

## Section 7: The Labour Governments of 1945–1951

The 1945 Labour government was one of the great governments in modern British history, whichever way one views it. Directly, we will look at

- Why Labour won a landslide in 1945
- The economy under Labour
- The creation of the NHS and the welfare state
- The government's problems, and the elections of 1950 and 1951

Once more, this is an area where you need to be strongly aware of the historiography, and of the idea of the post-war consensus. Likewise, the way in which subsequent British history has affected the way the post-war settlement has been interpreted. Thus, when you revisit this unit, knowing the history of Britain after the war up until Mrs Thatcher will very much help you understand the historiography of the 1945-51 governments.

The foreign policy of this period is covered in section 8.

What undoubtedly holds true is that these governments set what we might call the terms of trade of British national life

- **Post-war economic policy centred upon a mixed economy (with its 'commanding heights' nationalised) and Keynesian economics (with full employment)**
- **The Welfare State 'from the cradle to the grave'**
- The road from empire to Commonwealth
- Pro-western foreign policy & strong defences

It is the first two we are primarily concerned with here, but their historiography is very much related to the last two. If we accept the idea of a post-war consensus, we might then be aware of its critics, from left and right. From the left, critics see Attlee's government as not socialist enough, whether in education, nationalisation or the failure to create a planned economy. Others criticise it for being pro-American, for creating NATO and for its defence policy (especially nuclear weapons).

The more serious criticisms have come from the right. They are based on two assumptions about post-war British history. The first is that it was an era which saw the decline of Britain as a great power (that one is pretty unarguable). The second is that it saw the birth of what came to be known as the British disease: one of economic under-performance. The Attlee governments and the post-war consensus they created were to blame for both, but especially Britain's economic problems.

For most Labour supporters, and historians sympathetic to Labour in these years, the Attlee governments were simply Labour's finest hour. Faced with challenges that might have overwhelmed many, they not only met those challenges, but also managed to lay the foundations of modern British life. They are, simply, top of the Labour pantheon.

What do you think?

## WHY DID LABOUR WIN A LANDSLIDE IN 1945?

Use **Flagship**, pp241-44

- Outline the extent of Labour's victory
- There are ways in which Labour's victory can be explained by the 1930s and how people remembered them
  - It was in part a vote to avoid a repeat of the 'Hungry Thirties'
  - It was in part a vote against the Conservative Party of Baldwin and Chamberlain: 'Rule by Pygmies' and 'The Guilty Men'
- The war saw a sharp move to the left in British politics
  - The Beveridge Report and its legacy  
See the blog post <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/21/1945-all-that-the-beveridge-report/>
  - Wartime collectivism and the idea of the 'People's War'  
See the blog post on the Blitz <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/06/the-peoples-war-londons-heroes-my-family/>  
See the blog post on The British Myths of War <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2014/12/03/the-british-myths-of-war/>
  - The New Jerusalem
  - The need for post-war reconstruction
  - The evidence of wartime by-elections and Gallup
- Labour were best placed to address that move
  - Its recovery after 1932 (and especially after 1935) made 1945 possible
  - It developed a coherent philosophy and set of policies before and during the war
  - Its leadership (and the up and coming generation beneath them) were immensely able
  - Its leaders had proven their ability, and patriotism, in the war (and proved the viability of collectivist and socialist policies); much of the work on the home front was done by Labour ministers (specially Bevin)
  - They were fully committed to Beveridge
- The Conservative organisation and campaign were ineffective; Churchill was a mixed blessing  
See the blog posts on the campaign <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/19/1945-and-all-that-the-conservative-campaign/>  
And on the impact of Churchill's speeches <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/17/1945-and-all-that-churchill-those-speeches-the-war-and-the-people-and-professor-richard-toye/>
- The way in which Labour broke with Churchill after VE day; how the Labour campaign was more effective  
See the blog post <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/21/1945-and-all-that-let-us-face-the-future-with-labour/>

## THE POLITICS OF THE LABOUR GOVERNMENTS

Use **Flagship**, pp 245-47

- Explain the way in which Attlee was able to lead a pretty united government.
- Outline the pivotal role of Ernie Bevin.
- Show how Attlee saw off the threats to his position from left and right (and from Morrison)
- By 1951, were the government tired (actually, and politically)? What impact did the deaths of Cripps and Bevin have? What impact did the resignations of Bevan, Wilson and Freeman have?

