THE FIRST ATTLEE COMMEMORATIVE LECTURE GIVEN IN FEBRUARY 1983, BY THE RT. HON. DOUGLAS JAY.

CLEM ATTLEE

May I first thank the Trustees of the Attlee Foundation for asking me to help in honouring the memory of Clem Attlee, who was born on January 3, 1883, by giving this address tonight. The Attlee Foundation, based on Attlee House within the precincts of Toynbee Hall in the East End, has been for some years commemorating his work there by launching a number of projects for social service and experiment, mainly among young people, several of them in East London but some elsewhere, and one appropriately in India.

My first meeting with Attlee was in the winter of 1918-19 outside our house in Hampstead, where he was introduced to my brother and me by our next-door neighbour Miss Vi Millar, a tennis-playing partner of my family, and his future wife. He was then in the full First War uniform of a Major and all he said on this occasion, in parade ground tones which I long remembered, was "Good afternoon". As I came to know him, I found his background and outlook not unfamiliar. For my own father was born in Putney, was called to the Bar, lived in the Temple, grew up as a Conservative, and spent most of his working life up till 1914 doing social work in the East End of London where he became a close friend of George Lansbury.

Attlee himself was a man whose outstanding qualities emerged only slowly for, I think, two reasons. First, he never sought himself to display them; and secondly, they were the sort of qualities that can only prove themselves over time. Starting from a Victorian family home in Putney, with a father who was at once a successful solicitor and a strong Gladstonian radical, Attlee at school and Oxford (which he greatly enjoyed) was neither prominent nor ambitious. He early absorbed the Christian ethic which he always retained. From first to last he believed in doing his job, which he would have called his duty. He also absorbed at school orthodox Tory views which survived until he left the University. He shared like most of his young contemporaries a strong straightforward patriotism. It is ironic nowadays to record that in 1899 and 1900 the headmaster of Haileybury forbade the boys to celebrate the victory of Ladysmith, and they broke all the school rules to do so; and a few months later New College undergraduates unanimously requested the Warden that the College should officially celebrate the relief of Mafeking and the Warden flatly refused.

At Oxford, Attlee's inclination was towards literature and history rather than theoretical studies. And though he already admired Ruskin and William Morris, it was experience, not theory, which changed his political views; and it was conviction which pushed him into politics,and not from politicians that he drew his opinions. Politics for him was neither a career nor an art but a mission. When in October 1905 Attlee's brother asked him to visit one evening the Haileybury Club in Stepney, he found to his surprise for the first time how the other half of the nation then lived, and the spectacle changed his life. At Toynbee Hall he met men like Frank Wise and Jimmy Mallon who were leading the campaign to expose conditions in the sweated industries in the East End. Attlee joined them as a fact-finder.

It was the practical test which mattered to Attlee then and thereafter. Fifty years later in Moscow, having asked the British Ambassador, Sir William Hayter, whether he ever read Marx, Attlee remarked "Never read a word of him myself." When he first met Shaw and the early Fabians in his early East End days, his first comment was, "Must one have a beard to join this show?" In 1949, his conclusion on devaluation was that if the experts could suggest no other practical way of stopping the outflow of gold and dollars, we had better go through with it. What he would have thought of monetarism in 1983 I must notspeculate tonight.

In this practical spirit Attlee also embraced wholeheartedly the Victorian gospel of hard work. In his 14 years' service in the East End, at the Haileybury Club, Toynbee Hall, and the local Council, as in his 4 years in the Army from 1914 - 1918, there was little time for leisure, highly as he always valued his own family life. In the 1931-35 Parliament, almost unaided except for Cripps and Lansbury, he maintained the Opposition Front Bench and - surprisingly for someone so famed for brevity - filled more columns of Hansard in 1932 than any other Member. But, you may say, hard work and instinct for the practical, and a sense of mission are hardly enough in themselves to make a man leader of one of the great British political parties and hold his position for 20 years. I admit that when in the autumn of 1935 I went with Hugh Gaitskell to hear the result of the leadership election, we were both astonished and dismayed to hear that the Parliamentary Labour Party had elected Clem Attlee. Why, we said, do they choose this unobtrusive little-known character? The short answer, which is took me ten years or so to understand, was that they elected him because they knew him best and had watched him working over a period of years. Attlee's election in 1935 is the strongest possible argument for the election of a Party leader solely by his Parliamentary colleagues.

But there were many others who remained puzzled by Attlee's unchallenged leadership. Michael Food, in his life of Bevan, says that "no-one has ever unravelled the riddle." Herbert Morrison remarks in his autobiography, "It was quite impossible to approach near enough to get into his mind and to know what he was really thinking." It is indeed quite a feat in itself to have kept both Morrison and Foot guessing throughout most of a lifetime.

