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BY
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CLEMENT ATTLEE: A PRIVATE SECRETARY'S VIEW

I am very much honoured by the invitation of the Attlee Foundation to speak in commendation of Clement Attlee. It is altogether fitting that the celebration should take place in the heart of East London. This is the source of the experiences which inspired him to devote his life to the service of the public and it was here that he developed the doctrines of democracy and socialism to which he always remained staunchly loyal in good times and bad. At the same time I feel naturally apprehensive. I am conscious that the importance of my theme is so great, and those who have preceded me in addressing you on it so distinguished, as to make anyone doubt whether ~~they are~~ he could be equal to the task. I have in consequence deliberately limited the scope of my attempt. I shall not try to provide either historical narrative or ideological theorising. For someone who knew him at close quarters only for a short period, when he was in office as Prime Minister and I was one of his Private Secretaries, it seemed to me better merely to give a personal impression of his qualities as a man. As such, and as a statesman, I regarded him then and thereafter with both admiration and affection. There are no doubt many people here who felt the same and who knew him better. Nevertheless I must do my best, because it would be shameful if diffidence should deprive him of the tribute he deserves even from a humble admirer.

Anyone setting out to draw a portrait of Attlee has one preliminary difficulty to overcome: the generally received opinion that he was an inscrutable enigma. Sir Alan Herbert devoted a whole poem to the subject — not one of his best — entitled 'Man of Mystery.' Michael Foot, who was his ~~third~~ fourth successor as Leader of the Party, has confessed to being baffled by his character and policies; he adds that not only he but Bevan, Cripps and Dalton as well found Attlee, 'ever more incomprehensible'. From the Tory side Harold Macmillan has also called him 'somewhat of a mysterious figure'. I do not know whether these opinions have an ideological basis, but I find them strange.

During my time at Number 10 I never thought I was working under a mystery man. He seemed to me to be perfectly plain and straightforward and to have every quality required for the efficient dispatch of public business. I still think he was the ideal model of a Prime Minister, looking at him in abstraction from his policies, considering only his character. He was assiduous, attentive to detail, with a strong feeling for history and tradition that allowed him to assess current events, however complicated, in the light of past precedents. He had powers of leadership which kept his cabinet and his party both in order and in good heart. There were many formidable figures serving under him, people with great abilities and, in many cases, great ambitions; but he maintained an effortless superiority which was no less comradely for being firm. Above all he was decisive, a point to which I shall return. In fact the man I knew is the one I recognize in a tribute by Arthur Moyle, his faithful PPS. Writing at the time of his resignation as party leader he speaks warmly of his 'youthful buoyancy, astonishing memory for detail, charming simplicity, quiet courage and toughness'. No-one knew him better than Arthur Moyle.

Courage was one of his most striking virtues. He had of course shown it to a high degree in the First World War in which he served from the beginning to the end, always as a regimental officer, never on the staff. I am sure, and it is confirmed by those who served with him, that he was an outstandingly good regimental officer. He never spoke of his own exploits, though he did tell stories to illustrate the comradeship of the war; ~~and~~ as a practical illustration, he continued to keep in touch with his old batman, Charlie Griffiths. This theme of comradeship found a place in his political speeches as well, especially in the twenties and thirties, when he would appeal to that spirit and demand the same national mobilisation of resources that had been successful then and which should be repeated now to confront the problems of peace. Even without that experience he would have agreed with Johnson that courage was the greatest of the four cardinal virtues because without it we should not have the resolution to practise the other three.

A special aspect of his preeminent virtue was his decisiveness. This, if I may for the moment lower the angle of vision from Cabinet and Parliament to the office at No. 10, endeared him to his official subordinates. He was a splendid man to work for. If you put up a paper to him which required him to say 'yes' or 'no' you never had long to wait. In most cases he thought it unnecessary to ask for a second opinion, a well-known method of imposing delay. He would read the paper carefully — one of his great strengths was that he always mastered all the facts — signify his decision and pass on to the next paper.