## LABOUR AND THE ECONOMY

Use **Flagship**, pp 245-47

This is a contentious area. It might be argued that Labour introduced their great reforms, but that their price was economic failure. That there was economic failure at all is at least contestable.

Outline the economic problems the governments faced. How successfully were they dealt with?

- The 'economic Dunkirk' and the post-war loan
- The crisis of 1947
- The Marshall Plan
- The 1949 devaluation
- The impact of the Korean War

There was one clear failure:

- The failure of planning

There is an argument to be made that, in very difficult circumstances, Labour did well:

- They successfully managed demobilisation and post-war reconstruction
- Full employment
- The recovery in exports
- Low inflation
- Cheap money
- A more progressive tax system
- Industrial peace

However, that success came at a political price:

- The unpopularity of austerity, rationing and controls
- The cuts in the housing programme
- The need to introduce NHS charges

The criticism from the left is that Labour failed to fully implement socialism and a planned economy; the more telling critique comes from the right, that Labour created the 'British Disease'.

## NATIONALISATION

Use **Flagship**, pp 249-50, and **Peter Hennessy, *Never Again***, ch 5

This is really **Labour and the economy, part two**.

- Outline the industries that were nationalised, and when the acts were passed, and when the industries actually came into public ownership.
- Why did Attlee call them the 'commanding heights'?

- What practical reasons were there for nationalisation, and what ideological ones were there?
- How were they run? What were their structures? How might those be criticised?
- Outline Corelli Barnett's critique

How far was nationalisation a mistake? How far did it store up problems for the future? Or, was it broadly a success?

## THE NHS

Use **Flagship**, pp 247-48, and **Peter Hennessy, *Never Again***, pp132-44

See also the blog article on **Bevan & the NHS**

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/29/1945-all-that-nye-bevan-and-the-national-health-service/>

- What was wrong with the nature of health provision before the war?
- Labour was committed to a National Health Service in 1937
- Explain the significance of the wartime Emergency Medical Service and the Emergency Hospital Service, and the Beveridge Report
- What were the limitations to Henry Willink's scheme?
- Why was Bevan a surprising choice as minister of Health?
- In what ways was Bevan's NHS different from Willink's?
- Bevan faced opposition within cabinet from Morris and Dalton. Why was that, and how was it overcome?
- Bevan also faced opposition from the doctors. What was that, and how was it overcome?
- What were the problems faced by the new service?

For all the problems it would face, the NHS has proved enduringly popular and it usually regarded as Labour's 'jewel in the crown'. It also represented a formidable legislative achievement on Bevan's behalf: Peter Hennessy believes that the 1948 act should be remembered as the Bevan act. Attlee's gamble paid off.

## WELFARE

Use **Peter Hennessy, *Never Again***, pp 174-82

Welfare Reforms were not the work of one man. Most were under the auspices of James Griffiths, the Minister for National Insurance. However, the Family Allowance was introduced by Churchill's caretaker government and National Assistance was under the control of Bevan at Health.

The reforms had two guiding principles: universality, and the concept of the National Minimum. What were they?

Outline the following:

- The Family Allowance Act
- The National Insurance Act
- The Industrial Injuries Act
- Pensions
- The National Assistance Act

These measures should also be seen as part of a wider package, including the NHS, Housing, New Towns and Town and Country Planning, as well as full employment. Did they fulfil the ideal of 'from

the cradle to the grave'? Might they be seen as establishing a welfare state that would be a key feature of the post-war consensus (and beyond)? Might they be seen as feather-bedding the British workforce, leaving it (in Correlli Barnett's memorable words) 'hanging on the nipple of the welfare state'?

