Commonwealth

Commonwealth, also called **Commonwealth of Nations**, formerly (1931–49) **British Commonwealth of Nations**, a free association of sovereign states comprising the United Kingdom and a number of its former dependencies who have chosen to maintain ties of friendship and practical cooperation and who acknowledge the British monarch as symbolic head of their association. In 1965 the Commonwealth Secretariat was established in London to organize and coordinate Commonwealth activities.

Members of the Commonwealth

country	date of Commonwealth membership
United Kingdom	1931
Canada	1931
Australia	1931
New Zealand	1931
South Africa	1931 (left in 1961; rejoined 1994)
India	1947
Pakistan	1947 (left in 1972; rejoined 1989)
Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon)	1948
Ghana	1957
Malaysia (formerly Malaya)	1957
Nigeria	1960
Cyprus	1961
Sierra Leone	1961
Tanzania	1961 (Tanganyika in 1961; Tanzania in 1964 upon union with Zanzibar [member 1963])
Jamaica	1962
Trinidad and Tobago	1962
Uganda	1962

Members of the Commonwealth

country	date of Commonwealth membership
Kenya	1963
Malawi	1964
Malta	1964
Zambia	1964
The Gambia	1965 (left in 2013; rejoined 2018)
Singapore	1965
Guyana	1966
Botswana	1966
Lesotho	1966
Barbados	1966
Mauritius	1968
Nauru	1968 (joined as special member; full member since 1999)
Swaziland	1968
Tonga	1970
Samoa (formerly Western Samoa)	1970
Fiji	1971 (left in 1987; rejoined 1997)
Bangladesh	1972
The Bahamas	1973
Grenada	1974
Papua New Guinea	1975
Seychelles	1976
Solomon Islands	1978
Tuvalu	1978 (joined as special member; full member since 2000)
Dominica	1978
Kiribati	1979
Saint Lucia	1979

Members of the Commonwealth

country	date of Commonwealth membership
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	1979 (joined as special member; full member since 1985)
Vanuatu	1980
Belize	1981
Antigua and Barbuda	1981
Maldives	1982 (joined as special member; full member since 1985)
Saint Kitts and Nevis	1983
Brunei	1984
Namibia	1990
Cameroon	1995
Mozambique	1995
Rwanda	2009

Historically, the Commonwealth was an evolutionary outgrowth of the British Empire. The traditional British policy of allowing considerable self-government in its colonies led to the existence by the 19th century of several dependent states that were populated to a significant degree by Europeans accustomed to forms of parliamentary rule and that possessed large measures of sovereignty. By 1931 they were recognized as having special status within the empire by the Statute of Westminster, which referred specifically to a “British Commonwealth of Nations.” The rapid growth of nationalism in other parts of the empire from the 1920s produced a long series of grants of independence, beginning with that to India in 1947, and required a redefinition of the Commonwealth. In 1947 India and Pakistan became members of the Commonwealth, the first with chiefly non-European populations. In 1948 Burma (Myanmar) became independent and rejected membership. In 1949 India announced its intention to become a republic, which would have required its withdrawal from the Commonwealth under the existing rules, but at a meeting of Commonwealth heads of government in London in April 1949 it was agreed that India could continue its membership if it accepted the British crown as only “the symbol of the free association” of

Commonwealth members. That declaration was the first to drop the adjective British, and thereafter the official name of the organization became the Commonwealth of Nations, or simply the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth was also beset by other difficulties, some members opting to withdraw from the organization, as did Ireland (1949), South Africa (1961), and Pakistan (1972), though both South Africa and Pakistan eventually rejoined (the former in 1994 and the latter in 1989). Commonwealth membership grew dramatically in the second half of the 20th century as former dependencies attained sovereignty. Most of the dependent states granted independence chose Commonwealth membership, and the organization has even grown to include Mozambique (joined 1995), which was the first country granted entry that was never part of the British Empire or under the control of any member.

The Commonwealth differs from other international bodies. It has no formal constitution or bylaws. The members have no legal or formal obligation to one another; they are held together by shared traditions, institutions, and experiences as well as by economic self-interest. Commonwealth action is based upon consultation between members, which is conducted through correspondence and through conversations in meetings. Each member country sends an emissary, called a high commissioner, to the capitals of the other members. A Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting is held every two years. At the meeting in Singapore in 1971, members adopted a declaration that restated the Commonwealth's voluntary and cooperative nature and committed the organization to promoting international peace, fighting racism, opposing colonial domination, and reducing inequities in wealth. This declaration was echoed at the meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1991, when leaders further committed the organization to human rights and democracy.