I well remember his methods. You would get his work ready for him in a box and when he came down to the Cabinet Room after dinner bring it in to him to work on by himself. He would start with the top paper and work his way down to the bottom one. Meanwhile you were next door, finishing your own work or sometimes, to be honest, gossiping with the lady clerk on duty. He did not take long. It was usually only about eleven o'clock when he would ring his buzzer for you to go in. 'I've finished that lot. Anything else in?: 'No, Prime Minister'. 'Thank you, good night'. And then you could take the box away and sort the contents out between the various ministries and go home pleased to think that your colleagues in other offices could start work next morning with their answers clear in front of them. Like the Duke of Wellington, who expressed the thought in more constitutional terms, he believed in 'getting on with the job', a phrase often attributed to him. He would also agree with another of Wellington's maxims: 'My rule always was to do the business of the day in the day'.

I stayed on at Number 10 after Mr Churchill won the election in October 1951 and in the early days of the Conservative administration I had a party piece which I was often called on to produce. People would ask me what differences I noticed in the methods of work of the two Prime Ministers. My reply would be something on these lines: 'A great difference. One so decisive and sure of himself; the other tending to say either "this must come to Cabinet" or "that can wait; I'll look at it at the weekend, bring it down to Chartwell"'. At that point the person you were talking to would do what is known in theatrical circles as a double-take. He had been nodding his head thoughtfully as if to say 'how dreadful but just what I had imagined all along'; the mention of Chartwell made him realise that the one who insisted on delay was Churchill and the firm, decisive one was Attlee.

Let me quickly say that I have not introduced this comparison to disparage Churchill. In peace-time as opposed to war-time it is rarely vital that decisions should be taken so very expeditiously. Even during the war, as Sir Ian Jacob has recorded, 'the Prime Minister, curiously enough, was never keen on making a decision on matters that did not demand immediate action. Unless one had to be made he liked to discuss the pros and cons at length'. He wanted to be sure that everything would be exactly right, that everyone who should be consulted had had his say and that all the consequences of a proposal had been thought out. That was the way he liked to work, and a thoroughly statesmanlike way it is. One of my colleagues, Sir Anthony Bevir, used to say he had an artistic temperament and Attlee a more prosaic one. Attlee's method, as I have indicated,appealed more to bureaucrats; but, in spite of a popular television serial, Her Majesty's Government is not conducted for the benefit of civil servants.

I have mentioned that I stayed on with Churchill after having been selected as a Private Secretary by Attlee and perhaps the fact merits some comment. It is well understood here. In Britain continuity of administration is valued. In the United States a new President, even if he is of the same party as his predecessor, produces a complete change of the men at the top of the administration. I well remember, as I was still at Number 10 when it happened, the change over from Truman to Eisenhower which produced a dreadful hiatus. Things fell apart, decisions were not taken. It must always be remembered that the United States is a monarchy and if the monarch loses his authority or cannot control his instruments policy is paralysed.

Attlee used to tell a story about the Potsdam Conference of 1945. It opened when Churchill was Prime Minister and Eden Foreign Secretary, Attlee and Bevin came as part of the British delegation; there was a pause in the middle while the British went back to London for the declaration of the result of the election after which Attlee and Bevin returned as Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary. 'The Russians were most surprised, but the Americans were simply flabbergasted when I came back with the same Private Secretary that Winston had gone away with'. He also, incidentally, brought back the same valet, whom Churchill had pressed on him.

You will have noted that the Americans were more surprised than the Russians. The Russians could not understand what had happened; they had assumed the elections would be fixed. Attlee records how Molotov kept pestering him with questions and would not accept his assurance that 'we could not tell what would be the result'. The Americans on the other hand knew all about democratic elections, but for them the first thing you did after winning one was to 'turn the rascals out'. A clean sweep had been the American tradition ever since William Learned Marcy, later Secretary of State, had declared in 1831 'to the victors belong the spoils of the enemy'.

In Britain too in that year of 1945 there was much contrast between Churchill and his successor. His services as Deputy Prime Minister in the wartime coalition had been highly valued but he seemed less colourful as a public figure, and certainly less sonorously compelling as an orator than the man he replaced. It is from

this period that date many stories which perversely underestimate Attlee. If I quote one it is because it enables me to bring in a tribute by Churchill. I owe it to my friend Sir John Colville. He became aware of a witticism being repeated in Whitehall and Parliamentary circles and attributed to Churchill: 'An empty taxi drew up outside 10 Downing Street, the door opened and Mr Attlee got out'. I should have said it was not quite in Churchill's style; many such stories were then falsely attributed to him, and to Lady Astor. At any rate Jock asked him about the story, and the attribution, which made him very cross. His face set hard, and after an awful pause, he said: 'Mr Attlee is an honourable and gallant gentleman, and a faithful colleague who has served his country well at the time of her greatest need. I should be obliged if you would make it clear whenever an occasion arises that I would never make such a remark about him, and that I strongly disapprove of anyone who does.'

