

The Labour party and the impact of war, 1939-1945

Robert Gerard Crowcroft

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Abstract

This thesis examines the internal politics of the Labour party during the Second World War. There are two primary elements to the study: on the one hand, an analysis of the techniques of party management, and, on the other, examination of the personal conflicts and rivalries which dominated Labour's war. The thesis considers the way in which the party's leadership group performed a delicate balancing act to prepare the ground for entry into office in an eventual coalition during the 'phoney' war of September 1939 to May 1940, continually strengthening their bargaining position while working to keep the Labour party itself subordinate to their authority and establish the primacy of their own decision making. The key figure in this was the party leader, Clement Attlee. The thesis then analyses how, once Labour entered the Churchill Coalition, its leaders again worked to preserve their strategy of membership of the government by expanding their own power and influence during five years of internal upheavals. But their course was an unpopular one, and provoked much disaffection within the party's ranks. All the while, Labour's internal politics were shaped by a series of personal conflicts and rivalries, animated by competing ambitions and enmities. The most significant was the long-running struggle for the leadership itself, between Attlee and the heir apparent, Herbert Morrison. The thesis focuses upon a wide range of individual actors, but Attlee is central: examining the way in which Attlee controlled his party, established his authority, and sought to expand his influence within government, while simultaneously struggling against his great rival Morrison, the thesis is essentially a study in the leadership of this most impenetrable, yet skilled, of politicians. Considering the language and rhetoric which the party's senior figures used to steer their course and retain the backing of their followers, as well as devoting close attention to the manoeuvre, intrigue, and pursuit of personal vendettas which impacted upon Labour politics between 1939 and 1945, the thesis argues that power-political interpretations of the period are more useful than explanations which look to ideological conflict. It also questions how far sociological change, in particular national 'emergency' and wartime radicalisation, really altered the attitudes of the British political elite.

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Preface

Between 1939 and 1945, the Labour party was wracked by a series of internecine struggles which pushed it to the brink of outright schism. The most important of these were the conflicts over the course which its leaders had chosen for Labour against the background of the Second World War, and the parallel rivalry between party leader Clement Attlee and heir apparent Herbert Morrison for the Labour leadership. The thesis is an account of these struggles. The party's leadership group – denoting here the 'Big Four' of Attlee, Morrison, Ernest Bevin and Hugh Dalton – followed a course of perhaps unique political difficulty, firstly in guiding Labour towards office after the outbreak of war in September 1939, and then as members of the Coalition government under Winston Churchill from the following May. For six years, the leaders fought to control the party and maintain it along their chosen trajectory, engaging in a series of conflicts against those determined to challenge this course. That the leadership group was compelled to combine the day-to-day running of the Labour party with concentration upon their ambitions for office created a power imbalance at the heart of the party. It was here that the challenges to their authority were made. The overriding objectives of those leaders was to win access to government, play a central role in the war effort, advance a Labour policy agenda and acquire the credibility necessary to be candidates for office in the post-war era. As such, they were determined that the Labour party should be kept loyal and quiescent to their course, and were unwilling to tolerate open dissension. Managing the competing demands of party, government and ambition, Attlee and his colleagues performed a political balancing act for the entire war. All the while, Labour was gripped by innumerable personal conflicts and rivalries. The most significant of these occurred amongst the senior figures themselves, as Attlee and Morrison circled one another for six years, probing, manoeuvring, and competing for the support of their followers in a protracted struggle over the leadership. The thesis examines these conflicts and the fluid environment in which Labour politicians operated between 1939 and 1945. Moreover, the approach it adopts is rooted in the 'high politics' school of political history.¹ The thesis is therefore power-political in its orientation and concerns, focusing upon personality-based politics, and the struggle for individual advantage and ascendancy, in the narrow and restrictive conditions of wartime.

¹ See Maurice Cowling, *1867: Disraeli, Gladstone and Revolution. The Passing of the Second Reform Bill* (Cambridge, 1967); *The Impact of Labour 1920-1924: The Beginning of Modern British Politics* (Cambridge, 1971); *The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy 1933-1940* (Cambridge, 1975). See also, for example, Michael Bentley, *Politics Without Democracy 1815-1914* (London, 1984); A.B. Cooke and John Vincent, *The Governing Passion: Cabinet Government and Party Politics in Britain 1885-86* (Sussex, 1974); Philip Williamson, *National Crisis and National Government: British Politics, the Economy and Empire 1926-1932* (Cambridge, 1992).

Labour was a fractious and restless party during the war – angry with its leaders, disillusioned by political inactivity, and hostile at being kept on a short leash. It was this context of restlessness which provided the environment for the struggles described here. The central focus of the thesis is the way in which the party's leadership group controlled, managed and directed Labour between 1939 and 1945 – firstly in guiding it towards office during the first stage of the conflict, and then maintaining their position once within the Coalition. Attlee was the key figure in achieving both, and it was his strategy which the party pursued for six years. Though a deeply uncharismatic politician, as the thesis will demonstrate Attlee was in fact a skilled political operator and ruthless manoeuvrer. The investigation undertaken here proceeds from awareness that Attlee was one of the most puzzling, 'unknowable' major politicians of the last century. Yet it contends that the methods, character and leadership style of Attlee *can* be understood – provided we are willing to study him in the right way. As such it is essentially a study in leadership.

The leaders followed a strategy intended to exploit the opportunities of war by achieving a recovery of the party's fortunes and ensconcing themselves in office. It was intended to keep the Labour party loyal and secure freedom of action in directing it. The result was an effort to both rigidly control Labour and wield governmental power via membership of a coalition on favourable terms. Having fought to rebuild the party following its 1931 collapse, the necessities of war and patriotism combined with political opportunity to afford senior figures the prospect of seizing power from a position of parliamentary weakness. Attlee and his colleagues navigated this difficult course through a judicious combination of calls for national unity and patriotism, gestures to appease the party, intrigues to cluster all power and initiative in their own hands, and open assertions of authority. Attlee came into his own as a leader for the first time, the uncharismatic but guileful figure astutely imposing a political straitjacket on his party and working to foil all attempts at escape. But the other leaders, particularly Morrison, were similarly significant. Their chosen path facilitated Labour's evolution into a genuine governing force for the first time in its history. But the strategy was controversial and resented by many at all levels of the party. It is this story of party management – the struggle to control Labour and use it as a platform – which represents the core of the thesis.

During the period of the 'phoney war' from September 1939 until May 1940, the leadership struggled to keep dissent contained, while strengthening Labour's hand for entry into office when an opportune moment presented itself. Unwilling to serve under the prime minister, Neville Chamberlain – who Labour despised and blamed for the current crisis – the leadership group set

out upon a carefully-calculated trajectory. Refusing Chamberlain's offer of coalition but agreeing to an electoral 'truce' for the sake of national unity, Attlee and the other senior figures instead stood back and played a critical role in the weakening of his ministry, while waiting for circumstances to change and the prime minister to be removed. In this fashion, Attlee and his colleagues moved, crab-like, towards coalition, appeasing a restless party keen to launch partisan attacks while building their credibility with a policy of 'constructive Opposition'. Intending from the outset that the Labour party should be subordinated to their own authority, Attlee, Morrison, Bevin and Dalton worked determinedly to enforce this. By exercising control over the party and establishing an image of themselves as responsible statesmen, over the course of eight months Attlee and the rest of the leadership group were able to transform Labour's bargaining position. In May 1940 they seized a powerful role in the Churchill government, extracting from the new prime minister a significant degree of influence in the administration and a central role in the war effort. But in attempting to prevent political tensions from derailing their plans, they found themselves engaged in a protracted and bitter struggle with their own followers which only worsened as the war progressed. Simultaneously, however, during the 'phoney war' the senior figures themselves were gripped by personal conflict, as Morrison and Dalton made efforts to jettison Attlee from the party leadership, the deputy leader Arthur Greenwood attained new heights, and Attlee sought to decisively impose his authority on the Labour party for the first time in his four years as leader.

Once in office, the Labour ministers were even more determined to prevent any challenge to their suzerainty over the party. Conscious that Labour's position between government and Opposition left them exposed, and aware that internal dissension could undermine the gains they had secured, they sought to maintain the tight controls on the party they had established during the 'phoney war'. But their immersion in office, and Labour's growing restlessness and anger at the compromises necessitated by coalition, engendered opportunities for others to challenge their authority. Harold Laski, Emanuel Shinwell and Aneurin Bevan were the most threatening of these internal opponents, but, before long, disaffection over the political situation was so widespread that the party was an increasingly hostile environment to its representatives. Open revolt constantly threatened and the position of the Labour ministers became progressively more difficult. Attlee and his colleagues engaged in a long series of struggles with opponents determined to force Labour in a new direction. The threat facing the Labour ministers was not necessarily that they would be overthrown – there were too few alternative senior figures to replace them with – but that the opportunity that Attlee had manufactured would be wrecked. Moreover, even against this backdrop, the personal rivalry between the leader and Morrison continued, as both sought to strengthen their own position relative to the other by establishing

their credentials as the more vigorous champion of the party, undermine their rival, and prepare for an inevitable confrontation – yet, all the while, working alongside one another to keep the Labour party subordinate. Attlee had won the 1935 election for the post of leader, but in 1939 the struggle between the two had only intensified in the intervening four years. Indeed, the contest between them which lasted for two decades was probably at its most bitter here. The strategy implemented by the Labour ministers secured a degree of power in government out of all proportion to the party's parliamentary representation and, in the posts allotted to Attlee, Bevin and Morrison, a dominant role on the home front. But it also precipitated a rancorous series of conflicts between key figures vying for influence and the opportunity to lay down markers both for the present and the future.

The form which these clashes took was personal conflict. As will be seen, politicians at all levels of the party intrigued and manoeuvred against one another in a relentless search for advantage. There is little evidence that any of the protagonists did this from a coherent ideological position; rather, the struggles within the party were determined by a combination of short- and long-term bids for advantage. Even the mood of disaffection felt by the mass of the party – which provides the environment for the conflicts described here – was not about 'ideology', but the sheer boredom felt by Labour at the political inactivity of the 'truce' and coalition. The issues which were fought over were largely symbolic, and often essentially means of giving free rein to rivalry and personal hostility in a manner that would not be publicly acceptable if sheer ambition was openly acknowledged as the driving force of the actions of leading politicians during a period of national emergency. Most significantly, as alluded to above, although the Big Four were in agreement on the necessity of keeping their followers in line, they were also divided amongst themselves. Bevin and Morrison had a long-standing mutual loathing which frequently put them on a collision course. Dalton and Attlee had poor relations stemming from the formers' low opinion of the leader and desire to see him removed. Morrison and Dalton's relationship fluctuated. But the most serious, of course, was the struggle between Attlee and Morrison. As will be demonstrated, the Labour party's internal politics over this period were often used by the two as mere instruments in this rivalry.

But the party was beset by other conflicts as well. Laski, an intellectual rather than a conventional politician, worked to turn the NEC into his personal fiefdom, challenging the leadership group's direction of Labour and pursuing a bitter vendetta against Attlee. Bevan, previously only a minor player in Labour politics, used the war as a platform to transform himself into one of Britain's major political figures by its end, engaging in conflicts with most of the leading politicians of the period in an unashamedly careerist attempt to construct a powerful position. Shinwell, a much

more important actor at the outset, followed a similar – if even more vituperative – course. Such people were concerned not merely with the problems that instigated internal dissent, but in exploiting them in such a manner as to enable them to increase their own influence. For people like Bevan, the war was a dream come true. The deputy leader Arthur Greenwood, a staunch ally of the leadership group, rose to previously-unthinkable heights in the early stages of the war, before proving a failure in government, and then playing a central role as a ‘proxy’ for the Labour ministers in bearing the brunt of the struggle against internal disillusionment. He was assisted in this task by Herbert B. Lees-Smith and Frederick W. Pethick-Lawrence, middle-ranking figures who assumed key roles in the implementation of Attlee’s political strategy. Each of these individuals will be described more fully in the following chapter, but for now it is sufficient to state that, for six years, the entire party was convulsed not by struggles motivated by ideology or sociological change – as prevailing interpretative approaches tend to explain Labour party history – but instead by personal conflict, rivalry, and the struggle to ascend the proverbial ‘greasy pole’.

The thesis will examine the conflicts which gripped the party by charting their progress across the entirety of the Labour party’s organisational structure. The bureaucratic and institutional setting is an important element of the analysis assembled here, for these struggles did not take place in a political vacuum – it was the machinery of the party which provided the forums in which authority was contested and power sought. It offered platforms and positions which acted as a base for the protagonists, and the leadership group had to wield control of that machinery if their attempt to straddle the bridge between government and Opposition was to be a success. They therefore sought to dominate the entire apparatus and employ it to curtail opposition. Their enemies also utilised it as the anchorage necessary to challenge the leaders. The key arenas where the conflicts described in the thesis were played out were the National Executive Committee (NEC), Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), PLP Administrative Committee, and the annual Conference. Others included the National Council of Labour (NCL), and Trades Union Congress (TUC). Here, perhaps more than in any other period, control of that machinery was crucial: the leaders needed to dominate it if they were to keep the rest of the Labour party largely powerless.