Britain has huge overseas investments, both government and private, in the Commonwealth. When Britain joined the European Economic Community (later succeeded by the European Union [EU]) in 1973, the trade privileges of member countries began to be reduced. Now Commonwealth members have trade agreements with the EU. Many of the exports of Commonwealth countries go to other member countries. In 1996 the Commonwealth

Africa Investment Fund was established to increase investment in that continent. There are also significant educational links between members, as many British teachers travel overseas and many students from Commonwealth members study in Britain. Other cultural links include the Commonwealth Games, a sporting competition held every four years.

In addition to independent members, the Commonwealth also comprises dependent territories, which are formally governed by the United Kingdom, Australia, or New Zealand. Most of the older dependencies are colonies. Dependencies include Anguilla, Bermuda, the Cayman Islands, the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, and the Turks and Caicos Islands (United Kingdom); Christmas Island, the Cocos Islands, the Coral Sea Islands, and Norfolk Island (Australia); and Niue and Tokelau (New Zealand). The United Kingdom has followed a policy of leading the dependencies toward self-government by creating territorial governments in them. These governments comprise a lawmaking body (often called the legislative council); an executive body (called the executive council), which with the governor is the executive authority; and an independent judiciary. At first government posts are appointive, but an increasing elected element is introduced, as constitutions are altered, until elected officials are made wholly responsible for local affairs. After a colony achieves internal self-government, its legislature may apply to the British Parliament for complete independence. It then decides whether to remain in the Commonwealth.

Age of Austerity

On 8 May 1945, **Victory in Europe** was celebrated with universal joy and relief across Britain after six years of conflict and sacrifice. However, the country and its people still faced a number of challenges.

One of the key challenges facing the UK in 1945 was the economic position of the country.

The national debt had risen from £760 million to £3500 million. Britain had spent close to £7 billion, or a quarter of the national wealth, on the war effort.

The UK was spending £2000 million a year abroad, while earning only £350 million in return. Loans from the USA were vital if the UK economy was to recover.

One in three houses had been destroyed by bombing whilst factories and shops had also been destroyed in large numbers.

Britain suffered 264,433 military and 60,595 civilian deaths during the war. Many others were physically and mentally scarred by the war and unable to resume normal life.

177 merchant ships and two-thirds of the Navy had been sunk, so food supplies were still a problem. Rationing remained in place for another 10 years. Income tax remained high to help the Government pay for the reconstruction.

This period saw the end of the British Empire. Its standing in the world had declined as it became impossible to contend with the economic might of the USA.

Wartime rationing had to be continued due to shortages of food and raw materials. This period in UK history is often called the Age of Austerity.

However, there was some hope because:

- virtually every adult was employed (full employment)
- there was optimism of a better future due to the victory
- there was a sense of change – as shown in the Labour election victory
- many accepted the end of the Empire

Optimism was felt in Wales too at the end of the war. Many evacuees, Bevin Boys, allied troops, and women in the land armies had experienced life in Wales for the first time during the war. Many young men had brought tales of Wales to the rest of the world as they served in

the war. This exposure led to a recognition that Wales had a distinct identity from the rest of Britain, and people both within and outside of Wales were aware of it.

It was clear to many that the UK was no longer a great military or economy power. It was also evident that the country was entering a post-war decline.

Demobilisation

In 1945, there were approximately 5 million men and women in the armed forces. It was a challenge to bring these people back into civilian life, also known as civvy street.

Demobilisation centre in Lancashire, June 1945

How did demobilisation work?

Ernest Bevin was the chief architect of the plan and it began six weeks after the war ended.

Military personnel were released in order, based on the length of their service and age. Soldiers from key roles, with vital skills which would be of benefit to the UK were released ahead of their turn. Many were angered by the slow pace of release and this led to a number of disciplinary incidents.

Former soldiers encountered a variety of problems on their return to civilian life. Numerous homes and places of work had been destroyed, which meant that many people faced problems finding work or settling back into normal family life. The post-war divorce rate was high with over 60,000 applications processed in 1947.

War damage

As can be expected, a country that had been at war from September 1939 to May 1945 now faced a number of difficulties.

Economic

- Great Britain's declining economy was unable to match the USA.
- Pressures of demobilised soldiers needing jobs.
- Shortages of food and vital materials meant rationing had to continue.
- By 1945, Britain's reserves of gold had fallen from £864 million to £3 million
- Britain had lost 30 per cent of its total wealth

Social

- Rising divorce rates.
- Food shortages and long queues.