It would be perverse not to recognize that one of the elements in the comparison between the two Prime Ministers that moved people to put Attlee second to Churchill was the contrast betwen their styles of oratory. Churchill was the author of some of the most eloquent speeches in the history of the English language; Attlee's style was more concise, more matter-of-fact and more conventional. But rhetoric, as all its exponents agree, is an art, indeed, but one with a practical purpose. Its aim is persuasion. To achieve its intended result it must be adapted to circumstances. As parliamentary performers the two were much more nearly on an equality than will appear from a cold reading of Hansard. I am speaking of the period after the war. Churchill's best moments were when he was opening a debate, with a well-prepared and carefully polished address. Attlee, I used to think, was best at winding up. He was a sound debater with a good grip on all the points that had come up in the ebb and flow of the argument. He delighted in [illegible]

I used to think that in some respects he modelled himself on Baldwin as a Parliamentarian. Both were above all House of Commons men, assiduous in attendance and knowing all the members well. Baldwin was one of the main influences in popularising the conversational style of parliamentary speaking which has dominated the House since his time. The two men were on excellent terms; Baldwin, with the national interest in mind, was anxious to help the Labour Party to achieve efficiency and stability, and Attlee, though opposed to his policies, gave him credit for his good intentions.

[illegible] after having established that I had been at Oxford, which seemed to reassure him — he began at once to talk about my army service. He was particularly pleased to find that I had ended the war on the staff of FM Lord Alexander. He became quite animated in questioning me about him and declared roundly that he was the best British and perhaps the best Allied general in the war. (Alexander similarly thought most highly of Attlee.) When I respectfully but enthusiastically concurred I felt sure the job was mine.

This was indeed thoroughly characteristic of him. He liked people who had had experience of war. I was once later called on to advise him on the appointment of a Lord Lieutenant of Flint. The admirable Arthur Moyle was nonplussed: he had heard the name of a certain Hugh Mainwaring highly spoken of but was unable to identify him. This was because the spelling and pronunciation of his name were at variance. I said I knew the man who was obviously meant and he sent me in to tell the P.M. When I said that Hugh Mainwaring had been a regular officer in the army, and that we had served together in the Western Desert — and added that he had been educated at Oxford — he decided at once on the nomination, waving

I said he admired soldiers but, like most regimental officers in the First World War, he was not so keen on staff officers or generals. One of his most exuberant moments was during his visit to Washington to confer with President Truman about the Korean war. He got on very well with Truman with whom he had shared experiences of the Western Front in 1918. It was amusing to hear the two making fun of Slim and Marshall, their respective Army Chiefs of Staff, both maintaining that generals knew nothing about real war. (This was unfair to Slim, whose experiences in that war were much like Attlee's and who only took a regular com-mission after it was over). At one point he had Truman momentarily at a loss when he remarked that he had had experience of evacuating peninsulas; the reference to Gallipoli had to be explained.

His reputation rests fair and square on his conduct of the government between 1945 and 1951. This was his greatest achievement, and to it he brought all the varied strengths of his character. He was passionately devoted to the principles of the Labour Movement, to which he had been faithful through many trials. His aim in life was that they should triumph, not that they should triumph under his leadership. I cannot persuade myself that he was not the natural and inevitable leader of his party, though I know that there were many circumstances that happened to turn out right for him, especially in the early 1930s, and that, almost to the end, he had rivals among his ministers.

It used to be said sometimes by his opponents that he was no more than a good chairman of committees. That capacity, by the way, is not to be despised: in modern states all public business depends on committees, and really good chairmen are rare. The implication is, however, that that was all he was: a man who collected the voices at the end of a meeting and announced the lowest common level of agreement. Compared with what Attlee's conduct of business in his cabinets was really like such a description is so far from the mark as to be laughable. He certainly allowed the expression of every view. He did not let his colleagues talk for too long. He stopped them brusquely if they repeated themselves. Having read all the papers he was able to correct them if they misrepresented the facts, demonstrating what an enormous advantage it is to be the best-informed man present. After hearing the various views he would sum up, in a form which prescribed the action to be taken. It was usually pretty close to the kind of action that he had favoured from the start. He would then go on to the next item on the Cabinet agenda. These meetings always started and normally finished on time. No Cabinets before or since have been more businesslike.