II

The years in question currently lack a study of Labour party factional and leadership politics from this particular perspective. The agenda for the study of British politics between 1939 and 1945 has been set largely by the question of whether the war created a political ‘consensus’ which lasted until 1979. The leading proponents of the consensus theory were Paul Addison and Angus

Calder, their landmark analyses stimulating a debate on the subject which has lasted for decades.² Addison's study of wartime politics remains the standard work. Indeed, many of the omissions in the literature on the period should be traced to Addison; put bluntly, his book is so good as to have not only opened but, in the minds of many, perhaps also closed study of the period. Asserting that the 1930s saw political life deeply polarised, he believed that the new social cohesion of the war fundamentally altered the country, while the existence of the Coalition government and corresponding high-level co-operation between the parties precipitated a similar cohesion in politics. Though differences remained, the war framed the nature of political debate for over thirty years. Addison charted this transition from conflict to convergence through the initial phases of the war, when partisan hostility was at its height, to the formation of the Churchill government and its success in running the country through five years of war. The legislative measures undertaken by that ministry laid the foundations for this 'consensus'. Calder, similarly, argued that the conflict with Germany provided a backdrop for a transformation of Britain. Fuelled by the romanticism and mythology of Britain's struggle with Germany, 'consensus' has shaped the literature of both wartime and post-war politics. However, the pervasiveness of this single theme – whether or not it is correct – has perhaps produced historiographical distortion in our understanding of the period. The current study has little new to add to the consensus debate. While this is not to suggest that the subject is not an important one, its influence has perhaps been disproportionate.

The other broad surveys of wartime politics were undertaken by Kevin Jefferys and J.M. Lee.³ However, Jefferys', too, is informed by the arguments surrounding consensus, specifically in disputing Addison's interpretations. The book does examine Conservative politics in greater depth than does Addison, but is not a focused study of internal Labour politics. Lee's is a study of the policy of the Coalition, but does not offer real analysis of the internal politics of the government or the political parties. Maxwell Schoenfeld's book on the Coalition concentrates entirely upon Churchill's direction of the war and diplomacy.⁴ Of the two studies focused upon the Labour party, Stephen Brooke provides strong evidence for the party being disunited during the war years, demonstrating the existence of dissent at both the upper and lower echelons of Labour's structure.⁵ The book is perhaps the work closest to this thesis, but there are important differences between the two which should be noted. Brooke illustrates some of the conflict which plagued Labour during the war, as well as going beyond party factionalism and examining the

² Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (London, 1975); Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain, 1939-45* (London, 1969).

³ Kevin Jefferys, *The Churchill Coalition and wartime politics, 1940-1945* (Manchester, 1991); J.M. Lee, *The Churchill Coalition, 1940-1945* (London, 1980).

⁴ Maxwell Philip Schoenfeld, *The War Ministry of Winston Churchill* (Iowa, 1972).

⁵ Stephen Brooke, *Labour's War: The Labour Party during the Second World War* (Oxford, 1992).

wartime development of the policies which Labour would implement in government between 1945 and 1951. Brooke also details the continued ideological differences with the Conservatives and the importance of internal party debates about the nature of socialism and reform. It is, moreover, a contribution to the consensus debate, joining Jefferys in opposition to Addison's thesis.⁶ Where the thesis is distinctive from Brooke –and indeed from Addison and Jefferys – is in its specific focus on the significance of leadership politics and party factionalism. Attention to factionalism within all the political parties, or the government, is beyond the scope of the thesis, but it does set out to describe this aspect of Labour politics more fully than has been done in the past. This is particularly the case in its concern with the specifics of the party management strategy adopted by Attlee and the other leaders during wartime, as well as the strategies adopted by other individuals. The second examination of Labour between 1939 and 1945 was Trevor Burridge's monograph on the evolution of the party's foreign policy.⁷ Uniquely, Burridge's work is not part of the consensus debate. In examining the perceptions of international affairs prevailing within Labour, Burridge links together the party's heavily studied foreign policy of the 1930s with that of the 1945 Attlee government, and as such it represents perhaps the best study to date of Labour during this period. It offers insights into Labour's maturation on international affairs towards the hard-headed pragmatism of the period 1945 to 1951, Burridge demonstrating the prominent role held by the Labour ministers in foreign affairs decision-making under the Churchill government. There are also short chapters on the wartime party in studies by G. D. H. Cole and David Howell, yet these are naturally brief and again analyse policy.⁸

A myriad of articles and other studies have been undertaken of popular attitudes, culture and particularly the 1945 election, while biographies of leading Labour figures do consider the war years at some length, although these tend to concentrate upon ministerial work and the government if their subject held office.⁹ Even works on those who were not members of the Coalition focus largely upon policy disputes or causes such as the 'Second Front' campaign and

⁶ Brooke, *Labour's War*, pp. 3-8.

⁷ T.D Burridge, *British Labour and Hitler's War* (London, 1976).

⁸ G. D. H. Cole, *A History of the Labour Party from 1914* (London, 1948); David Howell, *British Social Democracy: A Study in Development and Decay* (London, 1976).

⁹ For a complete list see bibliography but, for example: Steven Fielding, 'The Second World War and Popular Radicalism: The Significance of the Movement away from Party', *History*, 3 (1995), pp. 38-58. Kevin Jefferys, 'British Politics and Social Policy during the Second World War', *The Historical Journal*, 30 (1987), pp. 123-44; Nick Tiratsoo (ed.), *The Attlee Years* (London, 1991); Isabelle Tombs, 'The Victory of Socialist 'Vansittartism': Labour and the German Question, 1941-45', *Twentieth Century British History*, 7 (1996), pp. 287-309. For biographies see Alan Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin: Volume One, Trade Union Leader, 1881-1940* (London, 1960), and *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin: Volume Two, Minister of Labour, 1940-1945* (London, 1967); Trevor Burridge, *Clement Attlee: A Political Biography* (London, 1985); Bernard Donoghue and G.W. Jones, *Herbert Morrison: Portrait of a Politician* (London, 1973); Kenneth Harris, *Attlee* (London, 1982); and Ben Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton* (London, 1985).

reconstruction.¹⁰ While this is, in some respects, understandable, nonetheless aspects of Labour party history during the period have been relatively neglected, at least in terms of factionalism and leadership. Some recent, more nuanced work on the Conservatives has been carried out, but there exists considerable scope for wartime politics in Britain to be investigated afresh.¹¹ The thesis is thus concerned with some quite separate things than earlier studies, which tended to address different subjects or aspects of politics. Whereas existing literature on wartime politics has focused primarily on policy issues, this thesis differs in being specifically a study of leadership politics and party factionalism. Moreover, the ‘high politics’ approach which it adopts – an approach rather different to those taken by existing studies – perhaps offers a particularly valuable method of achieving this.

III

As noted above, the thesis’ approach is ‘high political’. By this the author means a specific interpretative approach, turning upon a particular reading of political behaviour, inspired by historians such as Maurice Cowling.¹² At its core, this methodology is grounded in the personal struggles between politicians as their clashing ambitions and strategies push them towards conflict. It sees this as representing the real motive power of politics, and questions the utility of historiographical approaches which look to ‘ideological’ conflict as explaining the struggles between politicians – seeing this as mistaking rhetoric for action. It also doubts the usefulness of sociological explanations, which concentrate on the ineluctable forces of class and social ‘progress’, in explaining the operation of the political world on a day-to-day basis – which is, of course, how its inhabitants exist.

¹⁰ See, for example, John Campbell, *Nye Bevan: A Biography* (London, 1987); Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan: A Biography, Volume One: 1897-1945* (London, 1962); and Isaac Kramnick and Barry Sheerman, *Harold Laski: A Life on the Left* (London, 1993).

¹¹ D. J. Dutton, ‘Power brokers or just ‘Glamour boys’? The Eden group, September 1939-May 1940’, *English Historical Review*, 118 (2003), pp. 412-24; Larry L. Witherell, ‘Lord Salisbury’s ‘Watching Committee’ and the fall of Neville Chamberlain, May 1940’, *English Historical Review*, 116 (2001), pp. 1134-66.

¹² Too often the phrase ‘high politics’ is diluted and taken to mean any study which focuses on people ‘at the top’. Yet this is inaccurate. True ‘high politics’ is usually associated with the so-called ‘Peterhouse school’ and is much more closely focused with a specific conceptual base, stressing the pursuit of power and the autonomy of politicians in deciding what happens in politics day-to-day. Even some of those who have written about the approach have often missed the distinction between the two meanings of the phrase – see, for example, Steven Fielding, ‘Just gossip and the greasy pole? The ‘Peterhouse school’ and the politics of modern British democratic history’ (forthcoming) and Steven Fielding, ‘Rethinking the ‘rise and fall’ of two-party politics’ in Paul Addison and Harriet Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Contemporary Britain, 1939-2000* (Oxford, 2005) pp. 351-370, where Fielding labels Ben Pimlott a ‘high politics’ historian.

'High politics' concentrates upon the location and possession of political power, and how it is contested.¹³ It contends that political actors, in common with human nature, are interested primarily in themselves. This self-interest – defined as power-seeking behaviour – is entirely normal, and its influence over Labour party affairs should not be so surprising. The focus of the approach is the manoeuvring and intriguing between political actors as they attempt to expand their own position and influence, and undermine that of their rivals. Ambition is the most important single element here, for politicians naturally desire to secure themselves a more powerful and prestigious position or job, whether in government or internally within a party. The fact that the role of ambition is so often subordinated within literature on twentieth-century British politics is a considerable historiographical failing, for to reduce the importance of individual ambition in determining action is to relegate the individual himself. The actions of politicians are shaped by a desire to secure some degree of power, or lay the foundations to do so at a future date. This emphasis on personal conflict, and the struggles which occur as the competing ambitions of politicians intersect, is the essence of this type of approach to political history. It considers the feuds between individuals which animate political action, the struggle for personal influence and ascendancy, and the strategies pursued by politicians in realising their objectives. Politicians – whatever their position in the structure of the modern party – seek as a rule to win power and influence for themselves. Hence political activity should be interpreted as a series of manoeuvres between individuals vying for authority. Political behaviour therefore consists of decisions and actions – some pre-planned, others spontaneous – conducted so as to effect an improvement in one's prospects and frustrate those of rivals. The arena in which this occurs is a highly fluid one: there is no clear line dividing what happens at formal meetings from a continuous but informal process of intrigue, speeches, discussion, and manoeuvre. Rather, the two combine together to create the environment in which political action occurs. The involved actors are all in a state of conscious – and permanent – tension and rivalry with one another.

The analysis which follows is therefore grounded in painstaking attention to manoeuvre and rhetoric. Manoeuvre by one politician or group necessitates adaptation and counter-manoeuve by the other relevant actors in the environment. The calculations of each involved actor alter the dynamics of this environment, ensuring that the subsequent decisions of all other protagonists must take into account the changed situation. The nature of the political environment is thus in flux, its parameters shifting constantly. The rhetoric employed by politicians – whether for an internal party audience or the wider public – is similarly utilised in this struggle for power relative to others. It is intended to be ambiguous, reassuring to certain audiences, or to secure strategically valuable ground and support. Whilst politicians may well believe what they say, they also use it

¹³ The best description of the approach can be found in Cowling, *Impact of Labour*, pp. 1-12.

as a means to project and advance themselves and their agenda, as part of an attempt to pursue a particular strategy or gain ascendancy over others. The nature of politics presents actors with the scope and discretion to engage in these contests. That the number of issues on which political actors have very strong views is inevitably small, and hence they are able to operate freely on most fronts, means that politicians, regardless of their personal leanings, are an inherently flexible species. Politics necessitates compromise, retreat and counter-attack, and the realities of the profession do not sit comfortably alongside an approach which suggests ideology as the crucial element.

The struggles between political actors are, therefore, inevitably conducted in a highly opportunistic fashion. The issues which are fought over may have genuine resonance for the politician, but in the end are exploited as vehicles or platforms from which to bolster their position and undermine rivals. Politicians need to be willing to press home an advantage or abandon unprofitable positions in order to be successful. Thus, the issues which provide the ostensible basis for these conflicts are essentially means of justifying ambition and rivalry. Divergent instincts do exert considerable influence, in helping to push individuals towards one party, or a section of a party. Yet this influence is neither cohesive nor consistent – it informs, but it does not lead action. To assume that the internal environments of modern political parties, particularly the Labour party, are shaped by a simple and unending clash between ideologies is both an insufficient tool for the historian to use and inaccurate.

Four important points about this approach should be made. Firstly, the ‘high politics’ approach has never previously been satisfactorily applied by Labour party historians. It may at first sight seem difficult to apply an interpretation which is based upon a rejection of ideology-centricity in politics, and which places emphasis instead upon personal conflict and ambition, to such a self-consciously ideological entity as the Labour party. The struggles within that party tend to be explained by historians as reflecting, and being motivated by, ideological differences, or tied to wider sociological themes. But in reality Labour conforms to such a methodology without difficulty, and this type of study – focusing upon a period of serious internecine strife which at first sight seems largely ideological in origin – is an ideal demonstration of the reality of political behaviour in an apparently ‘ideological’ environment. Far from contradicting it, the history of the Labour party therefore underlines the strengths of this approach. The politics of Labour function like all other politics, and the thesis hopes to suggest the merits of challenging traditional assumptions about the writing of Labour history, and the development of alternative conceptual frameworks.

Secondly, because the methodology has so often been caricatured and misrepresented, it must be emphasised that ‘high politics’ *does not* deny the saliency of ‘ideas’ or ‘causes’ in influencing action. Politicians may, or may not, be influenced by them in a particular instance. The approach instead conjectures that ambition and personal conflict are the most important determinants of political behaviour, not ‘ideas’. ‘High politics’ is concerned with how the competing interests and ambitions of political actors intersect and impact upon an environment which ‘ideas’ and ‘causes’ have an important role in shaping.

