

Introduction to this book

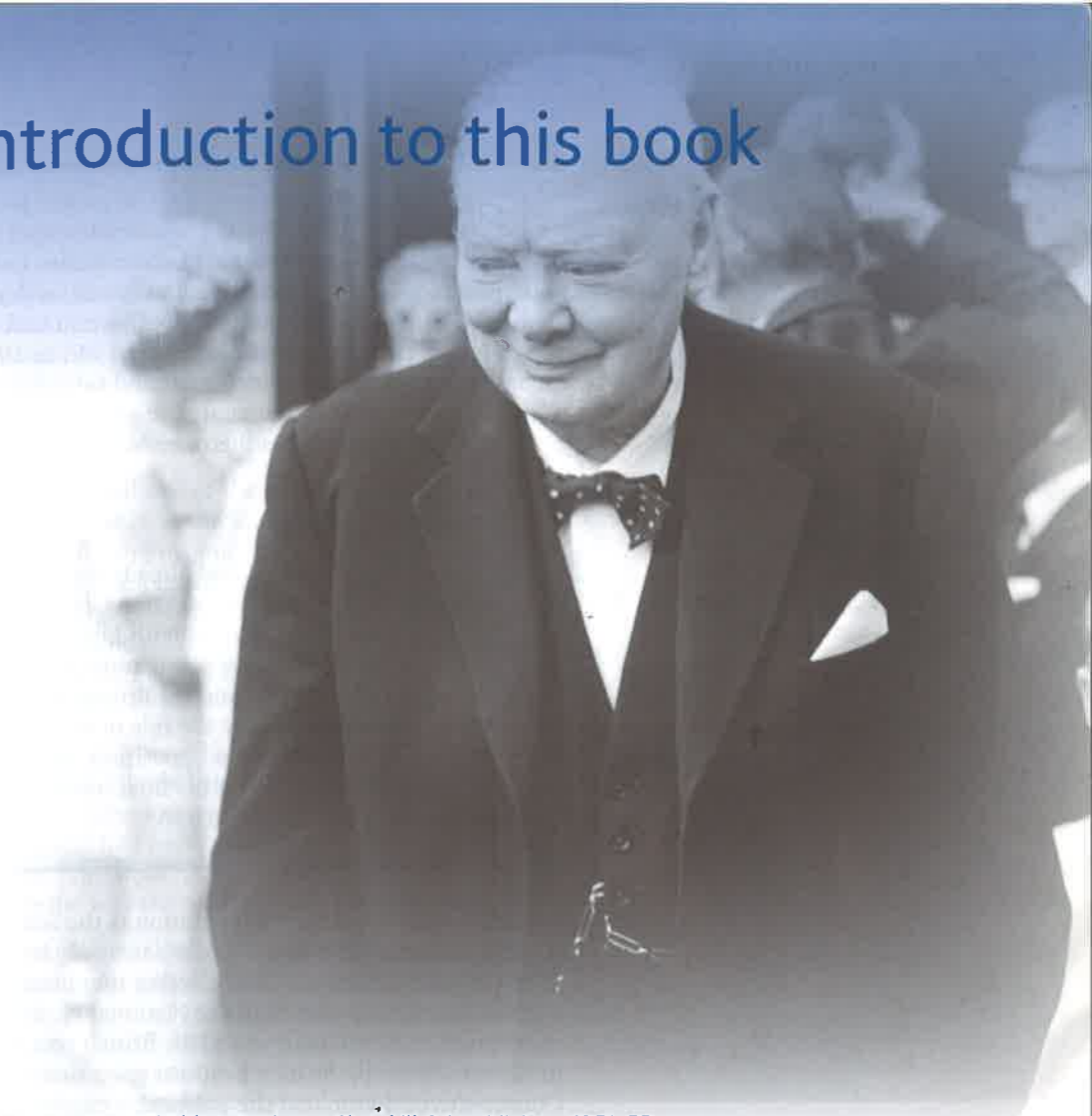


Fig. 1 *The Grand Old Man: Winston Churchill, Prime Minister, 1951–55*

■ Britain in 1951

Politics

1951 is an important landmark in British history because it marked the end of Clement Attlee's post-war Labour government and the return to power of the Conservatives under Winston Churchill. There were other 'turning point years' later, notably 1979, with the start of the 'Thatcher revolution'; and 1997, with its landslide victory for Tony Blair and New Labour. Historians examine the state of Britain in 1951, trying to evaluate the Attlee legacy in the light of what followed: more than twenty years of rising prosperity and of 'consensus politics', a period when both the main parties followed similar centrist politics. Naturally, their verdicts are not always the same – historical judgements are always provisional, never final.

In the stock market of historical reputations, some prime ministers slide downwards after their departure from office; others rise. In his own time, Attlee was not much admired and nobody would ever have used the word charismatic to describe him. He had the image of a bank manager or civil servant, unassuming and modest. In the public eye he was completely overshadowed by the flamboyant, larger-than-life personality of Churchill. Since 1951, however, Attlee's reputation has gone up and up. He has frequently been described (at least by those who do not prefer to give the accolade to Margaret Thatcher) as Britain's greatest post-war prime minister.

■ Cross-reference

The post-war consensus is discussed in Chapter 1.

Key profiles

Clement Attlee

Attlee (1883–1967) became Labour leader in 1935 and led the party for 20 years. He played a key role as deputy prime minister in Churchill's wartime coalition government from 1940 to 1945. He was then prime minister from 1945 to 1951 leading Labour's first-ever majority government and introducing the welfare state. He retired after the general election of 1955. Although he was often underrated during his lifetime, Attlee's reputation rose steadily afterwards.

Winston Churchill

Churchill (1874–1965) had already had a long and controversial career by 1951. On many occasions, between 1906 and 1940, he was a cabinet minister in both Liberal and Conservative governments. He became prime minister at the age of 65 in the war crisis of May 1940 and led Britain to victory by 1945. After the war, he continued to play the role of world statesman even though the Conservatives were in opposition. He was prime minister again from 1951 to 1955; his final mark on British politics was his impressive state funeral in 1965.