Housing

- Towns and cities, such as Swansea and Coventry, were heavily bombed.
- 20 per cent of schools/houses were destroyed or in need of repair.
- Thousands lost their homes, and many slept in army camps short term.
- Housing demands due to soldiers returning to civvy street.
- Poor standard of housing, such as a lack of running water

- **Revise**
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Video

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The 1945 General Election

An election was called for 5 July 1945. Voting closed on 19 July to allow enough time for soldiers stationed abroad to vote. The two leading parties were Clement Attlee's Labour Party and Winston Churchill's Conservative Party. The Liberal Party were in decline at this stage.

The election result was a surprise to many. Winston Churchill was a successful wartime leader and a hero. Clearly, many observers would have fancied a Churchill victory due to his war role and his popularity. However, Labour secured a landslide victory.

Labour Party poster, 1945

Causes of the 1945 election victory

Perhaps the British people wished to see a period of change and believed Labour would bring a break from the 1930s Depression. The Conservatives had under-estimated this mood. Despite Churchill's popularity, the Conservative party struggled to win new supporters.

The Conservatives ran a flawed campaign. By focusing on Churchill's World War Two role, they did not appeal to voters who intended to move on from the war. As this was the first election since 1935, an unusually high number of people were voting for the first time. The slogan Help him finish the 'job' hardly eased voters' fears.

There was a confidence that Labour would bring about great political and economic change. By promising to embrace and act upon the Beveridge Report they were able to win over voters.

Labour benefitted from the change in attitudes towards the class system and social mobility that had emerged due to the disruption to traditions during the war, alongside an increasing belief in access to opportunities for all.

The Conservative party was blamed by many for the recent Depression and the failure to stand up to Adolf Hitler in the 1930s appeasement. The Labour campaign focused on these issues and weaknesses.

Furthermore, Churchill mistakenly compared Labour's planned socialism to tyrannical dictatorships, and even made reference to the Gestapo.

The Daily Express newspaper, a supporter of the Conservatives, used the headline 'GESTAPO IN BRITAIN IF SOCIALISTS WIN', and this horrified many voters.

Attlee understood the desire for change in Britain, as seen in the slogan Let us face the future together. The promises of a welfare state, based on the Beveridge Report, and immediate nationalisation of the Bank of England, coal, power, transport and iron and steel industries attracted voters to Labour.

1945-51: Labour and the creation of the welfare state

From the shock victory of Labour at the 1945 general election, to the founding of the promised welfare state, Derek Brown trawls the archives and presents a potted history of the immediate postwar years.

Introduction

The outcome of the 1945 election was more than a sensation. It was a political earthquake.

Less than 12 weeks earlier, Winston Churchill had announced the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany. Churchill wanted his wartime coalition to continue until Japan too had been defeated, but was not unduly dismayed when his Labour ministers insisted that the country be offered a choice. The prime minister called the election for early July, confident that the British people would back the greatest hero of the hour. Of all Churchill's colossal misjudgments, that was probably the most egregious. The voters wanted an end to wartime austerity, and no return to prewar economic depression. They wanted change. Three years earlier, in the darkest days of the war, they had been offered a tantalising glimpse of how things could be in the bright dawn of victory. The economist William Beveridge had synthesised the bravest visions of all important government departments into a single breathtaking view of the future.

The 1942 Beveridge Report spelled out a system of social insurance, covering every citizen regardless of income. It offered nothing less than a cradle-to-grave welfare state.

That was the great promise dangled before the British electorate in 1945. Though Churchill had presided over the planning for radical social reform, though he was a genuine hero of the masses - and though, ironically enough, the Tory manifesto pledges were not all that different from Labour's - the people did not trust him to deliver the brave new world of Beveridge.

There were other factors too. The Labour party had held office only twice before, in 1924 and in 1929-31, but during the war years its leadership had acquired both experience and trust. It now looked like a party of government.

Labour's promise to take over the commanding heights of the economy via nationalisation were anathema to committed Tories, but after nearly six years of wartime state direction of the economy it did not seem nearly so radical as it had before the war - or indeed as it seems now.

Then there was the military vote. Britain had millions of men and women in uniform in 1945, scattered over Europe, the far east, and elsewhere. They, more than any other section of the electorate, yearned for change and for a better civilian life. The military vote was overwhelmingly pro-Labour.