His mastery of his Cabinet can be demonstrated, as in a scientific experiment, by noting what happened when he was away. The unhappiest event of his second administration was the resignation of Bevan, Wilson and Freeman in April 1951. He was in St. Mary's hospital at the time and Morrison in the chair. He always maintained that if he had been there an acceptable and amicable settlement would have been reached.

This is perhaps a good moment at which to mention his relationship with Aneurin Bevan. I cannot add any startling revelations to embellish what has been already written on this subject; but he would occasionally talk to me about it, especially

when I used to sit by his bedside in St. Mary's, and confirmation of received opinion may be useful. He thought Bevan was a very good departmental minister, an opinion which I knew to be strongly shared by his civil servants in the Ministry of Health. Apart from this he also felt towards him much as he did towards Ernest Bevin: that these were two examples of working-class people, of the sort he had come to cherish in his early days in the East End, who had made their way to the top by their talents and character. He wanted Bevan to succeeded him as leader of the Party and was sure that he would have done so if he could have kept his exuberant temperament under better control. He was surprisingly indulgent towards his occasional outbursts, surprisingly, I mean, for, one who was himself so measured and self-controlled, but he lamented them as hindrances to success in politics. One thing he held against him was his friendship with Lord Beaverbrook, because, as I learn from my friend Kenneth Harris's excellent biography, Attlee regarded Beaverbrook as 'the only evil man I ever met'. When asked to write an obituary on him he refused, saying 'I could find nothing good to say about him'.

Now that I have started on his likes and dislikes I had better make an effort to be more systematic. I have already said that he liked soldiers, Oxford men and, I must add, Old Haileyburians. When I first knew him I sometimes used to ask myself whether these were just conventional and put-on attitudes but I decided they were not: they reflected his feelings towards institutions which he had enjoyed belonging to and which deserved his loyalty in return. The Haileybury Club was another. He was passionately devoted to the party, and in it he felt most atracted to old stalwarts, and especially to Trade Unionists. He sometimes felt more doubtful towards people who had come into it from a similar background to his own. Sir Stafford Cripps is an obvious example; he always tried to work with him but his restless enthusiasm, his striking out in new and questionable directions, called for careful handling. As we all know, Attlee's patience and solicitous handling tamed Cripps into a valuable and trusted member of the governmental team. No one was closer to Attlee at the end. Cripps' death was almost as severe a blow as Ernest Bevin's.

Though he may have felt more comfortable with old friends he believed strongly in giving young men a chance. Harold Wilson was a conspicuous benefactor from this. He is usually credited with a dislike of intellectuals. I find this unjust. Unless 'intellectual' is given a special meaning, a pejorative meaning, Attlee was one himself. He was well read in history and philosophy and a lover of literature. He expressed himself lucidly and convincingly in speeches and writings; if his style appeals to a rather specialised taste, well, so does Marx's and I know which of the two I would rather read. To refute the accusation I appeal to Attlee's abiding admiration, even affection, for Leon Blum. Now Blum really was an intellectual in the purest Proustian mode, a last flowering of the *belle époque*. Attlee was immensely his superior in every aspect of political skill. Yet his feelings for Blum were unchanged from the early thirties to his death in 1950.

There certainly were intellectuals in the Labour party with whom Attlee was impatient because, as he said of their attitude in 1935, they 'can't be trusted to take the wrong view of any subject'. The names of Crossman and Zilliacus spring to mind;

he was against them not because of their theories but because he thought them untrustworthy. I suppose, though, that the one who really played the part of Judy to his Punch was Harold Laski. He was the perfect type of ineffectual intellectual, though he fancied himself as a practical, even a Macchiavellian, politician fitted for a leading role in the party. Today he will mainly be remembered as the man whose nagging produced from Attlee one of his longest and clearest expositions of his political faith. The text is given in Kenneth Harris's book. It ends with a fine and typical paragraph:

> 'As you have so well pointed out, I have neither the personality nor the distinction to tempt me to think that I should have any value apart from the party which I serve. I hope you will also believe that because I am face to face every day with the practical problems of government I am nonetheless firm in my Socialist faith and that I have not the slightest desire to depart from it.'