The chief reason for Attlee's reputation is the sense that he led a government that achieved its goals – not only by putting into action the aims set out in Labour's 1945 election manifesto, but by leaving behind a continuing legacy, above all the National Health Service and the welfare state. From 1951 to the mid-1970s, British society and politics remained in the mould set by Attlee's post-war governments, even though the Conservatives dominated the political scene for most of that time.

For many people, this political dominance was only to be expected; the Conservatives were the 'natural party of government'. The Liberals had ceased to be a major party in the 1920s; Labour had never seemed capable of achieving a governing majority before 1945. It seemed to many people that the Second World War and the Attlee governments that followed it were temporary interruptions to the natural order of things. For 35 of the 46 years from 1951 to 1997, Britain was under a Conservative government. Before Tony Blair, the Labour Party and its supporters showed the mentality of a party of opposition, even when they were in power.

In 1951, and for a long time afterwards, the two major parties had a near-total dominance of British politics. Third-party politics had been marginalized almost completely by 1951. The Liberals had been reduced to an insignificant rump of six MPs. There was little parliamentary support for nationalists. The Ulster Unionists were inseparable from the Conservative Party. The Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru had negligible impact. The Green Party did not yet exist. Political extremism was weak. Right-wing extremism had been discredited by the defeat of fascism in the war; communists were completely overshadowed by the strength of Labour.

The political gulf between the major parties was also narrower than ever before. The Labour Party had proved itself to be both moderate and patriotic. The fears of 1945, that Labour would follow extreme socialism, had been disproved. The key policymakers in the Conservative government were '**One Nation Tories**', keen to build on ideas of national cooperation to maintain an essential post-war consensus.