Many students of the 1945 election believe that a key role was played by the Daily Mirror, then the biggest selling paper in Britain, and easily the most popular among the armed forces. On VE (Victory in Europe) Day, the Mirror published an immensely powerful cartoon by the brilliant Philip Zec. It showed a battered, bandaged Allied soldier holding out to the reader a slip of paper marked Victory and Peace in Europe. Under the drawing was the caption "Here you are! Don't lose it again."
The same cartoon was published on the Mirror's front page on the morning of the most remarkable general election of the 20th century. But when the result was announced on July 26 - three weeks after polling day to allow military postal votes to be counted - it was clear that postwar politics had changed utterly.

With 47.7% of the vote, Labour secured a staggering 393 seats in the House of Commons. The Conservatives, with 39.7%, won just 210 seats. The Liberal party, which had governed the country less than quarter of a century earlier, was reduced to 9% of the vote, and just 12 seats. The new prime minister was Churchill's deputy in the war time coalition, Clement Attlee. On the first day of the new parliament, the massed ranks of Labour members bawled out the socialist anthem, the Red Flag. Tories everywhere were scandalised. (There is a splendid apocryphal story of a lady in a grand London hotel who was overheard exclaiming "Labour in power? The country will never stand for it!")

But stand for it they did, over the next six momentous years.

Clement Attlee
The new prime minister was not obviously cut out for the job. Painfully shy and reserved to the point of coldness, he had the appearance - and often the style - of a bank clerk. Churchill described him, cruelly, as "a sheep in sheep's clothing".

The son of a City solicitor, he was educated at Haileybury College - which specialised in turning out administrators for the British Raj - and at University College, Oxford. Attlee was so far from being a passionate ideologue that his wife Violet once casually observed: "Clem was never really a socialist, were you, darling? Well, not a rabid one."

Yet this essentially herbivorous exterior cloaked a steely determination, and a deepseated devotion to social justice first developed during his voluntary work in London's East End before the first world war. After distinguished service in that war, Attlee entered parliament in 1922, and served in the first two Labour governments. In 1931, he declined to join Ramsey Macdonald's national coalition, preferring to stay with the rump opposition. He became Labour leader in 1935.

Though many on the left opposed Labour participation in Churchill's wartime coalition (at least during the early years when Hitler was allied with the Soviet Union under Stalin), Attlee responded to the national crisis by guiding his party into the national government. He became Lord Privy Seal and, from 1942, deputy prime minister. He was 62 when he entered Downing Street.

Attlee's team

The great tide of new Labour MPs who entered the Commons in 1945 included some eager youngsters who were to make their mark on the party, and indeed the country. They included Denis Healey (who made an impassioned maiden speech urging world socialist revolution), Harold Wilson, Michael Foot, and James Callaghan. But the men Attlee leaned on were of course of Labour's old guard. His principal props were Ernest Bevin, a pragmatic trade unionist who had made his mark during the war as an energetic labour minister, Labour stalwart Hugh Dalton, and Stafford Cripps, an aloof intellectual (Churchilll once remarked of him: "There but for the grace of God, goes God.").

The Attlee-Bevin alliance was particularly important in protecting the administration from some of its own hotter blooded members, who shared the young Healey's enthusiasm for revolution. Their most potent figurehead was Aneurin Bevan, a fiery orator from the Welsh valleys, who constantly urged the government to embrace radical reforms, and bitterly resisted any suggestion of pragmatic trimming of policy. Bevan eventually was to deal the Attlee administration a hammer blow, when he resigned over the reintroduction of NHS prescription charges. For six years, though, his was the voice of radical Labour.

Nationalisation

"The Labour Party is a Socialist Party, and proud of it." The stark sentence is buried in the party's 1945 election manifesto, which promised that Labour would take control of the economy and in particular of the manufacturing

industry. The manifesto pledged nationalisation of the Bank of England, the fuel and power industries, inland transport, and iron and steel. And with a majority of more than 150, the party could not be denied.

One by one the key industries of the postwar economy tumbled into the public sector, where they were subject to elaborate planning controls. For the most part the takeovers were highly popular; none more so than the nationalisation of the coalmines. Pit owners still employed a million men, many of them in dire and dangerous conditions. The new national coal board was seen as much as a humanitarian institution as an economic one.

Other nationalisation operations were regarded more cynically. No sooner had British Railways taken over the old regional semi-private networks than jokes began to circulate about unreliable, crowded trains, crumbling stations and that old standby of British comedy, the buffet sandwich.