## HOUSING

Use **Flagship**, pp 248-49, and **Peter Hennessy, *Never Again***, pp 163-74

See also the blog article on **Bevan and Housing**

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2016/01/27/1945-and-all-that-bevan-building-and-the-prefabs/>

After the First World War, Lloyd George's 'Homes fit for Heroes' had fallen victim to the Geddes Axe. In 1945, in Hennessy's words, Labour 'promised the earth': Bevin promised 'five million homes in quick time'. The man tasked with trying to fulfil that was Bevan, at Health. He failed. Was the failure his fault? Was it Attlee's fault, should he have created a Ministry of Housing from the start?

- Outline the practical obstacles facing a housing programme
- Outline the significance of prefabs, squatting and council housing
- Outline Bevan's vision of quality public housing
- How was house-building hit by the economic problems of 1947 and 1949?
- What was the New Towns Act? Outline its significance (in the longer-term especially)
- What was the Town and Country Act? Outline its significance.

Given the scale of the problems he faced, should we see Bevan's record in housing as actually pretty credible?

## THE CONTEXT: BRITAIN'S WORLD ROLE, THE COMING OF THE COLD WAR, THE RECONSTRUCTION OF EUROPE AND THE EMPIRE

The next thing we do will be the foreign policy of this period. Without understanding this, it is impossible to understand the Attlee governments fully.

**FOR A DIFFERENT VIEW OF THE ATTLEE GOVERNMENTS, AS A SPECIES OF BRITISH NATIONALISM**

<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/review-david-edgerton-british-nation/>

## WHY WAS LABOUR'S MAJORITY SLASHED IN 1950, AND WHY DID THEY LOSE IN 1951?

Use the blog articles and the 1950 and 1951 elections

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/02/08/the-general-elections-of-1950-and-1951-part-one-2/>

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/02/09/the-general-elections-of-1950-and-1951-part-one/>

Outline the nature of labour's decline and 1950 and defeat in 1951. Considering both elections, why did they lose?

When we have done that, it is time to ask some questions

- How far was labour's welfare state new, or a development of what existed before the war?
- This was undoubtedly one of the most able and experienced governments Britain had, but it was one with some very big egos (none larger than Bevin and Morrison). Given that, and the

myriad nature of the problems it faced and the reforms it introduced, how successful was Attlee in leading it?

We cannot answer these questions yet, but will have to:

- Did Labour create the post-war consensus (did it exist)?
- How far was Labour responsible for the British disease? Did that exist? Or should they get some credit
- How far was Labour responsible for Britain's post-war decline?
- As Kenneth O Morgan argues, was their greatest mistake the hike in defence spending for the Korean War? Did that permanently skew the British economy: in particular, investment and R & D?

### FURTHER READING, LISTENING & VIEWING

Sixth form history needs you to do reading of your own. Already, this guide had given you references to the Flagship textbook, and some other resources. You need to take steps beyond that both online and, of course, by resorting to another revolutionary technology, the book. For modern British history, there is a dizzying array of printed and online resources, of startlingly variable quality. If you do find something not on here that's good, let the rest of us know through the Facebook page or email [s.tilbrook@rgs.newcastle.sch.uk](mailto:s.tilbrook@rgs.newcastle.sch.uk) and we'll add it.

For each topic or area, we have colour coded each book or article:

- Blue is essential
- Yellow means if you want to develop a deeper understanding you should read one or all of these
- Green means this is a monograph, or a sophisticated or highly detailed account. Learn how to dip into real history books, a vital study skill; you might sometimes find full books actually become more engrossing
- Pink is for choices that are more loosely related, and have grabbed someone's interest at some point. Try one or two, they might be fun

### A WORD ABOUT ONLINE RESOURCES

Three of the best resources are, of course, the History department's very own Blog, Facebook page and Twitter feed.

#### ***The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (DNB)***

Beyond that, for the British history course, get used to using one of the best resources available, and for free; the DNB. Any local library card will get you in: anyone can join the City Library via this link <https://eforms.newcastle.gov.uk/popup.aspx/RenderForm/?F.Name=JVpTDqdaf2o>

Once you have a library card number, got to <http://www.oxforddnb.com/> and fill in your number. You then have access to it all. They vary in quality from the good to absolutely excellent, and they are all written by leaders in the field. The best have a particularly good last section, dealing with how history has viewed these men and women, and their historiography. There are also the ***Themes***.