Key terms

One Nation Tories: the reformist policy agenda of Conservative ministers like Harold Macmillan and R.A. Butler had many similarities with the policies of Labour thinkers like Anthony Crosland and Hugh Gaitskell. In 1954, *The Spectator* coined the word 'Butskellism' as a label for these similarities. Not until the mid-1970s would a real ideological gulf between the parties open wide.

Cross-reference

Harold Macmillan is profiled on page 12, R.A. Butler on page 12, Anthony Crosland on page 34 and Hugh Gaitskell on page 14.

The economy

The economic situation of Britain in 1951 was contradictory. In one sense, the country faced huge difficulties. The war had badly damaged the infrastructure. Britain was saddled with massive debts. Pre-war markets had been lost. The old staple industries had been in decline long before the war. From 1945, Britain had needed massive financial aid from the United States in order to begin economic recovery. Key industries such as coal, steel and the railways had just been nationalised by the Attlee government, partly in the hope of bringing faster modernisation. Rationing was only just coming to an end and many consumer goods were scarce and expensive.

On the other hand, Britain was still one of the leading economic powers in the world. British companies were at the forefront of key sectors such as oil, chemicals, tobacco, shipping and financial markets. British firms were major manufacturers and exporters of cars, electrical goods, armaments and industrial machinery of all kinds. There was considerable optimism about Britain's economic prospects in 1951, especially in view of the fact that European competitors, like Germany, had suffered even worse devastation than Britain.

In the event, the British economy after 1951 remained a curious mixture of growth and decline. Living standards rose almost continuously. People became better dressed, owned more cars, filled their homes with more consumer goods and had more opportunities for leisure and entertainment. By 2007, the word 'poverty' meant something significantly different from the way the term was used in 1951.

This did not prevent Britain sliding slowly down the league tables of the world economy. Britain's economic growth was to prove slower and more patchy than that of the United States, Japan and the emerging markets of the **EEC**. British governments, both Labour and Conservative, repeatedly attempted to launch ambitious programmes for economic modernisation, to increase investment, to improve **productivity** and **competitiveness**; but their hopes were never fully realised.

Society

British society in 1951 looked very different from the Britain of 2007. Television sets, in the relatively few homes that possessed one, showed flickering black and white images on what would now be thought tiny screens. Feature films at the cinema were mostly shot in black and white, as were most of the holiday postcards and the snapshots in family photograph albums. Public buildings, whatever the colour of the original brick or stone, were covered in the same deep, soot-black blanket of air pollution.

Britain did not just look different – in many respects it *was* different. There were no motorways. Private cars were few and far between. Double-decker trams were a familiar sight in most towns and cities. Shopping by car was a rarity; supermarkets had never been heard of. People still grumbled about rationing and the shortages of consumer goods. In residential streets local children played football or cricket, according to the season, with only occasional interruptions from passing traffic. Railways still reached into every corner of Britain, with most trains hauled by steam locomotives. Mass air travel remained a futuristic prospect.

Most towns and cities were dominated by the obvious signs of heavy industry, looming factories, smoking chimneys, men pouring out of the factory gates in their thousands at the end of their shift. Most men worked on Saturday mornings as well as Monday to Friday. Most women in employment were single – for the majority of women, marriage meant stopping work. Sundays were a separate day – churches were full, few

Key terms

EEC: the European Economic Community, an economic union, often known as the Common Market, first established by the Treaty of Rome in 1957. Its six founder members were France, Germany, Italy and the 'Benelux' countries – Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. The EEC became the European Union in 1992.

Productivity: efficiency, i.e. getting more produced per worker, per shift, per hourly wage. In this way, costs are reduced, profits are increased and workers are freed up for other uses.

Competitiveness: the ability to match rival producers in terms of the price and quality of goods and the costs of making them.



Fig. 2 The author and his older brother at primary school in 1950

places of entertainment were open, Sunday shopping was unheard of.