After the initial euphoria of nationalisation, it wasn't long before doubts began to emerge. The state industries were smothered by bureaucracy and the demands of Labour's economic gurus, both amateur and professional. Their bolder ideas were often subsumed in the delicate balance between principle and pragmatism.
It became clear that the lumbering machinery of economic planning could not deliver what the voters had demanded and Labour had promised: full employment, secure jobs with fair wages, an end to wartime rationing and - above all perhaps - decent homes for all.

It has sometimes been argued that the Attlee government's main disadvantage was that Britain had been on the winning side in the war. British cities and industries had been bashed around by German air raids, but had not suffered the wholesale destruction which allowed the renascent German economy to start from a clean sheet. More importantly, British economic class structures - and bitter enmities - survived the war unscathed, in contrast to those countries which had been traumatised by invasion and occupation (none more so than Germany) into rethinking their economic cultures.

But there were other obstacles in the path of Labour's would-be revolutionaries. The country, to put it brutally, was broke. It had poured its wealth into the war effort and in 1945 was groaning under a mountain of debt. It had pawned many of its most valuable assets, including a huge slice of overseas investments, to service that debt.

And even when the war was finally over, the victorious, impoverished British maintained vast numbers of men and resources tied up in an empire on which the sun was about to set. In Europe, Britain paid for a huge army of occupation in Germany. The dawn of the nuclear age, and British pride,

demanded handsome investment in the new terrible weapons which would keep us allegedly a first class power. The disarmament, which some in the Labour party craved, proved illusory as - in Churchill's words again - an iron curtain descended across Europe, and the cold war began.
Speaking of cold, even the weather seemed at times to conspire against Labour. The winter of 1946-47 was one of the most severe ever recorded, causing widespread misery and disruption. One of the few truly cheering aspects of life was the imminent arrival of the Beveridge reforms.

The welfare state
The Attlee government is rightly seen as one of the great reformist administrations of the 20th century. It is a pleasant irony that the impetus for the more durable reforms came from outside the party.

The 1944 Education Act, which had introduced the concept of selection at 11 and compulsory free secondary education for all, was based on the work of a Tory, Richard Austin 'Rab' Butler, who went on to conquer all but the tallest peak of British politics.
The introduction of the welfare state rested very largely on the work of two Liberal economists: John Maynard Keynes, who argued the virtues of full employment and state stimulation of the economy, and William Beveridge. Beveridge's ideas were culled from every nook and cranny of Whitehall. His formidable task was to put together a coherent plan for postwar social reconstruction. What he came up with extended hugely the framework of national insurance first put in place before the first world war by David Lloyd George. Every British citizen would be covered, regardless of income or lack of it. Those who lacked jobs and homes would be helped. Those who were sick, would be cured.

The birth of the National Health Service in July 1948 remains Labour's greatest monument. It was achieved only after two years of bitter resistance by the medical establishment, with consultants threatening strike action and the British Medical Association pouring out gloomy warnings about bureaucracy and expense.

Alas, those warnings proved to have more than a grain of truth, and the government was forced to retreat from its first grand vision of free, comprehensive health care for all. In the beginning, everything was provided: hospital accommodation, GP cover, medicine, dental care, and even spectacles. But with Britain showing few signs of economic take off, the budgetary burden was enormous. In 1951, chancellor of the exchequer Hugh Gaitskell was obliged to reintroduce charges for NHS false teeth and glasses. Aneurin Bevan, Harold Wilson and junior minister John Freeman stormed out of government, and Attlee's goose was cooked.

Foreign policy
Attlee's government took office in a world changing at bewildering speed. The war had forged new alliances, the greatest and most nebulous of all the United Nations. The USA and the USSR were undisputed superpowers; Britain and France deluded themselves that they were too.

In the far east, the embers of nationalism had been stirred into flame by the brutal advance and subsequent stubborn retreat of Japan. Britain's ignominious surrender of Singapore in 1941 had sent a clear signal to Asia that the daysof European imperialism were numbered.

With hindsight it was a blessing for Britain, as well as for its vast numbers of subjects around the world, that Winston Churchill lost the 1945 election. The old warrior was, at heart, a Victorian romantic, hopelessly in thrall to the so called romance of empire. His antipathy to India's independence struggle, in particular, was well established.
Attlee, on the other hand, recognised that the British Raj was doomed. He had been to Haileybury College, after all, and had paid an official visit to India in 1929. Even if the prime minister had harboured any illusions about Britain's duty to its 300m Indian subjects, he was constantly reminded by Washington that the US would not tolerate the continuance of empire. Wisely, he bowed to the inevitable, and prepared for withdrawal.