Was perhaps Attlee's brevity of speech one essential part of his secret? Naturally if a politician says very little, he is less likely to say anything foolish, and Attlee hardly ever did. When I worked for him at No.10 in the turbulent year 1945-46, one of us coined the phrase: he never uses one syllable when none will do. Everyone now knows his reply to a long and prolix letter from Harold Laski: "A period of silence on your part would be welcome." In 1946 Dick Crossman came to No.10 and for 29 minutes gave Attlee his views on Palestine. Attlee replied, "Saw your mother last week." I was myself once foolish enough, when Attlee was Leader of the Opposition after 1951, to show him in the Commons Library what I thought was a rather clever Question I meant to put down to Anthony Eden. His comment after looking at it was, "Wouldn't serve any useful purpose."

And some of us have never forgotten the meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party in 1954 which had gone on too long when a certain Celtic Member embarked with great passion and even greater length on an oration about the hydrogen bomb, rising to a horrific climax, and Attlee responded, "We'll watch it; meeting's adjourned." He could economise words in writing as well as speech. In his account of 1914 in his autobiography he says, "My brother Tom was a convinced conscientious objector. I thought it my duty to fight. We ended the war near neighbours in Wandsworth - I in hospital and he in jail."

But economy of words does not necessarily involve scarcity of meaning. The last speech I heard Attlee make was in Battersea in the 1964 General Election when he was over eighty and making "only" two speeches each evening. He was lifted onto the platform amid a tumultuous meeting and said merely this, "I am a very old man. I have lived through two great wars and many General Elections. I shall not live much longer. But if I live till Friday, and my side wins, I shall die happy."

Or was it perhaps Attlee's modesty which won him the allegiance of his colleagues? In the sense that he despised egotism and verbosity, certainly yes. On one very arduous and crowded working day in the autumn of 1945, his private secretary offered to get a messenger to bring him a cup of tea to his room in the House. "I'll go to the tea room," Attlee said, "he's probably too busy." In Attlee's later years

(Kenneth Harris records in his admirable biography) Harris and Christopher Hollis came across the ex-Prime Minister in his Club and told him they were just going to Haileybury to address the Sixth Form. "I'm going down next week" he replied, "but only to the Upper Fourth." Was it mock modesty or even false modesty? If anyone thinks that I would ask him to read the Most Secret minute which Attlee addressed to Churchill as Prime Minister in early 1945 about the running of the Cabinet, in which he said to Churchill, When papers "do come before the Cabinet, it is very exceptional for you to have read them. More and more often you have not read even the note prepared for your guidance. Often half an hour or more is wasted in explaining what could have been grasped by two or three minutes reading of the document." I guess that Churchill had not yet received that minute when he made the alleged and oft-quoted remark that Attlee was a very modest man who had a lot to be modest about. Long afterwards, on the day in 1956 when Attlee became a Knight of the Garter, he composed a private limerick about himself which Kenneth Harris has unearthed, and which would have surprised Churchill. It read:

> Few thought he was even a starter.
> There were many who thought themselves smarter;
> But he finished P.M.
> C.H. and O.M.
> An Earl and a Knight of the Garter.

On that evidence one might say that he was an immodest man and had a lot to be immodest about. The simple fact was, I would judge, that he dispassionately recognised his own strengths and weaknesses, and also knew very clearly which subjects he understood and which he did not.

And that went with an extremely shrewd understanding of his fellow men, a rare quality he shared with Ernest Bevin. He was, I think, primarily interested in people. When Keynes opened The Times in the morning, he read first the gilt-edged prices. Attlee read first the births, deaths and marriages. His perception of individuals could be very sharp. Once in the 1945 Government in a conversation a deux at No.10, when I told Attlee that Cripps as Chancellor was opposed to some proposal, he replied, "He's no judge of politics." The clarity of this surprised me but it was true. When Cripps unwisely called on Attlee in 1947 to tell him he ought to resign in favour of Bevin, Attlee replied "He says he doesn't want to change his job."

Kenneth Harris also relates how, after Attlee had reviewed Montgomery's memoirs not without some criticisms, Montgomery told him privately, "You got me right and no-one else ever has." Attlee's handling of Aneurin Bevan was a further example. When in March 1955 Bevan finally exasperated the Parliamentary Labour Party by angrily cross-examining Attlee publicly in the House, there was acute division between those who thought Bevan should be expelled from the Party and those who did not. Attlee supported withdrawal of the Whip at first, but surprised many by apparently changing sides at the last moment. In retrospect, I believe he perceived that the only way of restraining Bevan without breaking up the Party was to scare him badly for several weeks and then offer him an eleventh-hour reprieve. It worked.