Leisure and entertainment still resembled the 1930s. Holidays were generally two weeks in the year, spent always within Britain at holiday camps or traditional seaside resorts. Few people had passports. Air travel or any trips abroad were for the privileged few. Mass entertainment meant listening to the radio or going to the local cinema. There was no such thing, yet, as youth culture or 'teenagers'.

Despite the sense of national unity fostered by the war years, class divisions remained clear-cut. The north-south divide was easy to recognise. The so-called 'Establishment' dominated public life. From Eton and Harrow, via Oxford and Cambridge, came the network of political leaders, diplomats, high court judges, bishops and civil servant 'mandarins' who held influence in the upper echelons of British life. The property-owning middle classes lived in the suburbs, tended their gardens and generally voted Conservative, especially the women.

In the areas of heavy industry, in the north, the West Midlands, central Scotland and South Wales, the working classes lived in urban areas close to the factories, were loyal to the trade unions and generally voted Labour, especially men. Social mobility had been increased to some extent by the impact of the war but Britain remained a very class-conscious and deferential society. The class system was very hard to break down.

Many people in the Britain of 1951 were ready for social change. There was a strong sense that the post-war world had to be made better than what had gone before: a fairer Britain, fewer economic inequalities, with less rigid class distinctions and wider educational opportunities. At what speed and in exactly what directions this social change would travel, nobody really knew.

Britain's position in the world

In 1951, Britain's position in the world was deceptive. Outwardly, Britain was a world power, part of the Grand Alliance that had defeated the Axis in the world war and still in possession of a great empire. Many people in Britain were self-consciously proud of having 'won the war'. Britain was one of the five permanent members on the security council of the United Nations and a key ally of the United States in the Cold War. British troops were fighting in the Korean War. British colonial possessions still stretched far and wide around the world. The Royal Navy had a vast reach, matched only by the new American and Soviet superpowers. The Attlee government had committed Britain to maintaining its status as an independent nuclear power. Britain had been a Great Power before the war; now Britain expected to remain 'at the top table' of international affairs.

In reality, Britain had emerged from the world war weakened and impoverished. Britain's role as a colonial power had actually been declining since the First World War; the decision of the Attlee government to withdraw from India in 1947 symbolised Britain's inability to

maintain its former imperial status. Disengaging from India was a painful process, involving dreadful inter-ethnic violence, but it was a necessary step. Carrying it through was an important part of the Attlee legacy, particularly as it would have been very difficult for a Conservative government to do so, especially a government led by Winston Churchill.

Militarily and economically, Britain could not compete with the new American and Soviet superpowers. It was the sudden realisation of British weakness in February 1947 that led to the launching of the Marshall Plan to rebuild war-torn Europe, including Britain, through American aid. The idea of Britain as a Great Power was built mostly on illusions. Illusions can take a long time to die, especially when they are warmed by the glow of a hard-won victory in a world war.

1951 was a time when Britain should have been making a fundamental reassessment of its position in the world; scaling down its military commitments, and accepting that the days of imperial grandeur were over. As the European Coal and Steel Community took shape in 1950 and 1951, for example, the door was wide open for Britain to take a leading role in European integration. European politicians seemed eager for Britain to be involved (though they were less enthusiastic for British leadership than politicians in Britain arrogantly supposed). The opportunity was ignored. The eyes of British leaders, of both main political parties, were fixed on the world beyond Europe, on the 'special relationship' with the United States, on the Empire and Commonwealth.

European integration was a fine idea to help the stability and economic recovery of Western Europe – but not Britain's affair. In a speech in New York in 1952, Anthony Eden, the Conservative prime minister, explained why a European federation was: *'something which we know, in our bones, we cannot do. Our thoughts move across the seas to the many communities in which our people play their part. These are our family ties. That is our life: without it we should be no more than some millions of people living on an island off the coast of Europe.'*

The Labour leader, Clem Attlee, was particularly unimpressed by the proposed EEC: *'The Common Market. The so-called Common Market of six nations. Know them all well. Very recently, this country had to spend a great deal of blood and treasure rescuing four of 'em from attacks by the other two.'*