But even as it bade farewell, Britain was to visit two disasters on the subcontinent. One was Attlee's appointment of Lord Mountbatten as the last Viceroy. Conceited, impatient, and breathtakingly arrogant, he took to the grandeur and the raw power of the job with unholy relish.

Mountbatten decided that independence would come on August 1947, on the second anniversary of the day he had accepted the surrender of the Japanese in south-east Asia. Nothing was to stand in the way of this vainglory - not even the unresolved issue of Muslim demands for a separate state, and the gathering storm clouds of communal violence.

In a few summer weeks, colonial servants scribbled lines across the map of the mighty subcontinent, carving East and West Pakistan out of Mother India, and sparking a bloodbath so frightful that no one to this day knows exactly how many millions died. The holocaust even consumed Mahatma Gandhi, the father of free India and of freedom movements everywhere, who was assassinated months after independence. Thus ended 300 years of history, and 90 years of Raj. King George VI would be the last British monarch to style himself emperor of India.

There was another colonial retreat, in a way just as disgraceful, on the extreme west of Asia. For just over a quarter of a century British

administrators had tried, and on the whole failed, to make sense of their League of Nations (later United Nations) mandate to rule Palestine. They tried partition, appeasement, manipulation and bald coercion. Nothing helped assuage the bloody friction between the rising tide of Jewish immigrants and the native Palestinians.

The end of the second world war brought new waves of refugees from Nazi tyranny to the shores of the holy land, and the conflict became more unholy than ever. Washington was adamant that nothing should stand in the way of the establishment of Israel and when the mandate finally dribbled into the sands of history in May 1948, the new state was born, fighting for its life.
Elsewhere, of course, Britain's imperial might remained intact. The Union flag still flew over huge tracts of Africa, whole archipelagos in the Caribbean and Pacific, jewels of Asia like Singapore and Hong Kong. But there was another much greater reality: British adherence to, and even dependence on, the patronage of the United States. We tagged along with Washington in the occupation of Germany and the establishment of Nato; we acquiesced in the new division of Europe between east and west; we willingly did our bit in the great airlift which saved west Berlin from the Soviet blockade of the late 1940s, and we sent our troops to South Korea to fight for the United Nations - under US direction - against China and the North.
At the insistence of Attlee and the Labour right, we developed our very own nuclear weapons and insisted that they kept us independent. In reality, the north Atlantic connection was the only one which ultimately mattered.

Conclusion
It is tempting to think of the Attlee years as an anti-climax. After the clamour of victory, the peace was a drab disappointment. And after all the fervent promises of a new dawn, British life remained to a large extent grey and grim. At times, food restrictions were even tighter than during the war - bread was rationed for the first time. Class enmities flourished; social and economic inequalities remained palpable. Here and there were little pockets of a new prosperity: television broadcasts were resumed, the first Morris Minors appeared, and British designers were working on the world's first commercial jet, the De Havilland Comet. But of that great universal prosperity which seemed to glow from the 1945 manifestos, there was little sign.
And yet, and yet... Britain in the Attlee years changed more than under any other government, before or since. The welfare reforms, and to a lesser extent the great experiment of state control of industry, had a profound effect on the way the people saw themselves and their country. And what they saw, on the whole, was pleasing.

In 1950, after five exhausting years, it was inevitable that the great electoral tide of 1945 would be turned. But in the general election of that year the

Labour vote dipped less than 2%, and it was only the vagaries of the first past the post system that saw the Tories gain 88 seats.

Still, Attlee remained in power, at the head of an increasingly fractious government rent by ideological divisions, and fatally wounded by the illness and withdrawal from public life of men like Cripps and Bevin. When the NHS prescription charge issue finally ripped the party apart, the prime minister was obliged to go to the country again in 1951.

Even then, Labour retained the faith of the people, gaining its highest ever share of the vote: 48.8%. Indeed, it was the closest any party came in the 20th century to achieving a popular majority mandate, but it was still not enough. The key turned out to be the Liberal vote, which suddenly evaporated, leaving the party with just 2.5% support and six MPs. The Conservatives ended up with fewer votes than Labour, but 26 more MPs. Winston Churchill was back in Downing Street.