Thirdly, while it could be argued that ‘high politics’ can be applied most readily to periods where circumstances are so fluid that politicians are free to conduct their private battles without significant constraint, and that the methodology becomes more problematic where circumstances – such as a national emergency – restrict freedom of action, such a suggestion would be, bluntly put, wrong.¹⁴ In the final part of his trilogy Cowling focused on the impact of the dictators and demonstrated how personal conflict is continued in such an environment.¹⁵ Philip Williamson has dealt explicitly with the relationship between ‘crisis’ and the ‘high political’ pursuit of self-interest.¹⁶ This concept of ‘crisis’ had, in fact, been the one constant in British politics during recent years, already stretching back at least a decade by the time that war broke out. The language, and sense, of ‘crisis’ was the central rhetorical branch in the political world; long before war erupted, then, a widespread political and public atmosphere of constant ‘crisis’ existed. Politicians utilised this language for their own ends – it provided them with a justification, or a powerful moral reason, to pursue their agendas, as well as something to respond to. More than this, though, it is also perhaps evidence of a siege mentality on the part of mid century politicians, who had memories of a seemingly endless series of crises – over Ireland, the constitution, the First World War, economic chaos, democracy, the National Government, and so on. The notion of there being a ‘crisis’ was therefore so pervasive as to provide an environment to operate in, and an impetus for action; on the other hand, it was sufficiently vague not to pose any problems for self-interested politics. The language of ‘crisis’ provided such a useful, and, by 1939, familiar, framework for political action that politicians did not encounter significant difficulties in playing that particular game. Simply because circumstances produce an emergency, and patriotism, duty, or other ‘ideas’ compel political figures to respond, does not mean that the laws which govern political behaviour cease to operate. Politicians are self-interested; ambition and rivalry with others for ascendancy will be their guiding star even if they are forced to focus

¹⁴ For the author’s earlier work on applying it to Labour history, in conditions which were more ‘open’, see ‘The ‘high politics’ of Labour party factionalism, 1950-5’, *Historical Research* (forthcoming, 2008), and the author’s MA thesis, ‘The Labour party and rearmament, 1950-55’ (University of Leeds, 2004), from which that article is drawn.

¹⁵ Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler*.

¹⁶ Williamson, *National Crisis and National Government*.

simultaneously on 'the national interest' or similar causes. At the same time, asserting that self-interest is paramount does not mean, for example, that party ideologies or patriotism are irrelevant. This is the most flagrant misrepresentation of 'high politics'. The methodology is not so simplistic. Cowling and Williamson have demonstrated 'high politics' in an atmosphere of national crisis; the thesis attempts something similar, in the crisis of the Second World War. The war meant that politics was often narrow and restrictive, while the straitjacket into which Attlee and the other leaders forced the party ensured that opportunities to rapidly ascend the 'greasy pole' were sometimes limited. But that political actors *still* behaved in this way regardless – seeking personal advancement above all else, exploiting opportunities to that end as they occurred, and being driven primarily by personal venom towards one another – in fact only reinforces the validity of this approach. The real test of a methodology is surely not whether it works where circumstances are most fortuitous, but where freedom of action is much constrained.

Fourthly, it is usually a feature of the 'high politics' field that, if understanding is to be comprehensive, the focus must be on as many individuals as possible, and all the parties simultaneously. Any attempt to restrict investigation to just one party will yield only a partial analysis. The research undertaken here seeks to concentrate upon individuals above all else and, as far as the limitations of space allow, examines a wide range of actors. But it is also admittedly concentrated on just one party, and it must be acknowledged that this would be a fair critique of the thesis. All that can be said in defence of the position adopted by the author is that, while accepting this, in filling in a major gap in Labour party historiography as well as, by implication, hoping to underline the problems of traditional approaches to the study of that party, and suggest the value of 'high politics' to Labour history, the thesis is seeking to accomplish something quite different.

IV

The thesis is structured as follows. This preface has sketched out the broad lines of conflict within the Labour party during the period, considered the existing literature and identified its interpretative approach. Chapter one details the central individual actors whose stories the thesis will pursue. Chapters two to seven analyse the course of Labour politics between 1939 and 1945, each chapter covering approximately a twelve month period. Chapters two and three demonstrate how the leadership group conceived and implemented their chosen course, fending off all serious challenges to their authority between 1939 and 1941. Chapters four and five show how dissidence worsened thereafter, and internal opponents were able to threaten the Labour ministers' control of their followers as the party descended into crisis. Chapters six and seven detail the leadership's

resurgence from mid 1943 and the march towards the post-war period, as the events described here reached their climax, and Attlee and Morrison contested the party leadership. A short concluding chapter follows.

The thesis has employed a broad range of sources. These include official Labour party material – particularly the papers of the NEC, PLP and PLP Administrative Committee and annual Conference reports – the personal papers and correspondence of most of the protagonists, government papers, diaries, parliamentary debates (*Hansard*), newspapers and other sources. Wherever access and existence has allowed, it is centred upon original sources. The most important, and frequently used, are official party records. Reading a book by John Vincent, I was struck by his comment on the usefulness of the ‘well-thumbed canon of Victorian political biography’ for his topic.¹⁷ The biographers of the figures whose stories are analysed within the thesis had access to much information beyond the reach of the current author – for example, interviews with many of the participants in the events described within. As such, they, as well as other secondary literature, constituted a useful asset. Where existence has permitted, part of the analysis is also based upon examination of personal papers. Yet it is a matter of regret that the archival papers of many of the protagonists here are thin. This is obviously an uncomfortable break with the approach taken by ‘high politics’ literature. However, it is an unavoidable result of the decline of political correspondence which took place after c.1940. As such the research also poses a question about ‘doing’ high politics – and writing political history in an accurate way – in periods after this aforementioned decline. These questions cannot be ducked. This research, in addition to telling a particular story about Labour party politics during the period, hopes to underline the fact that this is a debate which needs to be held. It proposes that the core of any viable analysis is examination of the things politicians say and do, and how these actors inter-relate. Hence, by studying what might be termed observable behaviour, it suggests that, if the conditions are right, an analysis of politics can be conducted even where some traditional parts of the ‘high politics’ approach become problematic. Much information about the past will obviously be lost with the decline of correspondence – plans, strategies, enmities and a whole array of rich information – but by close attention and careful mapping of the behaviour of politicians, the thesis suggests that sufficient information is still available for an analysis to be attempted. The question boils down to this: are we able to get a grip on the careers of these individuals? If it is possible, then the analysis is do-able; if not, then it probably is not. But the latter conclusion is a rather depressing one. Given that this collapse in political correspondence accelerated throughout the last century, as politicians saw each other face-to-face with greater frequency or picked up the telephone, this debate is an important one and is, at the very least, worth having. Moreover, in the

¹⁷ John Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party, 1857-1868* (London, 1966), p.11.

opinion of this author, it is a debate which can only really be held by those interested in the 'high politics' approach.

Chapter one – The Actors

Due largely to the position chosen by the Labour leaders, ‘normal’ politics ceased in 1939 and did not resume again until 1945. The struggle for power was increasingly conducted away from the public stage, both within the parties themselves and inside the government. But politics itself did not stop, nor did its nature change. The restrictive conditions of wartime put a premium on manoeuvre. This chapter describes the individual actors who exerted the most influence on Labour politics during the war. Given the situation facing the country, all but the most inflexible rebels were willing to give some degree of loyalty for a time. Yet, though the Coalition offered a major opportunity, the result was that the position of the leadership group *vis á vis* their followers quickly came under attack, for participation in the government enforced a degree of separation from the rest of the party. Attlee and his ministerial colleagues were thus compelled to walk a political tightrope.

The thesis charts the inter-locking stories, the rise and fall, and career trajectories of a range of figures at different levels – and in different parts – of the Labour party. This section briefly describes the competing forces and individuals who shaped events. Strangely, considering how divided the party was, Labour was in fact probably less *factionalised* here than in its entire history. The internal schisms which have wracked Labour since its inception have often taken the form of organised factional conflict, but, here, the narrow circumstances of war restricted the scope for large groups. The only faction of significance was the leadership group. Yet though Attlee, Bevin, Dalton and Morrison worked together closely, even this group was far from homogenous. Consequently the weight of the analysis must be upon individuals instead.

I

It was Attlee, more than anyone else, who was the primary architect of Labour’s strategy. It was he who led Labour towards office and then oversaw a continual extension of the party’s role within the Coalition, all the while working to keep his followers in line. It was a carefully-crafted, subtle strategy. Few politicians would have possessed the skill to implement something so delicate. Yet considerable problems have arisen in interpreting his career which have never been satisfactorily resolved. His rise was both rapid and wholly unexpected. It is doubly difficult to understand given that he was widely seen as an ordinary, unremarkable man. Attlee had proven a competent if uninspiring leader in the thirties, managing the party effectively and shouldering huge burdens, while his committee-chairman manner disguised an adept manoeuvrer. He had made some bad decisions – particularly over foreign policy – but other than that was generally

sound. But though his position in the PLP was reasonably secure – underpinned by the firm support of the bulk of the union-sponsored MPs – nonetheless his power base across the wider party was limited, and remained so in 1939. Partly a product of the post-1931 weakening of the PLP, this also reflected serious concerns about Attlee's lack of charisma. His personality was small and flat, and he lacked the dynamism necessary to galvanise his followers. He had also made little public impression, and seemed weak, vacillating, and indecisive. Dalton famously perceived him to be a 'mouse', and there was a sense that he had become leader by default, with his rival Morrison arousing as much hostility as support and a lack of other candidates for the job. While a competent *manager*, Attlee had failed to *lead* the party in any meaningful way. He had been unable to give it a direction – a pattern which was to be repeated when he became Leader of the Opposition again in 1951.

However, Attlee's position was transformed during the Second World War. From 1939 until 1951, he was not only a manager but displayed a hitherto unseen ability to seize the initiative. When performing the usual work of Opposition, he performed poorly and tended to drift; but once within proximity to real power, Attlee could not have been more different. It is this dichotomy between the two phases of his leadership, there essentially being 'two Attlees', compounded by his lack of personality, which explains the common historiographical bewilderment at the Labour leader. For Attlee, the war was dominated by his attempt to impose his chosen order on the party. He implemented the strategy of 'constructive Opposition' and silenced clamouring for partisan politics, while biding his time and strengthening Labour's hand for the negotiation of a coalition. In doing so, he decisively imposed his authority for the first time. Satisfaction of views of his followers was not his priority. The efforts he devoted to that goal were a means to an end. Later, in office, he played the crucial role in balancing the competing demands of party and government. Seeking to retain his grip over the Labour party, he worked to preserve Labour's role in government against all the disaffection which it engendered, while also fending off Morrison. Attlee's wartime conduct reveals a figure more adept in the political black arts than perhaps any other politician of the era. He was also a skilled worker of the Whitehall machine and engineered a uniquely influential role in the Churchill administration, becoming the most important politician in the running of the home front. Attlee's outlook and personality sprang from a background of Victorian Christianity, and he was powerfully committed to notions of duty. The story examined throughout the thesis, then, is really Attlee's story. Examining his leadership style in action, it will suggest a way in which this most puzzling of politicians should be understood. Focusing upon the most critical period of his leadership, the thesis contends that Attlee was in fact capable of being authoritarian, aggressive, and intolerant. Highlighting his ruthlessness, it finds little evidence of the weak, retiring Attlee often imagined.

He was, moreover, the central figure in *both* of the primary power struggles described in the thesis: that between the leadership group and the mass of their party, and that between himself and Morrison.

Morrison was Attlee's most formidable opponent for the two decades of his leadership. The party's most senior politician besides the leader, he was similarly central in the events described here, a dynamic force matched by few politicians of his generation. Widely assumed to be the heir apparent to Attlee's position, the ambition of seizing his job animated Morrison's career for twenty years. Bested by his rival in the 1935 leadership contest, four years on Morrison still burned with the desire to attain his objective. During this period, he exploited the circumstances of war in an attempt to achieve this. Temperamentally not dissimilar from Attlee, that did not preclude an intense competition between them. Moreover, Morrison possessed strengths that Attlee could not hope to enjoy. Where the leader was uncharismatic, Morrison was an energetic and attractive figure, giving off an aura of natural leadership. Further, he was highly respected in the party for his obvious ability in governance – a proficiency which again contrasted with the more opaque skills of Attlee in that respect. Morrison was also, every bit as much as Attlee, an adept intriguer and plotter – a professional in the political arts. The heir apparent thus posed a serious threat to his rival's position atop the party. Involved in a new attempt to displace Attlee during late 1939, even when this was aborted Morrison spent the rest of the war preparing for a future challenge to his opponent. Crucially, in his role as Home Secretary, he enjoyed much greater public prominence than Attlee during the war. Only Bevin and Churchill matched his public stature. Further, as events make clear, the conflict with Attlee was in no sense an ideological one, despite some rhetorical window-dressing used in the latter stages of the war. Instead, it was purely a clash of competing ambitions – who was on top and who was not. From the outset, the struggle between the two men, as it was for many others, was as much about the contesting of *future* power as it was over immediate authority. They engaged in a relentless search for advantage over one another, attempting to build up their own internal standing by being *seen* to do certain things, and *heard* to use certain kinds of rhetoric, as a means of undermining their rival. Morrison thus spent the period attempting to strengthen his own claim to the leadership and weaken that of Attlee. He did this by taking up a rhetorical position directly between the leader and the Labour party, and exploiting disaffection with Attlee's strategy, by posturing as a more aggressive champion of Labour within the Coalition – while in reality being the most draconian of all the Labour ministers against dissension. He was to pursue this tactic for five years. Encompassing the initial period in Opposition, the lifetime of the Coalition and finally that ministry's collapse and the general election of 1945, their conflict was the most important of all the struggles within Labour between 1939 and 1945. Sometimes overtly, sometimes via

shadow boxing, and adopting innumerable different forms, this rivalry dominated politics at Labour's upper echelons.

