Churchill, Attlee and the 1945 General Election

The 1945 election was the first general election held in Britain since November 1935. It was held on 5th July 1945, and the result was announced three weeks later on 26th July 1945 to allow the votes of those serving overseas to be counted.

From May 1940 to May 1945, Britain had been governed by a coalition government, with Conservative MP Winston Churchill as Prime Minister. Churchill had proved himself to be a popular leader during the Second World War, so he was confident that the Conservatives would win this election based on his wartime success.

Instead, in one of the biggest electoral swings of the twentieth century, the Labour party won the general election, decisively winning 392 seats, while the second placed Conservatives only secured 197. With an emphasis on social reform, the Labour party's manifesto was strongly influenced by the Beveridge Report and included a commitment to full employment, affordable housing and social security and health care for all.

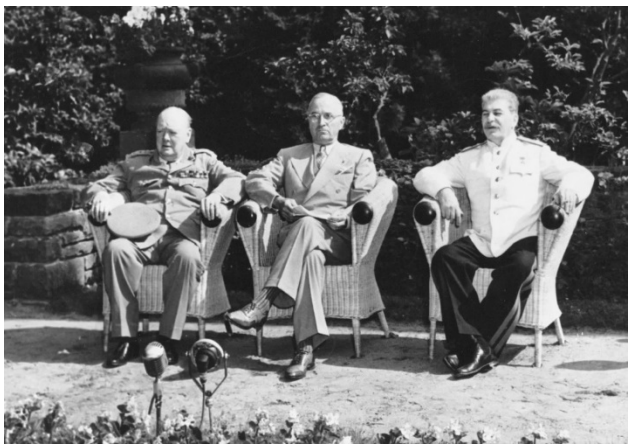
In contrast, the Conservative campaign focused on Churchill's popular appeal, lowering taxation, maintaining defence spending and encouraging private business interests. While Churchill acknowledged a need for social reform, he argued that this should be done privately, rather than by the government, claiming that Labour would need "*some kind of Gestapo*" to implement such reform.

Despite Churchill's concerns, the Labour party's emphasis on social reform clearly appealed to many voters, who gave Labour a landslide victory at the polls and a clear mandate for change.

Immediate Reaction and Resignation

Churchill had expected the British public to reward him for his wartime leadership. The landslide victory by Clement Attlee's Labour Party caught him completely off guard, leaving him genuinely stunned and deeply demoralized by the defeat.

Midway through the Potsdam Conference with Harry Truman and Joseph Stalin (below left), Churchill had to resign and return home immediately, replaced at the negotiating table by Attlee (below right).





Once the votes had been counted, Churchill made the following announcement from 10, Downing Street:

“The decision of the British people has been recorded in the votes counted today. I have therefore laid down the charge which was placed upon me in darker times. I regret I have not been permitted to finish the work against Japan. For this, however, all plans and preparations have been made, and the results may come much quicker than we have hitherto been entitled to expect.

Immense responsibilities abroad and at home fall upon the new Government, and we must all hope that they will be successful in bearing them.

It only remains for me to express to the British people, for whom I have acted in these perilous years, my profound gratitude for the unflinching, unswerving support which they have given me during my task, and for the many expressions of kindness which they have shown towards their servant.”

A newspaper article from 31st July 1945, illustrates Churchill’s state of mind at the time when it reported that had declined the King’s offer of the Order of the Garter, the highest British order of chivalry.

The announcement, issued by Buckingham Palace stated:

“After Mr. Churchill had rendered his resignation to the King last Thursday his Majesty asked him to accept the Order of the Garter in recognition of his great services throughout the war.

Mr. Churchill, however, begged his Majesty that in present circumstances, he might be allowed to decline the offer.

This is believed to be the first occasion on which a commoner has declined the Garter.

Only four other commoners have received the K.G. in the history of the Order, which dates back to 1348. They were Sir Robert Walpole, Mr. Arthur (afterwards Earl) Balfour. Sir Edward (afterwards Viscount) Grey and Sir Austen Chamberlain.”

Churchill famously quipped afterwards: *"How can I accept the Order of the Garter, when the people of England have just given me the Order of the Boot?"*

Emotional and Mental Aftermath

Exhausted from the war and approaching his 71st birthday, Churchill sank into a heavy emotional slump, often referred to in his later life as his "black dog" period of depression.

He retreated to the south of France to spend his time painting landscapes and building brick walls, remaining relatively apathetic toward domestic politics for over a year.