### **History Today**

Beyond that, another invaluable resource is **History Today**. We have institutional access to the entire archive, here: <http://www.historytoday.com/user/login>

Username: Tilbrook

Password: historian

You can search at your leisure, and find all sorts. These guides will flag some up for you.

### **Dynamic Learning/Philip Allan Resources**

Another good resource is Philip Allan Magazines Online, aimed very much at sixth-form students: here <http://my.dynamic-learning.co.uk/default.aspx?ReturnUrl=%2farchive.aspx>

Username: j.richardson@rgs.newcastle.sch.uk

Password: rgs1

The archive is then searchable

### **FURTHER READING: textbooks and student introductions**

There is a range of series aimed at sixth form history students. None make for exciting reading, and they vary in quality, but you should always aim to read at least one. The politics of the coalition are pretty well covered in the following:

Michael Lynch, *Britain 1945-2007 (Access to History)* (Lon 2008), ch 1

Malcolm Pearce & Geoffrey Stewart, *British Political History 1867-2001* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed, Lon 2002)

Stephen Lee, *British Political History 1914-1995* (Lon 1996)

AJP Taylor, *English History 1914-45* (Oxford 1965)

Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-1990* (Lon 1996), ch 7

Paul Adelman, *The Rise of the Labour Party* (Seminar Studies) (3<sup>rd</sup> ed, Lon 1996)

Kevin Jeffreys, *The Attlee Governments, 1945-51* (Seminar Studies) (Lon 1992)

Peter Hennessey, *Never Again* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Lon 2006)

*The Prime Ministers* (Lon 2000)

David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain* (Lon 2008)

David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation* (Lon 2018)

Gives a new view of these years: it is reviewed here (a PDF is available in the shared area)

<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/review-david-edgerton-british-nation/>

The DNB entries on Attlee, Bevin, Morrison, Cripps et al are excellent

Read the relevant blog articles on chancellors of the exchequer:

Hugh Dalton <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/05/23/the-chancellors-14-hugh-dalton/>

Sir Stafford Cripps <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/05/24/the-chancellors-15-sir-stafford-cripps/>

Hugh Gaitskell <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/05/the-chancellors-16-hugh-gaitskell/>

And the home secretary James Chuter Ede

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/05/25/the-home-secretaries-17-james-edel/>

And the foreign secretaries

Ernest Bevin <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/05/18/the-foreign-secretaries-12-ernest-bevin/>

Hebert Morrison <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/05/the-foreign-secretaries-13-herbert-morrison/>

John Bew, *Citizen Clem* (Lon 2016)

Kenneth Harris, *Attlee* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Lon 1995)

Robert Pearce, *Attlee* (History Today, 1997) <http://www.historytoday.com/robert-pearce/attlee>

William Golant, *Mr Attlee* (History Today, 1983)

<http://www.historytoday.com/william-golant/mr-attlee>

There is an excellent BBC documentary by David Reynolds, *The Improbable Mr Attlee*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnSBTN9DUA8>

Robert Pearce, *Ernest Bevin* (History Today 2002)

<http://www.historytoday.com/robert-pearce/ernest-bevin>

There is a [blog article on Ernie Bevin & Labour](https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/22/1945-and-all-that-ernie-bevin-labour-my-grandfather/):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/22/1945-and-all-that-ernie-bevin-labour-my-grandfather/>

There is a [blog article on the Labour Chancellors](https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/28/1945-all-that-the-labour-government-in-person/):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/28/1945-all-that-the-labour-government-in-person/>

Gordon Marsden, *Aneurin Bevan: Enemy of Complacency* (History Today 2011)

<http://www.historytoday.com/gordon-marsden/aneurin-bevan-enemy-complacency>

Revisits Henry Fairlie's 1960 obituary

<http://www.historytoday.com/henry-fairlie/aneurin-bevan-and-art-politics>

John Campbell, *Demythologising Nye Bevan* (History Today 1987)

<http://www.historytoday.com/john-carnpbell/demythologising-nye-bevan>

John Plowright, *Hugh Dalton* (History Today 2007)