That illustrates two of Attlee's special characteristics: his modesty, and his skill at deflation. On the former I cannot do better than quote Sir John Colville who said of him 'He may well be the only British Prime Minister in all history without a touch either of vanity or conceit'. It used to surprise me how completely selfless he was. He must know, I would say to myself, that he was both a better and a cleverer man than those around him, but he never thought of advertising his own abilities or claiming special credit for himself.

His talent for deflation is well known and was much relished by his associates. For note that he never used it on humbler and weaker characters but only on the self-centred and arrogant. Most of the anecdotes illustrating this are ~~well known.~~ / of this nature. There was the 'period of silence' from Laski which would be so welcome. There was the famous response to the flood of eloquence released on him by Richard Crossman about the right solution for Palestine. Crossman, though an Oxford man, ~~was~~ was hardly ever in Attlee's good books. After he had wound up with what he flattered himself was an eloquent peroration, ending with 'what do you think'? The P.M. stopped doodling, looked up for the first time and said "How's your mother?"' I also like the story about Montgomery. It was a great relief to Attlee when he was manoeuvred out of the office of CIGS to go to Western Union at Fontainebleau. Montgomery was anxious to pick his own successor, who should be one of his own men and not someone with a reputation that would rival his. Attlee's intention was precisely the opposite. At the final interview in the Cabinet Room he informed Montgomery that the next CIGS would be Slim. The reply was brusque and immediate: 'this is out of the question, Prime Minister; I have already told Crocker he is going to succeed me'. Attlee took his pipe out of his mouth, looked him straight in the eye, and said: 'well, untell him'.

Let me touch finally on another aspect of his statesmanship: his skill in international negotiations. Dean Acheson, in his memoirs of his period as Secretary of State, refers to the Attlee-Truman meeting in December 1950, which I have already mentioned, and in particular to the discussions on the conditions for the use of nuclear weapons. In his view Attlee was a most wily negotiator, indeed a skilful seducer, who made Truman go much further than Acheson would have liked. I think the root of the matter was that Attlee was pragmatic and wanted definite rather than generalised decisions – and so did Truman when the point was plainly put to him. The result was satisfactory to both sides.

I have been speaking hitherto of Attlee as a public figure, since my role as Private Secretary was almost entirely concerned with that aspect; but Number 10, as Harold Macmillan said, is a tied cottage. In consequence I saw a great deal of the family. The affection and trust between Mr and Mrs Attlee, and their ideal relationship with their children, was a pleasure to observe. It was exhilarating to note how he expanded in the warmth of the family circle. His conversation too expanded in range and affability; at family meals he was cheerful, almost garrulous, and engagingly anecdotal. All the family particularly enjoyed staying at Chequers. They thought, with some justice, that the countryside around it was among the prettiest in England, so much so that they bought a house near it for their retirement.

I remember Mrs Attlee with both affection and respect. I had been warned that her temper was sometimes short, mainly because of her health, and I did in fact have to suffer criticism from her because I was in charge of the Prime Minister's engagements. She often raised objection, because she thought I was overburdening him, and would express herself in vigorous language. If the Prime Minister was present he could be relied on to take a mollifying role. I sympathised with her motives. She certainly made most gracious amends at her farewell party to the staff of Number 10. Although I expostulated, she insisted on saying how sorry she was for our differences and added ruefully: 'I know what I'm like; if I hadn't been married to the best man in the world I should have been divorced long ago'. By then I was ready to believe that Clement Attlee really was the best man in the world.

I must attempt some kind of summing-up. Like Lord Justice Crewe I find it difficult not to let affection press upon judgment. Clement Attlee combined a vivid faith in socialism with the pragmatic ability of a statesman; that is why he conducted with success the most innovatory government of modern times. He was of a conservative temperament in all inessential matters. Where no principles were involved he respected tradition and enjoyed a rational amount of ceremony. He thought, for instance, that despite austerity the Lord Mayor's banquet should go ahead with all 'its customary pomp'. He was so natural a leader of his party that he could counter all the intrigues against him without special effort. I admit that in the most serious one, in 1947, the intriguers were not as clever as they thought themselves but he frustrated their efforts not by wiliness ~~ingenuity~~ but by character. It was not simply that his popularity in the party, and in the country, was far greater than anyone else's but that he outshone them all in ability. That ability, tempered by experience, was supported by resolution. I think the conclusion he would himself have liked to hear was that he did his duty and had the courage to ensure that it was done well.

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