Another quality which Attlee certainly possessed was a power of firm and, if necessary, speedy decision. It is clear now from the evidence that the decision to appoint Mountbatten as Viceroy of India in 1947 and set an early date for the end of British rule, was Attlee's own. In June 1950, after the invasion of South Korea, Attlee decided within 48 hours of the U.N. Resolution to commit British forces to its defence; and few will doubt that he was right. The creation of N.A.T.O., which I would now judge to have been the greatest achievement of the Attlee Government, was first it seems proposed by the Canadian Premier, Mr. St. Laurent, but immediately and decisively backed by Bevin and Attlee, as was Marshall Aid.

Not many would probably have guessed in early years that Attlee would prove an expert on the art of efficient Government. Here let the professional speak. Kenneth Harris quotes "a distinguished civil servant" who served under five Prime Ministers, working directly to all of them, as saying in retirement: "the country was never so well governed in this technical sense as it was under Attlee." This must, I think, have been Sir Norman Brook speaking and there could be no higher praise.

But more important than efficiency or even judgement of men was Attlee's basic conception of himself as a servant of the community. Elizabeth Longford,in her biography of the Duke of Wellington, describes the Duke as "retained for life by the King." Attlee would have seen himself as thus retained, not by the King but by the nation. I believe his view of himself as a life-long public servant was essentially the same as Wellington's, and incidentally his opinion of the actual occupants of the throne in his day was much more complimentary than Wellington's in his. Very possibly, because of the obvious differences, you may think a comparison between Wellington and Attlee to be rather far-fetched. But there are some other similarities, quite apart from the obvious one that they both fought through a long war in the British Army and later became Prime Minister. They also both believed profoundly in loyalty. Attlee once said, speaking of Bevin, "Loyalty is a great virtue in private life and an even greater one in the stormy seas of politics." (Dick Crossman in reviewing Attlee's writings once complained that Attlee kept mentioning "loyalty" but nowhere explained what he meant by it.) Attlee's loyalty to this country was as indisputable as Wellington's or Churchill's. He says also in his autobiography, "I have been a very happy and fortunate man in having lived so long in the greatest country in the world." And by "greatest" he evidently meant greatest not in military or economic power, but in human achievement.

In case anyone still thinks the comparison with Wellington a little bizarre, I would quote two letters written from No.10 in 1930 and 1946 respectively, by each of these two when serving as P.M. Wellington received in 1830 a long letter from a Mr. Hamilton about Irish affairs and replied in his own hand as follows; "The Duke begs leave to observe to Mr. Hamilton that he misapplies his own time as well as the Duke's by writing invectives against any men or parties. That which is desirable is to state facts shortly and clearly and how and where the evidence can be procured. The Duke can assure him that it is not worthwhile to state his opinions."

Attlee received in 1946 a very long memorandum from Konni Zilliacus about all the defects in the Government's foreign policy, and replied in these words: "My dear Zilly, Thank you for sending me your memorandum which seems to me to be based on an astonishing misunderstanding of the facts. Yours ever, Clem. "

Probably the conventional view would be that it was all these virtues taken together which explain Attlee's long survival and so unravel the riddle which so perplexed Herbert Morrison and Michael Foot. But I have come to feel myself that this was a case where the whole was rather greater than the sum of the parts. Attlee's real secret, I would guess, was that he possessed together in high degree the three gifts of common sense, integrity and intelligence. Most of his contemporaries were no doubt blessed with two of these; very few with all three. And this rare combination evoked in turn the respect and trust which were felt for Attlee by virtually all who worked with him. It was essentially, I believe, this respect and trust which strengthened steadily over time, which enabled Attlee to hold together, as nobody else could have done, the five prima donnas in his Cabinet - Morrison, Bevin, Cripps, Bevan and Dalton, and which explain why his reputation has progressively risen ever since his death.

With Bevin the trust was mutual and deeply felt, and so sustained the unshakable partnership between the two; a partnership whose existence was the main single reason why the 1945 Government, described by Harold Macmillan in his memoirs as "one of the ablest Governments of modern times," was so rich in achievement.

I could not improve on Harold Macmillan's verdict on that Government which, quite apart from N.A.T.O., Indian independence and Marshall Aid, introduced at home National Insurance, the National Health Service, family allowances, high employment policies, New Towns, and many other reforms which I need not mention now. Whether you approve of all these changes or not, most historians will surely rank the 1945 Attlee Government with Gladstone's 1868 Administration and Asquith's of 1906 - 1914 as the most successful reforming Governments of the past 150 years.

All this could not, I think, have been achieved without the basic Attlee-Bevin partnership.

The story was told me a few years ago of a meeting held at Transport House in 1935 by someone who was present there, and though I cannot vouch for the details it is, I think, true in spirit. Bevin was complaining about the deficiencies of George Lansbury's leadership, and one of those present asked, as people do, but what is the alternative? Bevin replied, "You see that little man sitting over there who smokes a pipe and says nothing. I don't know him very well, but 'e'd do."

Well, 'e did. And that is perhaps as good an epitaph as any on Clem Attlee.

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