But, like Attlee, Morrison also had weaknesses, and he would have to overcome significant obstacles if he was to become leader. The most problematic was the enmity of Bevin – an enmity which prompted the union boss to align himself with Attlee and form what amounted to an anti-Morrison bloc. Further, despite his willingness to exploit internal disillusionment, Morrison's refusal to tolerate opposition from the party to the leadership group's strategy, coupled with his frequently controversial decisions as Home Secretary, brought him into regular conflict with the rank-and-file. Morrison's natural leanings towards authoritarianism meant that he was quite willing to act as the Coalition's political trouble-shooter – a role which posed problems for his attempts to win backing of the party by putting him at odds with those he would have to persuade to support him.

Bevin was, by some distance, the most powerful man in the Labour movement. Though as a union, rather than political, figure, he was only peripherally involved in the efforts of Attlee and the others during the first eight months of war, once Labour joined the Coalition, Bevin – with his gift for organisation – was the ideal figure to be tasked with directing the logistics of Britain's domestic war effort as Minister of Labour. He was in many respects similar to Attlee and Morrison (the latter especially), but had never been a 'political' figure and remained so throughout the war; always distrustful of professional politicians, viewing them as 'intriguers', he was concerned solely with the exercise of executive power and profoundly uninterested in party politics. The authoritarian Bevin was thus a paradoxically remote, but central, figure in the wartime party, having only hostility towards it but demanding unmitigated support. His power was most evident at the annual Conference, where his control of union bloc votes delivered victory after victory for the official line despite the growing anger of the party. Bevin was a frequent target for the attacks of those set upon overturning the leadership group's authority, and his notoriously short temper ensured he was usually provoked into a response that made the delicate party management efforts of Attlee still more difficult. That Bevin so distrusted politicians was at the root of his contempt for Morrison – the very embodiment of the career politician. The mutual loathing between the pair pushed Bevin towards Attlee and the formation of the axis between the two which dominated Labour politics until 1951. Bevin perceived Attlee as being the only trustworthy politician. Though they had not been close during the thirties, once Labour joined the Coalition an unshakeable alliance – quite unlike any in recent political history – developed between them, entrenching and virtually institutionalising an internal balance of power that was to last until Bevin's death. Attlee joined with Bevin to balance Morrison and protect his

own role. Strangely, Bevin, the more obviously powerful of the two, had no interest in the position of leader and backed Attlee to the hilt. The union boss was concerned solely with the possession of what he would have considered *real* power – executive authority. He probably perceived Attlee as his ‘lieutenant’ – of which he had had several in the unions – who would keep the meddlesome Labour party in line while he concentrated on more important matters. Bevin’s interests were thus focused in rather different directions from those of most politicians. Of course, that he despised Morrison for being a ‘manoeuvrer’, but failed to discern Attlee’s own abilities in that regard, only underlines once again how the restrained personality of the leader could give an inaccurate impression of him.

Dalton, Labour’s policy Czar, was the most significant individual in the post-1931 regeneration of the party, straddling both the NEC and PLP, and constructing a powerful and influential position. He had taken the leading role in both mapping out a new course for the party and the factional conflicts of the period, engaging in a long and bitter feud with Stafford Cripps and expending much energy to reorient Labour foreign policy towards rearmament. But, like the other senior figures, his attitude was primarily determined by the need to construct a platform to enter government office. Dalton had spent eight years preparing for this, and, once within sight of power in 1939, like Bevin he became generally uninterested in the internal politics of the Labour party – he had climbed the ladder and intended to stay there. To some extent, Dalton thus disengaged from affairs within the party and left its direction to others. But he did remain a frequent plotter, heavily involved in the leadership intrigues of his ally Morrison. He had been at the centre of Morrison’s efforts to become leader in 1935 and remained so here. The alignment between the two added a further dimension to relations *within* the leadership group – though Labour’s Big Four were united on the necessity of keeping the party contained and focusing upon achieving their ambitions for high office, they were deeply polarised amongst themselves. As we have seen, the relationship between Attlee and Bevin amounted to an anti-Morrison alliance, and, by the same token, Dalton and Morrison formed an anti-Attlee bloc for at least part of the war. This division into separate camps on one of the most important issues facing them during the period – the future of the leadership – resulted in relations between Labour’s senior figures often descending into undisguised power struggle.

The key to the leadership’s efforts to exercise control over Labour was the tactic they employed to do so: a quite specific and instrumental ‘doctrine’ established at the outset of war. Attlee, Bevin, Morrison and Dalton – as well as their allies and proxies – propagated and adhered to it, but it was the leader himself who assumed the critical role in formulating and applying this doctrine. It consisted of a combination of various forms of rhetoric intended to create the

circumstances for the leaders to retain the backing of their followers while maintaining their own authority. As the thesis will demonstrate, it included appeals to the party for national 'unity' and political 'responsibility' in the shadow of the national 'crisis', threats of the collapse of Labour's credibility if it was seen as unpatriotic, reassuring ideological gestures about the advance of socialism, and emphasis on the benefits that the Coalition would yield. It was backed by open authoritarianism when necessary. The leaders used this between 1939 and 1945 to control Labour through cajolery and threats, while permitting them to concentrate on their real agenda. It was therefore essentially a cover for them to pursue their ambitions. These tactics enabled Attlee and his colleagues firstly to divert tensions away from themselves and towards the Chamberlain ministry, and later as a means of shoring up the Coalition. While the individuals who constituted the leadership group each had their own specific aims and prejudices, they co-operated in recognising the opportunities presented by the war and joined in propagating this doctrine. This mixture of rhetoric and substantive action was the platform from which Labour's leaders sought to maintain their position, and from the beginning amounted to a bid to marginalise all internal opposition.

However, individuals other than the core leadership group were also important figures during the period. The leaders had three particularly strong allies who they employed as proxies in their efforts to manage the party. These men were thus afforded central roles in the conflicts which followed. The deputy leader, Arthur Greenwood, is a relatively neglected figure, the promise of his early career never fulfilled and blighted by drink.¹ But between 1939-45, particularly in the early stages of the war, Greenwood was of critical importance. In the initial months of the conflict, with Attlee ill, it was he who led Labour on the first stages of its journey. As will be seen, Greenwood was such a success that attempts were made to remove Attlee and replace him with his deputy, rather than with Morrison, in late 1939. The eight months of the 'phoney war' represented the high point of his career, Greenwood playing a crucial role in the strategy of the leadership group and securing a place in the War Cabinet when Labour entered office. But his war was a fluctuating one: performing poorly in the government, he was sacked by Churchill in 1942 and became acting head of the PLP, leading the parliamentary party via its wartime Administrative Committee. This position placed him at the forefront of the worsening revolts and the challenges being mounted to the authority of the Labour ministers. Greenwood thus remained a major figure in Labour party politics throughout the war.

¹ See Richard Whiting's entry for Greenwood in David Howell (ed.) *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol. XI (2004), pp. 83-91. There is no published full scale biography of Greenwood.

The two other individuals were Herbert B. Lees-Smith and Frederick W. Pethick-Lawrence. Relatively elderly at the outbreak of war, both had been competent front-bench figures for many years. Given the need for senior figures to divert their attention towards their plans for office, they needed to leave the day-to-day direction of the PLP in the hands of those they could trust. Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence fitted the bill perfectly, and, from September 1939, these previously middle-ranking MPs shouldered a huge burden as the de facto leaders of the PLP. When Labour entered office in 1940, Lees-Smith became acting head of the PLP and Leader of the Opposition – serving in the role until his death in December 1941 – with Pethick-Lawrence as his deputy. The two proxies were old friends and acted as a bulwark at the head of the party, navigating the tricky course of retaining Labour’s loyalty to its representatives while appeasing an increasingly resentful PLP. After Lees-Smith’s death, Pethick-Lawrence formed a comparable alignment with Greenwood. Tasked with vitally important roles, the three men were to be central to the struggles between the leadership group and their followers.

II

These figures were the key actors in guiding the Labour party along the path chosen by Attlee. But however subtle this strategy, the patience it necessitated dissatisfied much of the party, and internal conflict quickly broke out on a wide scale. By the middle stages of the war, the course chosen by the Labour ministers seemed on the verge of collapse, and the possibility of them being overthrown or abandoned by their followers a serious one. There were also, therefore, a number of prominent rebels who were the exploiters of Labour’s anger and disaffection. These dissidents were at the centre of, and often instigated, many of the crises which afflicted the party. Their war was dominated by efforts to expand their influence within Labour and put down markers for the future. These figures – most significantly Laski, Bevan and Shinwell – exploited the mood of disillusionment, and the power vacuum at the heart of the Labour party, for their own ends. Throughout the war, they sought to establish themselves at the expense of the Labour ministers and encourage rebellion – even to the point of hoping to derail the strategy of the leadership group, and take the party back into Opposition. The Labour ministers were subjected to constant attack by these rebels for failing to secure ‘socialism’ from the Conservatives and, invoking the language of ‘betrayal’, they became their most frequent enemies. They did not act in concert, and each of these individuals had their own specific set of objectives and enmities. Under the conditions of 1939-1945, everyone in the party who craved advancement was simply out for themselves. There was, moreover, little evidence of a substantive ideological component to their actions. Instead, sheer opportunism occasioned their activities.

At the beginning of the period, Shinwell seemed likely to prove the most significant enemy of the leadership group. He also appeared certain to secure a major role in the party both during and after the war. Popular with the rank-and-file due to his having defeated MacDonald for his seat at Seaham in 1935, Shinwell was a skilled orator and unremitting critic of his leaders. By 1939 he possessed a strong position in the party, both in the PLP and via an NEC seat. But at the outbreak of war, this archetypal rebel suddenly altered his posture and immediately became a distinctly moderate figure, loyalist and supportive of the leadership. The reason for this was not patriotism, but careerism: he spent the first eight months of war preparing the way for attaining his most treasured ambition, to become Minister of Shipping in the coalition which seemed probable. But when he was not offered that post the following May, an embittered Shinwell reverted to type and became the most ferocious critic of his leaders, pursuing vicious personal vendettas against those who, in his mind, had frustrated his plans. For five years he then worked constantly to sabotage the Labour ministers' attempts to straddle the bridge between government and Opposition.

Bevan, meanwhile, had been expelled from the Labour party with Cripps in January 1939, and even upon his return to the party in December at first remained a minor actor. He hardly seemed likely to become the most important rebel figure in the party and capture a platform which would permit him to tear Labour apart in the subsequent decade in his pursuit of the leadership. But in fact, at the outbreak of the conflict with Hitler, Bevan quickly began constructing what was, by 1945, a virtually impregnable position, using the war as a vehicle to establish himself as the leader of a significant strain of opinion within Labour. To this end, this famous parliamentary orator— a master performer in the Commons chamber and a match for any political speaker of the 1940s — picked fights with both the Labour ministers and virtually all other leading politicians of the period as well. Engaging in a series of bitter feuds with men such as Bevin, Churchill, and Morrison, Bevan established himself as the party's coming man, and acquired a standing which enabled him to lay claim to a senior position in the post-war Labour hierarchy. His control over the *Tribune* newspaper was a second crucial asset for his projection of himself and his agenda. Bevan — patterning himself after that other great rebel, Charles James Fox — was a constant thorn in the side of the leadership group, and occupied a platform from which he was capable of besting anyone in the party if he chose his ground carefully. By the end of the war, he had become the leading politician in Britain outside the government. This evolution, with its far reaching consequences, was one of the most remarkable aspects of Labour's war. Always more calculating and power-hungry than the ideological firebrand he depicted himself to be, to the ambitious Welshman, more than for anyone else, the Second World War was all about the future.

The socialist intellectual Harold Laski proved to be the Labour ministers' most troublesome and persistent opponent between 1939-1945. Even more popular than Shinwell, an 'insider' to the Labour machine rather than an 'outsider' like Bevan, and with a wide-ranging brief on the NEC, Laski was able to operate from a position of greater security than either. He entered into a rancorous personal feud with Attlee, which lasted throughout the war and instigated many crises. The Labour ministers found it almost impossible to face down their enemy decisively, for, not being a politician, he was largely immune from conventional punitive measures. As Laski worked against the strategy chosen by the leaders, he and Attlee quickly came to despise one another, and the dissident intellectual spent much of the period seeking to engineer the removal of the leader and his replacement by Morrison. Attlee, for his part, struggled to prevent Laski from upsetting his carefully chosen course. Laski also sought to make himself the motive power of the Executive, the role that Dalton had played in the thirties: he expanded his influence almost exponentially between 1939 and 1945, and, with his endless drive and enthusiasm, by 1941 posed a persistent threat to the Labour ministers' control of their party. Ensclosed at the core of the Labour machine, Laski was unlike other dissentients.² Though his leaders could consistently outnumber him, no-one had more influence across the NEC as a whole. He used this to undermine their position and try to change Labour's political direction, favouring a much more aggressive strategy towards the Conservatives and eventually withdrawal from the Coalition. Moreover, unlike so many rebels, Laski did not suffer from a propensity for self-destruction. This, along with the leaders' vulnerable position between government and party, resulted in the NEC becoming for much of the period examined here little more than a battleground between Attlee and Laski.