Staying out of the EEC did not seem to be a momentous decision at the time; but within a few years the post-war illusions were shattered by the 1956 Suez Crisis. There was a belated realisation of Britain's reduced power and influence; in 1961, it was decided to apply for membership of the EEC. By then, however, the open door to European integration had been slammed shut by President de Gaulle of France. Looking back, it seems clear that Britain's place in the post-war world was shaped by two momentous decisions. The first was to go ahead with Britain's independent nuclear deterrent. The second was to stand aside from the process that led to the formation of the EEC. For the next half-century, British foreign policy continued to revolve around the consequences of these decisions.

Timeline

The colours represent different types of events as follows: political, economic, social and international.

1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965
<p>Nationalisation of iron & steel</p> <p>Festival of Britain</p> <p>Anglo-American relations damaged by Burgess and MacLean affair</p> <p>Conservative election victory and return of Churchill</p>	<p>Death of George VI and accession of Elizabeth II</p> <p>Britain's first atomic bomb test</p> <p>Mau Mau rebellion against British rule in Kenya</p>	<p>Mass TV audience for coronation of Elizabeth II</p> <p>Steel & transport denationalised</p>	<p>British withdrawn from Egypt</p>	<p>Election victory of Conservatives under Eden</p> <p>State of emergency declared in Cyprus</p> <p>Launch of ITV as commercial rival to BBC</p> <p>British opt-out from plans for the EEC at the Messina Conference</p>	<p>Failure of Anglo-French invasion at Suez</p> <p>Massive financial crisis caused by Suez Crisis</p>	<p>Anthony Eden replaced as prime minister by Harold Macmillan</p> <p>Independence achieved by Ghana and Malaya</p>	<p>Formation of CND</p> <p>Serious anti-immigrant rioting in Notting Hill</p>	<p>Sweeping Conservative election victory</p> <p>The feature film <i>Sapphire</i>, dramatises the issue of race relations</p>	<p>Blue Streak missile abandoned in favour of American Polaris</p> <p>Macmillan's 'wind of change' speech</p> <p>Independence granted to Cyprus and Nigeria</p>	<p>Britain's application to join the EEC submitted</p> <p>Cold war tensions intensified by building of the Berlin Wall</p>	<p>Macmillan's ruthless cabinet reshuffle, the 'Night of the Long Knives'</p> <p>Launch of <i>That Was The Week It Was</i> on BBC TV</p>	<p>Britain's EEC application blocked by de Gaulle</p> <p>Independence granted to Kenya</p> <p>Profumo Scandal and resignation of Macmillan</p>	<p>Cabour election victory</p> <p>Start of Rhodesia crisis</p>	<p>Death penalty abolished</p>
1966	1967	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977				
<p>England win the World Cup at Wembley</p> <p>Labour election victory with increased majority</p> <p>'Swinging London' featured in <i>Time</i> magazine</p>	<p>Deep cuts in military commitments east of Suez</p> <p>Devaluation of sterling by the Wilson government</p> <p>Liberalisation of laws on abortion and homosexuality</p> <p>Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech against mass immigration</p>	<p>Voting age reduced to 18</p> <p>Start of 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland</p>	<p>Surprise election victory for Conservatives under Edward Heath</p> <p>Equal Opportunities Act passed</p>	<p>Decimalisation of the currency</p> <p>Reform of the divorce laws</p>	<p>'Bloody Sunday' in Derry</p> <p>Unemployment above 1 million for first time since 1930s</p>	<p>Oil-price crisis and energy shortages</p> <p>British accession to the EEC alongside Ireland and Denmark</p> <p>Sunningdale Agreement for power-sharing in Northern Ireland</p> <p>'Three Day Week' imposed</p>	<p>Heath narrowly defeated in February election</p> <p>Collapse