<http://www.historytoday.com/john-plowright/hugh-dalton>

Paul Adelman, *The British General Election, 1945* (History Today 2001)

<http://www.historytoday.com/harriet-jones/beveridges-trojan-horse>

There are [blog articles on the election campaign of 1945](https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/19/1945-and-all-that-the-conservative-campaign/):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/19/1945-and-all-that-the-conservative-campaign/>

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/21/1945-and-all-that-let-us-face-the-future-with-labour/>

Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945* (Lon 1975)

Steven Fielding, *New Labour and 1945* (History Today 1995)

<http://www.historytoday.com/steven-fielding/new-labour-and-1945>

There is a [BBC documentary on the 1945 general election](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWXtbg3gUJw):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWXtbg3gUJw>

There is also a [lecture on the 1945 general election by Vernon Bogdanor](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJe3OJJ7At8):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJe3OJJ7At8>

Warren Dokter and Richard Toye discuss Churchill's Gestapo Speech here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IM54hRMxZCc>



There is an excellent and stimulating new view of the Attlee government

David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation* (2018)

And a review: <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/review-david-edgerton-british-nation/>

There is a [blog article on the Beveridge Report:](https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/21/1945-all-that-the-beveridge-report/)

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/21/1945-all-that-the-beveridge-report/>

Harriet Jones, *Beveridge's Trojan Horse* (History Today 1992)

<http://www.historytoday.com/harriet-jones/beveridges-trojan-horse>

John Vincent, *Consensus & Crisis since Beveridge*

A look at the controversy over the Welfare state since 1945

<http://my.dynamic-learning.co.uk/default.aspx?ReturnUrl=%2farchive.aspx>

**Philip Allan:** Modern History Review | Modern History Vol 5 | November 1993

Make sure you read the blog post on Beveridge

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/21/1945-all-that-the-beveridge-report/>

There is a [blog article on then creation of the NHS:](https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/29/1945-all-that-nye-bevan-and-the-national-health-service/)

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/29/1945-all-that-nye-bevan-and-the-national-health-service/>

Charles Webster, *Fifty Years of the NHS* (History Today 1998)

<http://www.historytoday.com/charles-webster/50-years-nhs>

There is a [blog article on housing:](https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2016/01/27/1945-and-all-that-bevan-building-and-the-prefabs/)

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2016/01/27/1945-and-all-that-bevan-building-and-the-prefabs/>

There is a [blog article on education policy:](https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/31/1945-and-all-that-the-butler-act-sir-henry-hadow-and-ellen-wilkinson/)

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/31/1945-and-all-that-the-butler-act-sir-henry-hadow-and-ellen-wilkinson/>

There is a [blog article on the Festival of Britain:](https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/02/03/1945-and-all-that-the-festival-of-britain/)

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/02/03/1945-and-all-that-the-festival-of-britain/>

There is a [blog article on the big freeze of 1947:](https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/31/1945-and-all-that-shiver-with-shinwell/)

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/31/1945-and-all-that-shiver-with-shinwell/>

[Use the blog articles and the 1950 and 1951 elections](https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/02/08/the-general-elections-of-1950-and-1951-part-one-2/)

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/02/08/the-general-elections-of-1950-and-1951-part-one-2/>

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/02/09/the-general-elections-of-1950-and-1951-part-one/>

William Crofts, *The Attlee Government's Pursuit of Women* (History Today, 1986)

<http://www.historytoday.com/william-crofts/attlee-governments-pursuit-woman>

Robert Pearce, *The 1950 and 1951 General Elections* (History Today 2008)

<http://www.historytoday.com/robert-pearce/1950-and-1951-general-elections-britain>

Lewis Goodall reported on the legacy of 1945 for *Newsnight*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArnmL82u2lg>

Jacob Baxter wrote an excellent blog article on Attlee's Great War:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/02/11/solider-clem-fleeing-from-disaster/>

There is a [blog article comparing Attlee and Kemal:](#)

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/02/20/thoughts-on-turkey-attlee-and-kemal-at-gallipoli-remembrance-nation-building-and-human-life/>