The danger posed by these figures was not necessarily that the Labour ministers could actually be overthrown but – more likely given the persistently hostile mood of the bulk of the party – they would succeed in mobilising sufficient support to make the balancing-act performed by Attlee and the other leaders untenable. Crucially, the nature of that balancing-act was such that Labour could not sustain the dramatic upheavals witnessed in other periods of the party's history – it would take much less dissension to upset the precarious efforts of the leadership here.

Significantly, therefore, men such as Bevan, Laski, and Shinwell did not need to be strong enough to threaten an actual overthrow of the leadership in order to be equally as destructive. They did not even have to be successful at *that* in order to advertise themselves and bolster their credentials for the future. The leadership's strategy closed the rest of the Labour party off from immediate

² Laski was, in the words of Richard Cockett, 'probably the most famous academic in the English-speaking world'. Lest it be thought questionable that intellectuals are capable of playing such an active political role, an important corrective is supplied by Cockett's book *Thinking the unthinkable: Think-tanks and the economic counter-revolution, 1931-1983* (London, 1995). The cited quotation can be found on p.29.

advancement, freezing into place an internal hierarchy which would last while ever the Coalition did. The struggle of these dissidents, and other rebels, then, was not only about prosecuting personal feuds but to be in a position to break into the inner councils of the party when circumstances finally changed.

Those described above represented the most important individual actors within Labour between 1939 and 1945. But others will be encountered throughout the thesis as well. Ellen Wilkinson, the leader of the Jarrow marches, was a long-time rebel but also Morrison's most fervent supporter, and constantly involved in the intrigues over the leadership. Jim Griffiths was a man very similar to the leadership but, out of office, became a perpetual nuisance to the Labour ministers, reflecting the problems that they faced when the position of weakness they had imposed on the party eventually caused even those who normally supported them to revolt. Walter Citrine, Bevin's only peer as a powerful union boss, exercised influence at key junctures, as did Morgan Phillips, the party secretary, George Shepherd, the national agent, and a myriad of others. A substantial range of figures will therefore play a role in the account which follows, but those considered here represent the most significant of the competing players arrayed within Labour between 1939 and 1945.

Chapter two – ‘Power without responsibility’¹

Between the summer of 1939 and May 1940, the Labour party’s senior figures established a commanding political position by orchestrating and carrying into effect a precarious balancing-act. These men worked to continually strengthen their hand for eventual entry into a wartime coalition which, given the international situation, looked an increasingly likely outcome. They also sought to restrain their followers and subordinate the party to their own strategy of biding time, marshalling their strength and awaiting the right moment to enter office. In doing so the Labour leaders played a key role in the weakening of the Chamberlain ministry. The strategy implemented by the leadership group – representing the initial steps along the course they were to follow until 1945 – was to yield considerable benefits for the party in May 1940. This chapter will construct the first focused analysis of these events, examining the means by which Attlee and the other senior figures steered their course and sought to lever their way into office while simultaneously attempting to keep the Labour party itself in line. At the same time, this was further complicated by internal scheming for advantage and personal rivalries between the leaders themselves.

There are therefore two components to the current chapter, and the analysis undertaken in the thesis as a whole. These were, moreover, quite separate here – it was only later in the war that the two would converge, bringing the different conflicts and strategies which shaped Labour’s war to a decisive culmination. The first is examination of the strategy collectively employed by the leadership group. The difficulties facing them were considerable: Labour’s strong personal antipathy for prime minister Neville Chamberlain was balanced by recognition that office, achieved at the opportune moment, was the overriding objective. This, in turn, was matched by the necessity of adopting a public posture of patriotism and stridently ‘responsible’ conduct, while also being seen as sufficiently anti-Conservative by an internal Labour audience to retain the backing of their followers. The result was a strategy prosecuted through calculated posturing, subtle shifts of rhetoric and language, and a concerted effort to appease the disaffection within Labour’s ranks about a course that seemed to revel in inactivity and simply waiting for the Conservatives to fail. Through this, Labour’s leaders were able to exert a degree of political leverage out of all proportion to their limited parliamentary representation. The manufacture of this opportunity necessitated patience and recognition that only a Conservative rebellion could actually remove Chamberlain; but, as the chapter shows, the crucial point is how effectively Labour’s senior figures, particularly Attlee, controlled and managed the party. It is an account of

¹ Parts of this chapter appear in article form as the current author’s ‘The Labour party and the pursuit of office, 1939-1940’ (under consideration).

Labour's transition from a position of weakness, having only achieved minimal electoral progress since the 1935 general election, to one of great strength. This, moreover, permitted them to exact a heavy price from the Conservatives upon finally consenting to protect their rivals' flank in entering the Churchill Coalition in May 1940. The fall of Chamberlain and Labour's powerful role in the eventual coalition were certainly not inevitable; but this does not take away from the success which resulted from the party being positioned as it was by its leaders and which has been repeatedly overlooked by historians. Previous accounts have concentrated upon Conservative party politics, and adopted a negative view of Labour's course during this period. In contrast to most existing literature, then – which sees Labour as drifting aimlessly for eight months with 'the worst of all worlds', until fortune gifted them a key role in office² – the chapter will suggest that this was not so, and in fact the party was embarked upon a carefully-crafted and deliberate strategy which could easily have come to grief. In this it makes a contribution to other recent historiography which has facilitated a more nuanced appraisal of the period.³

The second element is the personal competition and jockeying for position between these same figures, most significantly over the question of Attlee's leadership and the desire of many to see him replaced. At the point at which our analysis begins, during the first half of 1939, Labour had experienced less internal conflict than at any point since August 1931. The most troublesome dissident figure in the party, Cripps, was expelled along with a number of his followers in January, his demise signifying the symbolic end to the divisions which had plagued Labour since MacDonald's defection. Yet there still existed a power vacuum at the heart of the party. Attlee shouldered huge burdens and managed the PLP admirably, but while he was officially leader he had not really 'led' the party anywhere. Instead, his period in charge had been characterised by drift, a perhaps inevitable consequence of his uncharismatic personality and lack of dynamism in circumstances of parliamentary Opposition. The work of taking Labour forward had been done by others. Of the other leading figures within the party, they too possessed only a limited internal reach – Attlee's great rival Morrison was highly respected, but did not yet enjoy the support necessary to ascend to the leadership; Dalton had driven the NEC for years but possessed only a small personal following; deputy leader Greenwood was popular, but hindered by his taste for alcohol; and Bevin and Citrine were powerful union figures but lacked the same influence over

² For example, Addison, Brooke and Jefferys have all taken this view.

³ D. J. Dutton, 'Power brokers or just 'Glamour boys'? The Eden group, September 1939-May 1940', *English Historical Review*, 118 (2003), pp. 412-24; Larry L. Witherell, 'Lord Salisbury's 'Watching Committee' and the fall of Neville Chamberlain, May 1940', *English Historical Review*, 116 (2001), pp. 1134-66.

the political wing. Hence power at the top of the Labour party remained diffuse and, as will be seen, ripe for competition.⁴

The chapter will show how this situation changed over the period up to the formation of the Coalition in May 1940 – particularly in the transformation of Attlee. For the first time, he took hold of his party and moved it decisively in a direction of his choosing. In doing so he imposed himself on his followers to a greater degree than he had ever done previously. The period was the most crucial of Attlee's career for, though absent through illness from May until October, upon his return he emerged as a genuine leader for the first time. Though this often went unappreciated by his followers and contemporaries, the thesis will demonstrate the increasing centrality of Attlee's role and propose a new means of understanding this most puzzling of politicians. At the same time, others set out on their own courses. Of most immediate significance was Greenwood's being propelled to the highest stature he was to attain in his long career, and the plotting of Dalton and Morrison to jettison Attlee as leader. Even under conditions of national crisis, political actors remained self-interested beings, and the period in question offered significant opportunities for advancement. In the circumstances of war, outward loyalty was at a premium; anything else would have engendered accusations of undermining national unity. As a result, the ability of politicians to partake in their usual activity of seeking personal and party advantage became more difficult, and to some extent restricted. Yet, even within these confines and behind this facade, politics continued largely as normal. The nature of politics did not change because of the war. Rivals continued to snipe at one another; politicians still went about setting out their stalls for power and advancement; and senior figures still competed in high-stakes contests for superiority.

I

The period opened with the beginnings of a major internal crisis over the leadership. Running parallel to this, the first indications of the party management strategy which the senior figures would adopt were seen at the 1939 annual Conference in May. Events that month initiated a realignment in the balance of power at the top of the party which would continue until the end of the year, laying the foundations for a renewed conflict over the leader's position. Attlee was

⁴ It is a matter of regret that this aspect of the analysis is, for the current chapter at least, disproportionately dependent on a single source – Dalton's diary. This was due primarily to the destruction of the PLP records for 1938-41 by the Luftwaffe, as well as the fact that many other sources which will become significant later were not so here. This is a problem which has confronted all previous historians of the period, and, as a result, the examination of politicking at the top of the party in this chapter is more reliant on this one source than would be preferred. Nonetheless, it should be stressed that, as far as we can see, its account is not contradicted by the other sources that are available, and much of it is corroborated elsewhere (for example, in memoirs).

absent, ill with a prostate condition, for most of the period from May until October 1939. He still retained a guiding hand, but his temporary removal had the effect of necessitating changes in the day-to-day management of the party. Surprisingly, the most significant role was assumed not by the heir apparent, Morrison, but the acting leader, Greenwood. The Conference did not witness the public schisms of earlier years and, with a general election assumed to be on the horizon, outward unity was at a premium. With the continued deterioration in the international situation, it was here that Labour's senior figures put down their first public markers – for Conservative observers and their own followers – on the possibility of cross-party alliance. Though they did not set out fully along their new trajectory until the actual outbreak of war, nonetheless the basic position was in place by May.

With Attlee ill, it was Greenwood who was tasked with defining Labour's stance. Bringing the Conference to a close, he commented on the possibility of Labour joining a coalition in the event of war, asserting to the delegates that 'I will never, myself, if I were called upon to do, take office in any government that was not prepared to implement [the] Immediate Programme (Labour's 1937 policy document)'.⁵ Greenwood poured further cold water on the idea by stating that 'those people who would sell our principles to buy the uncertain support of Liberals and Conservatives are doing this great party no good.'⁶ While we should see Greenwood's speech in the context of its Conference setting, the stance adopted by the acting leader marked out a high price for Labour's co-operation – something Chamberlain would certainly be forced to pursue should war erupt. It was thus evidently intended for external consumption as well. The address represented the first glimpse of the strategy pursued by the leadership group until May 1940, staying out of the government so as to reap maximum advantage when the opportune moment to enter a coalition came. In declaring that Labour would not enter a cross-party ministry without the implementation of some of its key policies, the leadership were from the outset able to construct a distinctly advantageous bargaining position *vis á vis* the Conservatives. But his role as the leading spokesman for the party also initiated a sudden rise to prominence for Greenwood himself, and over the subsequent months he became a critical player in the political world. He ended the Conference amid cheering with a energetic electioneering speech: 'My friends, the fight is on! Soldiers, to your posts! Forward, to victory!'⁷ Despite possessing a limited internal power base – he was not a member of the NEC and was deputy leader only of the PLP, not the Labour party as a whole – Greenwood was pushed to the forefront from mid 1939 as acting leader, and rapidly

⁵ *1939 Labour Party Annual Conference Report* (these are hereafter cited as *LPACR*), pp. 330-1.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

propelled up the greasy pole. By the autumn he was in the ascendant and undercutting Morrison's prized status as leader-in-waiting.

But, for the moment, the question of political strategy retreated into the background as Morrison exploited Attlee's illness to immediately launch a new plot to snatch the leadership from his rival. That war was widely thought to be inevitable, but 'politics' continued entirely as normal once their position on coalition had been marked out, is instructive. Morrison had apparently been preparing a move against Attlee throughout 1939, one newspaper labelling it 'an immense and far-tentacled intrigue' by his supporters, and earlier in the year the *Sunday Express* observed that Morrison's 'closest friends scurry around the lobbies at Westminster, there and here, to and fro, staking out his claim [for the leadership]...their propaganda is meeting with some success'.⁸

Drawn from across the party and temperamentally dissimilar, Morrison's supporters underline the significance of loyalty to individuals, not ideology, in Labour factionalism. His most active allies were Dalton and Wilkinson – two more different figures would be difficult to conceive. In June 1939, with the leader out of the way, and with the possibility that Labour's poor prospects of winning a general election would generate sufficient disaffection with the incumbent to enable him to challenge and defeat Attlee, Morrison thus tried to seize his job and precipitated the first of two attempts that year to force a change of leader. This also began a pattern which was to recur throughout the war: attention by senior political figures to personal conflict and ambition despite the existence of 'crisis'. Dalton, loathsome as ever towards Attlee, was at the centre of both episodes, being determined to remove the uncharismatic leader. To a man like Dalton, determined to 'become the government' as Stafford Cripps observed, this was a fatal flaw.⁹ Dalton's hostility to Attlee is evident from his lack of concern at the rumour that the leader might actually die from his prostate condition.¹⁰

Independently of this, though, it is clear that Attlee's position remained fragile not only because of the actions of his rivals, but as a consequence of having made so little public impression. At the Conference, Bevin complained to Dalton about 'the weakness of [his] leadership', and Dalton recorded hearing that both Bevin and Citrine felt that a change of leader 'must be made'.¹¹ That Bevin held this view suggests that the union boss, like most others, at this time misjudged Attlee's skills. Bevin and Citrine apparently had little confidence in Greenwood either, and the

⁸ Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.245; *Sunday Express*, 1 January 1939.

⁹ Unpublished Beatrice Webb Diary, 16 April 1937, cited Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton*, p.234.