of Sunningdale Agreement after Loyalist Workers' Strike</p> <p>Victory of Harold Wilson and Labour in the October general election</p>	<p>EEC referendum brings a 2:1 majority for the 'yes' vote</p> <p>Heath replaced as Conservative leader by Margaret Thatcher</p>	<p>Shock resignation of Wilson; Jim Callaghan becomes prime minister</p> <p>Britain forced into deep spending cuts by terms of IMF loan</p>	<p>SALT 1 (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks)</p> <p>Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II</p> <p>Start of Concorde flights to New York</p>				
1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993
<p>Industrial unrest leads to 'winter of discontent'</p> <p>Devolution for Scotland and Wales rejected in referendums</p>	<p>Independence granted to Rhodesia (Zimbabwe)</p>	<p>Formation of SDP</p> <p>Violent riots in Brixton and Liverpool</p> <p>Big gains in opinion polls by Liberal-SDP Alliance</p>	<p>Victory in the Falklands War</p> <p>Unemployment above 3 million</p>	<p>Conservative victory in the general election</p> <p>Michael Foot replaced as Labour leader by Neil Kinnock</p>	<p>IRA bomb at Brighton</p> <p>Miners' strike & Battle of Orgreave</p>	<p>Miners' strike called off amid bitterness</p>	<p>Resignation of Michael Heseltine after the Westland affair</p> <p>Deregulation of financial markets in the 'Big Bang'</p>	<p>Third election victory of Thatcher</p> <p>Stock market crash in London and New York</p>	<p>Fall of the Berlin wall and end of the cold war</p>	<p>First satellite broadcasts by Sky TV</p> <p>96 Liverpool fans killed in the Hillsborough disaster</p>	<p>Rioting in London against the poll tax</p> <p>Resignation of Thatcher; John Major becomes prime minister</p> <p>Unification of Germany agreed at Two-plus-Four talks</p>	<p>Victory of coalition forces in Gulf War</p>	<p>Surprise election victory of Major</p> <p>Resignation of Kinnock; John Smith becomes Labour leader</p> <p>'Black Wednesday' forces British withdrawal from the ERM</p>	<p>Rebellion against Maastricht treaty by Conservative Eurosceptics</p> <p>Downing Street Declaration by John Major and Albert Reynolds</p>
1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	
<p>Death of John Smith; Tony Blair becomes Labour leader</p> <p>First women priests ordained at Bristol</p>	<p>Major challenges his own party to a leadership election</p> <p>IRA ceasefire suspended and new bombing campaign begins</p> <p>Peace settlement at Dayton Ohio ends Bosnian War</p>	<p>Renewal of IRA ceasefire</p>	<p>Landslide election victory 'New Labour'</p> <p>Death of Princess Diana</p> <p>Hong Kong handed to China</p>	<p>Good Friday Agreement brings an end to the Trouble in Northern Ireland</p> <p>Human Rights Act</p>	<p>Launch of the euro in nine states of the EU but not Britain</p> <p>Devolved parliaments for Scotland and Wales established</p> <p>NATO bombing campaign expels Serb forces from Kosovo</p>	<p>Intervention by British forces to stabilise Sierra Leone</p>	<p>Labour election victory with big majority</p> <p>Al Qaeda attacks on New York, 9/11</p> <p>NATO invasion of Afghanistan and overthrow of the Taliban</p>	<p>UN resolution directed against WMD in Iraq</p>	<p>Invasion of Iraq by US-led coalition forces</p> <p>Iain Duncan-Smith replaced as Conservative leader by Michael Howard</p>	<p>Publication of the Hutton Report</p> <p>Expansion of EU to include Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia</p>	<p>Third successive election victory for Blair and Labour</p> <p>David Cameron becomes Conservative leader</p> <p>56 people killed by terror attacks in London, 7/7</p>	<p>G8 summit at Heilbronn</p>	<p>Agreement on power-sharing government for Northern Ireland</p> <p>Resignation of Blair; Gordon Brown becomes prime minister</p> <p>Growing financial crisis heralded by collapse of Northern Rock</p>	