His political drive was eventually revived in March 1946 when U.S. President Harry Truman invited him to deliver his famous "Iron Curtain" speech in Fulton, Missouri, steering him back into active opposition leadership.

Clement Attlee Thanks Churchill

The Prime Minister Clement Attlee spoke in parliament after the Japanese surrender, mentioning Churchill in glowing terms. Although no orator in comparison with Churchill, (who was?), Attlee’s speech was full of the greatest praise:



“Yesterday we gave thanks for the final victory over all our enemies and the world is once more at peace, and for the first time for almost six years the Prime Minister can speak in this House without referring to war operations.

Later we shall be taking an opportunity of thanking the fighting forces, but I think that, before I deal with the general policy contained in the gracious speech from my Hon. friend opposite, which I thought showed him to be in most excellent form, there is a duty which I ought to take the earliest opportunity in performing.

The surrender of Japan has brought to an end the greatest war in history, and a General Election, which took place at a time which was not of our seeking – (Ministerial cheers) – has resulted in Mr. Churchill being on the Opposition benches at a time when the fruits of his long leadership of the nation in war are being garnered. I think it is fitting that today I should pay tribute to one of the main architects of our victory. However we may be divided politically in this House, I believe I shall be expressing the views of the whole House in making acknowledgement here of the transcendent services rendered by the right hon. gentleman to this country, to the Commonwealth and Empire, and to the world during his tenure in office. (Loud cheers).

During those years he was the leader of the country in war. We have seen in Fascist countries a detestable cult of leadership, which has only been a cover for dictatorship, but there is a true leadership which means the expression of one man of the soul of a nation, and its translation of the common will into action. In the darkest and most dangerous hours of our history this nation found in my right hon. friend a man who expressed supremely the courage and determination never to yield which animated all the men and women of this country. (Cheers).

In undying phrases, he crystalized the unspoken feeling of all. “Words only,” it might be said, but words of great moment in history are deeds. We had more than words from the right hon. gentleman. He radiated a stream of energy throughout the machinery of government, indeed, throughout the life of the nation.

HE SET THE PACE

Many others shared in the work of organizing and inspiring the nation in its great effort, but he set the pace. He was able to bring into cooperation men of very different political views and to win from them loyal service. At critical times by his personal relationship with the heads of allied states, he promoted the harmony and cooperation of all, and in the sphere of strategy his wide experience, grasp of essentials, his willingness to take necessary risks were of the utmost value.

I had the honour to serve with the right hon. gentleman in the War Cabinet throughout the whole of the Coalition Government, from the days of Dunkirk to the surrender of Germany. There are many things on which we disagree, but I think it right to take this early occasion, before we turn to controversy, to express the gratitude and admiration for his leadership in war which we feel. His place in history is secure – (cheers) – and although he was no longer at the head of affairs when the Japanese

surrendered and final victory came, this really was the outcome of plans made long before under his leadership.

History will link with the name Winston Churchill that of another great leader of democracy, the late President Roosevelt (Cheers). One is present with us here today; the other did not live to see victory, but his service to the cause of freedom this country can never forget."

Prime Minister Again

Churchill returned as Prime Minister in 1951. Labour lost the October election that year primarily due to post-war economic exhaustion, deep internal party divisions over defence spending, and an effective Conservative opposition that accepted the welfare state.

Despite winning the highest raw popular vote of any party up to that point in British history, Labour's majority was wiped out by the first-past-the-post electoral system.

Key Reasons for Labour's Defeat

- **Austerity Fatigue:** Six years of strict post-war rationing, high taxes, and shortages under Chancellor Stafford Cripps left the British public exhausted.
- **Internal Party Divisions:** The government fractured over how to fund the National Health Service (NHS) versus rearmament during the Korean War, leading to the high-profile resignations of Aneurin Bevan, Harold Wilson, and John Freeman.
- **Conservative Modernisation:** Rebranded by figures like R.A. Butler and Lord Woolton, the Conservatives accepted the NHS and full employment while promising to build 300,000 new homes and ease rationing.
- **Electoral System and Liberal Collapse:** The collapse of the Liberal Party vote largely benefited the Conservatives in marginal seats, handing Winston Churchill a parliamentary majority despite Labour winning 48.8% of the national vote to the Conservatives' 48.0%.



Churchill with his wife Clementine accepting the Premiership in 1951

Sources

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