¹⁰ British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, Dalton papers, Diary, entries for '26th May 1939 to 2nd June 1939' (p.267). Page numbers in brackets refer to where the source can be found in the published version of the diary, in Ben Pimlott (ed.), *The Political Diary of Hugh Dalton, 1918-40, 1945-60* (London, 1986).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

former despised Morrison.¹² These signs of discontent confirm that the standing of the leader remained tenuous. For all his hard work in managing Labour since 1931, it is obvious that by 1939 Attlee's party was tiring of him, but also that no obvious successor was agreed.

Following the Conference, Dalton began politicking to get rid of the leader, telling the influential Francis Williams, editor of the *Daily Herald* and another Morrison supporter, that 'I am prepared to go to all lengths to get the right sort of change'.¹³ By 'the right sort of change', Dalton meant ensuring that Greenwood did not get the post; he told Williams 'a few things', about Greenwood and his supporters, whom Dalton referred to as 'the Masons' (Greenwood, along with numerous other Labour MPs, was a freemason).¹⁴ Though details of Dalton's comments are unspecified, it seems unlikely they were complimentary. Williams then sent up a balloon for Morrison's claim to the top job, writing in the *Daily Herald* that political leadership 'is at this moment shown pre-eminently in the commanding position in public respect which has been achieved by Herbert Morrison through the great qualities of courageous and imaginative leadership he has brought to the control of London'.¹⁵ No mention was made of Attlee in the article.¹⁶ Shortly afterwards, the plot emerged into the open when Wilkinson published a newspaper piece expressing a lack of confidence in Attlee.¹⁷ Wilkinson advocated that Morrison should replace Attlee, with Dalton, Greenwood and Cripps serving as his chief 'lieutenants'.¹⁸ But given Attlee's ill-health, this effort to remove him days into his absence was not well-received by MPs. Moreover, Greenwood and 'the Masons' suspected it to be a preliminary to a strike by Morrison.¹⁹ Considering his opposition, Greenwood's name began to be canvassed as an alternative nominee.²⁰ His supporters apparently presented his candidacy in terms of 'indignation at this attempt to stab a sick man [Attlee] in the back', while, in Dalton's view, actually hoping that Attlee would 'retire on grounds of ill-health' and that Greenwood, not Morrison, would then replace him.²¹ Dalton recorded that the Masons were 'going about, swearing that they would have Ellen's head on a charger' and denouncing the effort to impose Morrison on the PLP.²² The acting leader, apparently inebriated at the time, warned Wilkinson privately that he would push for her to be censured.²³ The attempt to unseat Attlee gathered pace when the chief conspirators met secretly behind the Speaker's

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Daily Herald*, 3 June 1939.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *Sunday Referee*, 4 June 1939.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Pimlott, *Dalton*, p.265.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Dalton Diary, 14 June 1939 (pp. 268-70).

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

chair in the Commons on 12 June.²⁴ Dalton urged Wilkinson, if she was attacked, ‘to counter by spilling some Masonic beans’ (again unspecified), as ‘Greenwood and the Masons are a scandal’, and the episode offered ‘a chance to expose them’.²⁵ Quite what Dalton knew, or thought he knew, about Greenwood is unknown; but he obviously thought it a useful weapon.²⁶ Wilkinson agreed, while Morrison – determined to use Attlee’s absence to fatally undermine his position – wanted to engineer ‘an open discussion on the leadership’ by the PLP.²⁷

As it was, however, no contest actually occurred. Dalton heard through the journalist Maurice Webb – another Morrison supporter – that Greenwood was less concerned with winning the leadership than with stopping Morrison.²⁸ Greenwood was apparently ‘terrified’ of becoming leader amid such a grave international situation.²⁹ At the crucial PLP meeting on 14 June, Dalton and Morrison were both received coolly, a sign that their plotting had annoyed many.³⁰

Wilkinson came in for heavy criticism from Greenwood and an ‘angry and confused discussion’ followed, in which Wilkinson – perhaps a proxy for Morrison in the eyes of the union MPs loyal to Attlee – was berated.³¹ Coming under sustained attack, she made a poor defence and failed to ‘spill [the] beans’ on the Masons.³² In the end, she was severely reprimanded, but narrowly escaped censure.³³

Under the circumstances, if Morrison had publicly associated himself with her attack on Attlee it would quite likely have done him considerable harm, being seen as manoeuvring against a sick colleague. Consequently, he abandoned his closest ally altogether, saying that he knew nothing of the article before it was published and would have advised against it anyway.³⁴ He affirmed his loyalty to Attlee, and said he would support him in a vote of confidence.³⁵ Whether he would have adopted such a line if a leadership crisis had actually been provoked is questionable. Dalton observed that the affair had wounded Morrison, noting a ‘certain hostility in the atmosphere’

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ For further information on the Masonic element within the PLP, see John Hamill and Andrew Prescott, ‘The Mason’s candidate: New welcome lodge no. 5139 and the parliamentary Labour party’, *Labour History Review*, vol. 71 (2006), pp. 9-41.

²⁷ Dalton Diary, 14 June 1939 (pp. 268-70).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Dalton Diary, 14 June 1939 (unpublished version).

³¹ Dalton Diary, 14 June 1939 (pp.268-71). The unpublished version contains slightly more information than the published account of the incident.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

when he made his speech.³⁶ The heir apparent recognised, moreover, that any attempt to take the leadership was hindered by the fact that the existing composition of the PLP stacked the odds against him and that it would require an influx of new, non-union MPs before he could attract the necessary support.³⁷ This realisation of the unfavourable situation facing him in the arena where a leadership contest would have to be decided would, as we shall see, eventually push Morrison to change tack. But for the moment his position was weakened by the backfiring of this bid to unseat Attlee. Shinwell – who had been energetically reassuring Attlee that he was leading the way against any attempt to replace him, perhaps seeking preferment – moved a vote of confidence in the incumbent which was carried unanimously, and the episode came to an abrupt end.³⁸ While, as suggested above, Attlee's position clearly remained vulnerable and his style of leadership ill-suited to the normalities of Opposition, that he remained leader in spite of the disillusionment he engendered, and his absence from the centre of events, underlines the depth of his support among the union MPs. He held the backing of a majority of them so firmly that neither Morrison nor Dalton had even been able to engineer a contest.

II

With this initial bid to remove Attlee a failure, attention shifted back to events abroad and internal affairs receded in importance until the days preceding the outbreak of war. Nonetheless these changes in the distribution of authority among senior figures – particularly towards Greenwood – continued. Simultaneously, however, the course chosen by the leaders of standing back and strengthening Labour's hand now had to actually be implemented as the international crisis developed. With Attlee still absent in August, it fell to Greenwood to lead Labour in the Commons and in its contacts with the government, and within days he achieved the highest stature he was to attain in his long career. He was, of course, long blighted by drinking, but in a brief three-month period from late August Greenwood offered a fleeting glimpse of his true capacity. Serving as the Labour liaison with Downing Street, he was in close touch with both Chamberlain and Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, as the crisis gathered pace. A significant factor in Greenwood's rise was that Morrison, having already being stung by the PLP, was at this time taken up with his work on the LCC in preparing the capital for aerial attack. The acting

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.245.

³⁸ Dalton Diary, 14 June 1939 (pp. 268-70). Shinwell was 'raging' against Morrison, denouncing him as a 'MacDonaldite in 1931' and 'whose capacities have been enormously exaggerated'. Shinwell favoured retaining Attlee and wrote to the indisposed leader that 'The one thing I want to let you know is that some of us are quite capable of looking after your interests while you are away. There is nothing you need worry about, keep that in your mind all the time' – cited Francis Beckett, *Clem Attlee* (London, 2007 edition) p.152.

leader rose to the occasion, and along with senior colleagues sought to strengthen the government's resolve to resist Hitler. At a meeting of the PLP Executive in late August, Greenwood and Dalton advocated the strategy of simultaneously acting 'responsibly' in the national interest whilst leaving Chamberlain isolated by refusing to join the government.³⁹ This 'responsibility' constituted a rhetorical means of protecting Labour's flank from any charge of a lack of patriotism while simultaneously restraining the party, affording its leaders the scope and discretion to thereafter manoeuvre largely as normal. It thus represented the core of the party management doctrine which was now being created. It was agreed that no MP or trade union leader should enter into individual agreement with the government: any such initiative must be a collective decision, for this independence was crucial if Labour was to exert a pressure disproportionate to its parliamentary strength.⁴⁰ The PLP backed this decision.⁴¹ That same day, Greenwood delivered a commanding performance in Parliament, leading for Labour in a debate on the international situation. He told the packed Commons that 'The war clouds are gathering. Europe and the world are in shadows. A terrible...responsibility lies on the shoulders of him [Hitler] that lets loose the hounds of war'.⁴² Greenwood's oration was measured but direct, lambasting the appeasement policies of Chamberlain while emphasising that Labour would stand behind the government in resisting the dictators.⁴³ His conduct as acting leader had elevated Greenwood from the status of minor deputy to major national figure.

At a meeting of the NCL the following day, the decision not to co-operate was supported.⁴⁴ Some wanted to publicise this, but Dalton, Citrine, and Lees-Smith successfully argued that Labour would appear unreasonable, regardless of whether it was the more adept course of action.⁴⁵ Three days later, as Chamberlain leaned towards appeasing Berlin once more, Greenwood entered another effective Commons performance in response. He attempted to force the prime minister to adopt a tougher stance by now publicly distancing Labour from the government, saying that 'as far as *we* are concerned aggression must stop now...*our* determination...is that these threats, menaces and open aggression will come to an end'.⁴⁶ Despite Greenwood's taking the reins, Attlee – still recuperating in North Wales – ensured that he retained a guiding hand over events at this crucial stage, staying in touch with Greenwood via telephone. His own support for

³⁹ Dalton Diary, 24 August 1939 (p.283.)

⁴⁰ NEC minutes, 2 September 1939; *London News*, October 1939.

⁴¹ Dalton Diary, 24 August 1939 (p.283).

⁴² Parliamentary Debates (Commons) Fifth Series (*Hansard*), vol. 351, 24 August 1939, cols. 10-14.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ People's History Museum, Manchester, Labour party archive, NCL minutes, 25 August 1939. All official party records cited in the thesis are located in the Labour party archive.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Hansard*, vol. 351, 29 August 1939, cols. 110-16 (italics mine).

appeasement having long since dissipated, Attlee urged his deputy to pressurise Chamberlain to declare war, by now resolved that ‘We’ve got to fight’.⁴⁷

On 1 September, Chamberlain responded to Labour’s tactical shift by formally inviting the party to join a coalition under him.⁴⁸ Attlee told Greenwood to refuse the offer and, displaying his usual gift for sensing the mood of his followers, advised the acting leader not even to discuss it at length, so as to avoid raising any suspicions that it was being considered or that the leaders may ‘betray’ Labour.⁴⁹ Unsurprisingly, the PLP Executive followed this recommendation and unanimously rejected the offer.⁵⁰ Crucial in determining their course so far was that, whilst Attlee and the other leaders were favourable to the notion of coalition and exploiting the war as an opportunity to secure office, they were adamant that they would not serve under Chamberlain personally, the man they considered responsible for the crisis. A strong mutual antipathy had long existed between Chamberlain and the PLP.⁵¹ Chamberlain, particularly, held a low opinion of the MPs on the other side of the Commons and their ‘pathetic’ leaders, and was far from shy about expressing this publicly.⁵² Labour consequently reviled him. Attlee, in his own words, ‘detested’ the prime minister, who treated Labour ‘like dirt’.⁵³ This would come back to haunt Chamberlain during what remained of his premiership. Labour MPs doubtless took a certain pleasure in the discomfiture of a man who they knew thought little of them, and there was a distinct element of revenge in the party’s attitude, something that reached its crescendo with their final, fatal strike on him the following May. Further, to go in so soon would sacrifice Labour’s leverage – a stronger bargaining position could be held outside the administration than bound within it. The party’s stance was thus one of ‘patriotic detachment’, for a weak position in the government would not be worth possessing.⁵⁴ By staying out in this manner, Labour was not associated with the government’s failures, affording it a credibility that could be exploited in coalition negotiations at a later date.

⁴⁷ John Swift, *Labour in Crisis: Clement Attlee and the Labour party in Opposition, 1931-1940* (Basingstoke, 2001), p.119.

⁴⁸ NEC minutes, 1 September 1939.

⁴⁹ Attlee interview, cited Harris, *Attlee*, p.166.

⁵⁰ Dalton Diary, 6 September 1939 (p.297).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² See, for example, Birmingham University Library, Neville Chamberlain papers, Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 26 Feb 1938. Robert Self’s editions provide abundant examples of his views.

⁵³ *Clem Attlee: The Granada historical records interview* (London, 1967), p.17. In the same interview, Attlee commented that ‘I thought the man [Chamberlain] was no good. I thought he was absolutely useless for foreign affairs’.

⁵⁴ Being given the ‘Secretaryship of State for Latrines’ was Dalton’s judgement on Labour’s prospects at this stage – Dalton Diary, 6 September 1939 (p.297).

Whether the leaders could succeed in restraining the Labour party while strengthening their bargaining position – the balancing-act which was now in the offing – remained an open question. The continued importance of personal conflict among the Labour leaders was again apparent, however, in that part of Dalton's opposition to Chamberlain's offer in fact stemmed from his continuing hostility to Attlee. Dalton asserted that one of the arguments against coalition was that 'it is not as if our present 'leaders' were supermen capable of wielding vast influence'.⁵⁵ At a joint meeting of the NEC and PLP Executive on 2 September, Morrison took a significant role for the first time in introducing, and vigorously arguing, a motion that Labour not join the current government.⁵⁶ It is surprising that Morrison had not taken the opportunity offered by Attlee's absence to focus more attention upon his own leadership abilities. But given the crisis, he was just as concerned with governing London – where he had a serious task to perform – as with party politics. Nevertheless, his proficiency as a political operator was still evident in that his motion was simultaneously a further blow to Chamberlain's position, whilst leaving the party free to enter *another* government in the future. The meeting decided that Greenwood should stress immediately to Chamberlain, and later in the upcoming Commons debate, the necessity of honouring the treaty with Poland.⁵⁷ Labour was now advocating war.

The following day, Greenwood followed both this, and Attlee's earlier instructions, by leaving in ruins Chamberlain's final effort to avoid declaring war. The government's meek response to the invasion of Poland had brought no response from Hitler, and the prime minister seemed to be wavering towards further appeasement. Amidst much hostility to such a course in the House, when Greenwood got up to follow Chamberlain, the Conservative anti-appeaser Leo Amery famously shouted across to him 'Speak for England, Arthur!' Greenwood entered a performance that has been described as the highpoint of his career.⁵⁸ He again distanced Labour from the government, saying that the party was 'perturbed' by Chamberlain's latest statement and demanded that Britain 'must march with the French...the die is cast', refusing to afford the prime minister any room for compromise.⁵⁹ Following this rebuff and with his options having run out, Chamberlain finally declared war the following day.⁶⁰ Conservative uncertainty and Hitler

⁵⁵ Dalton Diary, 25 August 1939 (pp. 283-4).

⁵⁶ NEC minutes, 2 September 1939.

⁵⁷ NEC minutes, 2 September 1939.

⁵⁸ Whiting, 'Greenwood', *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, p.89.

⁵⁹ *Hansard*, vol. 351, 2 September 1939, cols. 282-3. Cowling believed that Greenwood could have 'destroyed' Chamberlain's position here. It is certainly conceivable, given the mood of the Commons, that if Greenwood had combined his focus upon the international situation with a sustained personal indictment of the prime minister and his foreign policy, anti-Chamberlain feeling across the political spectrum could have been galvanised to coalesce in early September in a way which ultimately did not occur. Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler*, p.345.

⁶⁰ The mood following the outbreak of conflict was not panic but relief. Dalton later recalled that his feeling had been 'war at last' – Hugh Dalton, *The Fateful Years: Memoirs 1931-1945* (London, 1957),

himself had combined with the Labour party in forcing him to do so. Greenwood had conducted his duties with great effectiveness in Attlee's absence, managing the Labour party for four crucial months, and his personal standing was now at its height. Such a judgement is perhaps coloured by the gravity of the situation and Amery's emotive plea, focusing all resistance to Chamberlain upon Greenwood's shoulders. Yet this only confirms the manner in which Greenwood had embodied the mood of the political nation in the debate. Up to this point, Labour's 'Big Four' had played a largely secondary role in attending to Labour's course. Bevin was uninvolved, not being an MP, while Attlee was ill. Further, as suggested above, Morrison does not feature heavily in the available documentary material; though it seems likely that he was closely involved in decision-making, his precise contribution is difficult to assess. He introduced the crucial resolution not to join a coalition with Chamberlain at the joint NEC-PLP meeting, but did not speak in Parliament. Though Dalton was more visible at meetings than Morrison, what accrues from an examination of events thus far is an impression that it was Greenwood who acted as Labour's leading figure in the days surrounding the outbreak of war.⁶¹ Moreover, in Dalton's not unbiased opinion, he was doing the job 'better than poor little Rabbit (Attlee) ever did'.⁶² In his contacts with the government, performances in Parliament, and conduct at party meetings, Greenwood had carried out a difficult balancing-act, at once striking at the detested Chamberlain, whilst still defining Labour's position as being one of support for military action and setting out the party's stall for eventual coalition.

Following the declaration of war, Greenwood immediately announced that Labour's conduct of Opposition would be 'constructive', a stance which underlined the party's patriotism while implicitly emphasising to Chamberlain the damage that would be inflicted to the government if Labour was provoked into a more active Opposition. Before British forces had fired a shot, then, Labour's leverage over the administration was extensive. Given how desperately Chamberlain wanted Labour to agree to enter a government of 'national unity' in order to protect him against a brewing Conservative rebellion, the longer the leadership group resisted the better their bargaining position became. It is here worthwhile to link their cautious positioning into that which was occurring at the same time within the Conservative party, and gave the efforts of the Labour leaders their context. There was nothing inevitable about the fall of Chamberlain, by any means: at the outbreak of war, he 'decapitated' the most prominent dissidents within his own party, by bringing Churchill and Eden into the government at the Admiralty and Dominions posts

p.264. Similar sentiments are expressed in Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan: A Biography, Volume One: 1897-1945* (London, 1962), p.304, and Herbert Morrison, *An Autobiography* (London, 1960), p.168; Also see Greenwood and Bevan in *Hansard* on 3 September.

⁶¹ The role of Dalton may, of course, be exaggerated by his diary. Nonetheless the fact that Morrison had not been at the centre of events stands.

⁶² Dalton Diary, 22 August 1939 (pp. 282-3).

respectively.⁶³ He was forced to do this by the fact that Labour's refusal to be co-opted compelled him to look elsewhere to protect his flank. The muzzling of Churchill and Eden, and the absence of serious military engagements, may have underpinned the resilience of Chamberlain's position, but the prime minister was still perceived as being vulnerable from the outset. Within his own party, Lord Salisbury's 'Watching Committee' of MPs and peers alone was almost half of the size of the PLP; along with the smaller Eden and Churchill groups, there were already more than forty Conservatives actively organised against the prime minister. Many were rebels because their opportunities for office were frustrated under Chamberlain.⁶⁴ The instability of government politics therefore bolstered Labour's position. It has been pointed out that, among 'informed people', the lifespan of the government was widely expected to be short; in other words, the fall of Chamberlain was always considered to be a distinct possibility.⁶⁵ The imperative for the prime minister to avoid Labour coming out energetically against him is clear; as a result, as soon as the conflict began, liaison arrangements were established between Labour and Whitehall departments.⁶⁶

The policy of 'constructive Opposition' was at the core of the strategy pursued by Labour's leaders during the eight month 'phoney war'. It enabled them to depict themselves as patriotic and responsible while making a power-play; it also allowed them to demand loyalty and obedience from the party itself. Irrespective of the personal conflicts between them, the party's senior figures were in agreement on the way forward – and thus began the process of binding their followers within a political straitjacket. The second element of the party's chosen trajectory was the immediate negotiation by Greenwood and the government Chief Whip of an electoral 'truce' for the duration of the war, so as to prevent partisan politics derailing national unity. In the event of by-elections, the party that previously held the seat would be unopposed by the other. Again, the perception of Greenwood as Labour's leading figure at this time is striking. Despite some dissension, he won the backing of the NEC for the policy.⁶⁷ In agreeing not to contest Conservative seats, the leadership had further strengthened Labour's hand – as shown by Attlee's stressing that the truce could be terminated at any time.⁶⁸ This also helped to quell the internal

⁶³ Witherell, 'Watching Committee', p.1141.

⁶⁴ Paul Addison, 'Political change in Britain, September 1939-May 1940', Oxford D.Phil thesis (1972), p.340.

⁶⁵ Nick Smart, *The National Government, 1931-40* (London, 1999); Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, Patrick Gordon Walker papers, Diary, 3 September 1939; John Barnes and David Nicholson (eds.), *The Empire at Bay: The Leo Amery Diaries, 1929-1945* (hereafter *Amery Diary*), 3 September 1939, p.571; John Harvey (ed.), *The Diplomatic Diaries of John Harvey, 1937-40* (London, 1970), 5 October 1939, pp. 324-5; N. Rose (ed.), *'Baffy': The Diaries of Blanche Dugdale, 1936-47* (London, 1973), 3 September 1939, p.150.

⁶⁶ *Hansard*, vol. 351, 3 September 1939, cols. 293-4.

⁶⁷ NEC Election subcommittee minutes, 5 September 1939; NEC minutes, 22 September 1939.

⁶⁸ Bodleian Library, Oxford, Attlee papers, box 8, Attlee to James Middleton, January 1940 (n.d.).

discontent that accumulated over the issue.⁶⁹ Attlee asserted to the rank-and-file that the truce had been 'forced upon us' by the war, intimating that he had not wanted it.⁷⁰ In reality, however, the agreement was another valuable bargaining chip.

A clear party management strategy, and convergent plan to secure the leaders power at an opportune moment, was therefore developing. Much of the Labour party would doubtless have preferred vigorous Opposition, but the course plotted by its leaders reflected a more pragmatic reading of political realities, the danger facing the country, and a calculation of future advantage. If the leadership had permitted Labour to attack the administration's every initiative, they would have appeared unpatriotic. They were hence faced with the task of ensuring only 'constructive' Opposition, while retaining their freedom of action to move quickly if circumstances changed. This policy was adhered to until the formation of the Coalition, and has been described by Brooke as a 'stasis'.⁷¹ It was a combustible strategy which could easily have failed – a Labour revolt against this careful balancing of competing tensions was always a serious possibility – but one prosecuted with efficiency. Moreover, it was a consciously pursued plan, and, rather than simply drifting, the Labour leaders were indeed thinking about office, but they refused to join the current government and sought to maximise their strength in the interim. The strategy orchestrated by the leaders can be illustrated by quoting from some of the rhetoric they employed: in an anonymous *Political Quarterly* article by one of the leaders, Labour was advised to bide its time until the war situation exposed the government's failures to its own backbenchers, advocating a policy of standing aside while the Conservatives 'committed suicide'.⁷² This article made clear that the leadership was playing a deliberate waiting game: the party's 'chief objective...should be...the achievement of a position which can be exploited when hard facts compel the resignation of Mr. Chamberlain', whilst 'a frontal attack...would be...politically foolish'.⁷³ From their language and behaviour, it seems apparent that the party's senior figures had carefully hedged their bets, adopting a position that enabled them to strike different poses to each of their three audiences: the Labour party, the parliamentary Conservatives, and the public. Their strategy was based upon a 'studied moderation of language'.⁷⁴ Thus, even before May 1940, the party held a degree of influence much greater than its parliamentary representation would imply. The doctrine they had established, the type of language it used, and the things it demanded, was an instrumental one.

⁶⁹ There was constant opposition to it which persisted until its end six years later. Bevan, for example, denounced the truce as a 'voluntary totalitarianism' which would destroy Labour – *Tribune*, 26 January 1940.

⁷⁰ Attlee papers, box 2, 'Your constituencies in wartime: An interview with the Rt. Hon. C. R. Attlee', *The Labour Candidate: Journal of the society of Labour candidates* (Winter 1939).

⁷¹ Brooke, *Labour's War* p.37.

⁷² 'Politician', 'Labour and the War', *Political Quarterly*, 10 (1939), pp. 477-88.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Hansard*, vol. 351, 21 September 1939, col. 1103.

The *New Statesman* described this as ‘power without responsibility’.⁷⁵ This was applied in a negative sense but, in fact, precisely the opposite was true: Labour publicly behaved ‘responsibly’ whilst distancing itself from the government and preparing to exact a heavy price for consenting to enter a coalition. This state of affairs underlines the manner in which they exploited the opportunities of war to effect a realignment of the political environment. Labour did indeed exercise ‘power without responsibility’.

III

Yet the fact that Labour’s senior figures had imposed a particular course upon their followers did not mean that it went unchallenged. Very quickly, the first rebellion against their authority erupted over the question of ‘peace aims’. This inaugurated a pattern which would be repeated until 1945: forced into inactivity, the restless mass of the Labour party would time and again seize upon all things symbolic as a means of airing their grievances. Moreover, with Attlee’s continued political isolation, when he returned to his duties, the months of September-November 1939 were to represent the make-or-break period for his leadership.

Greenwood had performed what Brooke terms an ‘exemplary’ job of leading Labour through the crisis, and had been a more commanding parliamentary presence than Attlee.⁷⁶ Consequently, in September, Dalton abruptly shifted his support away from Morrison and began agitating instead for Greenwood to assume the leadership, instigating a disruptive campaign which continued until November. In mid September, Dalton informed Greenwood that ‘as things are, I am in favour of [you] being leader’ and that Attlee was not ‘big enough or strong enough’.⁷⁷ He also told Greenwood that he would no longer back Morrison.⁷⁸ The only explanation Dalton offered was that Morrison had ‘sacrificed major things to minor things’, which is presumably a reference to the latter’s concentration upon the LCC.⁷⁹ That Dalton was so fickle in transferring his support to Greenwood, who just months he denounced as a ‘scandal’, is evidence that his motivation was simply desperation to get rid of Attlee. Greenwood made no recorded comment on Dalton’s proposal. It is doubtful he would have been even considering the possibility before his rise over the preceding months. Despite his new prominence, though, it seems unlikely that he could really have defeated Attlee, who retained the allegiance of the union MPs that had backed him four years earlier and protected him in June. It does not seem plausible that the leader’s support would

⁷⁵ *New Statesman*, 4 May 1940.

⁷⁶ Brooke, *Labour’s War*, p.40.

⁷⁷ Dalton Diary, 18 September 1939 (pp. 301-2).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

have dissipated so far as to award his job to someone similarly lacking in charisma. Dalton's dismissive complaints again betray a failure to recognise Attlee's proficiency as a political operator – a proficiency that would soon be employed to isolate and embarrass both Dalton and Morrison.

As it was, Attlee finally resumed his duties in late September.⁸⁰ Doubts persisted about his health, however, and some still wanted a new leader. He was thus faced with a situation quite different to the one he had left in May. Attlee's position was under serious threat and he was isolated. His sole advantage was provided by the fact that his detractors were divided as to who should replace him. In addition, upon his return he had to contend with the first internal split of the war. At the NEC meeting on 15th September, Laski circulated a memorandum entitled 'Labour's Peace Aims', advocating that the party publish a formal statement of what it hoped to achieve from the war.⁸¹ Greenwood argued against this, whilst Dalton similarly sought to restrain Laski by moving a motion that the Executive publish a pamphlet containing various existing statements, and that Laski's suggestion be submitted to the International subcommittee to consider – an adept usage of Labour's institutional apparatus to bury the suggestion and a tactic which was to be employed frequently throughout the war.⁸² Both the leaders and the TUC were reluctant to set out peace aims explicitly, aware that Labour could be restricted in its post-war policy. Nonetheless, the memorandum represented the beginning of a long effort by Laski to secure an official declaration, precipitating recurrent difficulties for the leaders. The peace aims question quickly became highly symbolic to a party frustrated by its political straitjacket. It thus developed into a combustible situation for a leadership group already embarked upon a precarious course. The leaders were wary of the rebellious Laski making electorally damaging statements, and thus insisted on the vetting of all documents worked on by him.⁸³ Attlee, Dalton and Morrison tasked themselves with this role.⁸⁴ The effort to keep Laski on a short leash, however, did not stifle the dissent that rapidly accumulated over the issue.

In the Commons on 3 October, Attlee sidestepped the controversy, saying vaguely that 'we shall require deeds, and not merely words, before we get any substantial basis for peace'.⁸⁵ The following week, during a debate about the British refusal of German peace feelers, the leader finally acted to quell the dissension and adopted a position entailing rejection of a peace that allowed Hitler to keep his gains, whilst still refraining from any discussion of policy specifics.

⁸⁰ He chaired the NEC meeting on the 29th – NEC minutes, 29 September 1939.

⁸¹ NEC minutes, 15 September 1939.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ NEC minutes, 15 September 1939.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Hansard*, vol. 351, 3 October 1939, cols. 1862.

Attlee took a firm stance, telling the Commons that ‘we must with resolution pursue this struggle’ and that Hitler’s word was ‘utterly worthless’.⁸⁶ It was an efficient performance in his bid to suppress the issue and reassert his disputed authority. On the same day, the unions decided they were now opposed to *any* elucidation of aims at all.⁸⁷ This was backed by the NEC and PLP Executive.⁸⁸ The upper echelons of the Labour movement had resolved to close down internal discourse on the subject altogether.

Yet, within days, it became evident that the clamour would not subside, as almost forty local parties requested a statement of peace aims.⁸⁹ The NEC decided that Attlee should make a public speech on the matter, finally consenting to set out Labour’s position, but agreeing that he should do so in as broad a sense as possible.⁹⁰ This speech was made on 8 November, and concentrated upon the kind of Europe that the party would like to see emerge, but remained suitably vague.⁹¹ Moreover, Attlee cleverly threw a sop to anti-militarist sentiment in giving no indication that a war might actually have to be fought.⁹² It was turned into a pamphlet and published in December as *Labour’s Peace Aims*.⁹³ The leadership also adroitly utilised Laski’s popularity – he had topped the poll in the election to the NEC constituencies section at the Conference – to help bring their followers into line, tasking him with writing a separate pamphlet, emphasising in emotive language Labour’s commitment to removing the conditions that facilitated the rise of Nazism.⁹⁴ The leadership were more willing to be explicit about their intentions when they used the pamphlet to again publicly rule out joining the Chamberlain government.⁹⁵ Other than this, though, Laski’s pamphlet remained unspecific. As his biographers have observed, it was essentially a balloon sent up by the leadership group, exploiting his popularity but committing them to no particular course of action.⁹⁶ Not for the last time, Laski’s name was associated with their policies. These events underline once again the nature of the leadership group’s employment of language and the doctrine they were constructing. The entire episode – from the initial attempts to restrain Laski, Attlee’s speeches, and the eventual decision that they would have to say *something* – was all determined by an intention to appease a restless party while preserving their own freedom of action.

⁸⁶ *Hansard*, vol. 352, 12 October 1939, cols. 568-70.

⁸⁷ Warwick University Archive, Trades Union Council papers, Trades Union General Council minutes, 12 October 1939.

⁸⁸ NCL minutes, 20 October 1939.

⁸⁹ NEC minutes, 25 October 1939.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Burridge, *British Labour and Hitler’s War*, p.33.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ C. R. Attlee, *Labour’s Peace Aims* (London, 1939).

⁹⁴ 1939 LPACR, p.274; Harold Laski, *The Labour Party, the War and the Future* (London, 1939).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Kramnick and Sheerman, *Laski*, p.416.

Though Labour's senior figures co-operated in ensuring their continued ascendancy, nonetheless events quickly reverted to the power struggles between them. The questions over Attlee's performance had not been resolved during the summer and now – with the situation complicated further by the sudden emergence of Greenwood – the conflict erupted again. The persistent uncertainty over the leadership was destabilising, and hence had to be resolved one way or another. Building for months, this challenge amounted to the crucial test of Attlee's position. The weakened leader either had to see off his enemies or face defeat. At the same time as Attlee was attempting to sidestep the peace aims controversy and re-establish his grip over his followers, Dalton's effort to replace him was gathering pace. The leader's effective curtailment – at least for the moment – of the peace aims issue had not silenced his critics. Moreover, as we have seen, in an atmosphere of national emergency his style of leadership was not appreciated by those who favoured a more dominating character at the helm. This culminated in a leadership challenge in November, orchestrated largely by Dalton, who, in his desire to remove Attlee, dragged Greenwood and Morrison into a poorly organised initiative which only had the effect of retrieving Attlee's position. Given the destruction of the PLP minutes, our main source of evidence for this episode is Dalton's diary, although much is corroborated in memoirs. With his increased standing and popularity, Greenwood now appeared to some the candidate best placed to defeat Attlee, and there was speculation in the press that he could win a leadership contest if one was held.⁹⁷ Yet even Dalton admitted that internal support for replacing Attlee had evaporated following his return, despite the fact that he remained 'much below even his own...par'.⁹⁸ Greenwood had, however, attained a new level of respect over the preceding five months. Dalton thus continued his bid to press the deputy leader to challenge Attlee, telling him that he was 'the only possible change', as well as expressing this opinion to numerous MPs in an effort to generate momentum.⁹⁹ Greenwood was, 'as usual, dilatory in decision' but the fact that he did not dismiss the idea suggests he was at least open to the possibility.¹⁰⁰ He was perhaps weighing his options, but his prospects were scotched in that no other prominent figure came out in support, and days passed with rumour and speculation spreading throughout the party, but no action taken.¹⁰¹ Although Dalton attempted to start a petition requesting Greenwood to run, this quickly 'petered out' – indicating once again a lack of enthusiasm for replacing Attlee.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ See, for example, *News Review*, 19 October 1939.

⁹⁸ Dalton Diary, 'November 1939' (pp. 311-13).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

The shift in Dalton's support was based upon a calculation that, due to Morrison's reduced role in recent months, the man widely considered the inevitable successor 'would not at this stage be in the running.'¹⁰³ It does seem at least plausible that circumstances might have converged in late 1939 to push Morrison into third place in a ballot. Greenwood was more popular than ever before, while Morrison had not been particularly visible. Moreover, Dalton himself was mooted as a candidate, which would certainly siphon off some support from Morrison's natural base. Nonetheless, the conversion of Dalton to Greenwood may not have been complete. He desired to get rid of Attlee and would back anyone who could accomplish this, but he was also amenable to the possibility of replacing Greenwood with Morrison at a later date.¹⁰⁴ Dalton, like Morrison in June, knew that the PLP as it was comprised – dominated by the union MPs that Attlee had won over during the Parliament of 1931-5 – simply would not elect Morrison, and therefore believed that there would have to be a substantial change in its membership before Morrison could ascend to the top.¹⁰⁵ The ramifications for the next sixteen years of Labour history if Morrison had come third, and hence would no longer have been viewed as the automatic successor, are readily apparent.

But with Greenwood's inaction and the petition failing to generate momentum, it seemed that Dalton's efforts would come to naught. Yet, just as it appeared that there would not be a challenge after all, Alfred Edwards, a backbench MP, wrote to Dalton, Greenwood, and Morrison, asking them to permit their names to go forward in a contest.¹⁰⁶ Morrison was the only one who replied – Dalton and Greenwood did not, and perhaps silence would have been more astute on Morrison's part as well. His reply, though aimed at protecting his flank from accusations of disloyalty, effectively scuppered his chances before the election had even been declared. Attempting to retain his freedom of action to move in on a weakened Attlee, Morrison wrote that he personally did not want a ballot, but emphasised 'I should have to reconsider this if a contest were forced from another quarter'.¹⁰⁷ If Morrison had said no more, the continuing speculation may have precipitated a leadership election. As it was, the clumsiness suggested by his biographers, which affected him whenever he came close to reaching the summit of his ambitions, struck. In the letter, Morrison needlessly re-iterated that he reserved the right 'to accept nomination at any time'.¹⁰⁸ This was a mistake, betraying his object too readily. Most damaging to his chances of provoking a contest, however, was that he rather foolishly went on to comment that he did not feel 'that there is a general or substantial desire [in the PLP] to

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Dalton papers, 5/6 (3) (5), Alfred Edwards letter to Dalton, 9 November 1939.

¹⁰⁷ Dalton papers, copy of Morrison letter to Alfred Edwards, 11 November 1939.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

reconsider the matter at this juncture'.¹⁰⁹ He sent copies of the reply to Attlee, Dalton and Greenwood, but Morrison had effectively closed the door on a contest. His need to avoid the charge of plotting is obvious, but he had made a misjudgement nonetheless, effectively precluding any of the others making a move which would provide him with an opportunity to exploit.

At the PLP on 15 November, it became apparent that all three potential challengers had been nominated against Attlee, probably by Edwards.¹¹⁰ In the discussion that ensued, amid many 'expressions of gentlemanly good will' – an indication that no one was prepared to make the first strike – Attlee took the initiative and moved decisively to outmanoeuvre his opponents.¹¹¹ In an adroit display, he rose and stated that he did not regard an alternative nomination for the leadership as 'disloyal'.¹¹² Of course, once he had said this, any challenge would appear precisely that! The leader had acted effectively, if belatedly, to preserve his position. There was little sense in forcing a contest if Attlee could not be defeated, which, once he had called his opponents' bluff, seemed likely. Greenwood was surely aware that his internal strength was less than it seemed. More importantly, given Morrison's status as the assumed heir apparent, some MPs who actually favoured Greenwood might have switched to Attlee in order to stop Morrison, as they had four years earlier. Accordingly, Greenwood told the assembled MPs that he would withdraw his candidature.¹¹³

With Greenwood's retreat, there was no possibility of the other two candidates forcing a contest without provoking accusations of putting ambition before party and country. Even Dalton knew better than to close in on Attlee, and he and Morrison were left with little choice but to withdraw their names as well.¹¹⁴ Attlee, then, had played a political masterstroke in seeing off his adversaries in such a fashion. The challenge to him had been aborted before a vote was even taken, for the statement that he would not consider alternative candidates disloyal put irresistible pressure on the three nominees to emphasise their loyalty. Moreover, having been absent for four months perhaps helped him to deflect the challenge, for the fact that he had not been at the centre of events meant that the onus was upon his enemies to force a contest. With their target absent, Dalton and others lacked a publicly-acceptable reason to trigger an election that would not be

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Dalton Diary, 'November 1939' (pp. 312-13). Dalton's account suggests that he did not know beforehand that his name had gone forward. It seems likely the same could be said for Greenwood and Morrison.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Dalton, *Memoirs*, p.281.

¹¹³ Dalton Diary, 'November 1939' (pp. 312-13).

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

viewed as a simple power-grab. Through a combination of quiet skill and the misjudgements of his opponents, Attlee had ensured the security of his position once more. Having defeated the machinations of his rivals, Attlee was now free to direct the strategy of ‘constructive Opposition’ and concentrate upon Labour’s crab-like movement towards office. His efforts over the next six months were to be focused upon the task of appeasing internal opinion while preparing to enter government when more favourable circumstances arose. On 16 November, the day after the aborted contest, the leader again imposed himself on his party, entering an impressive performance in Parliament in a debate on the war and acting to assuage Labour’s discontent by calling for the beginning of planning for the eventual peace.¹¹⁵ This new decisiveness represented something of a departure from his previous years as leader; with the whiff of office in the air, Attlee was now more than willing to take the Labour party by the scruff of the neck and haul it in the direction he saw fit. As such, it challenges many enduring perceptions of Attlee as being a weak figure. The success of the party’s strategy throughout the ‘phoney war’ was Attlee’s achievement more than that of anyone else. Morrison, by contrast, had once again failed to become leader. The next week he suffered yet another blow to his standing when, having angered MPs, he polled poorly in the elections to the PLP Executive.¹¹⁶ The new strain on his relations with Dalton also did not assist in his continuing ambition to replace Attlee. If he was to do so, he needed the allegiance of as many senior figures as possible. Morrison had struggled to achieve this, and within a year his task would be made still more difficult by the entry of Bevin into Parliament, and the formation of the formidable (and essentially anti-Morrison) Attlee-Bevin alliance.¹¹⁷ In backing away from an overt challenge, as he was to do on so many occasions between 1935 and 1955, Morrison had not possessed the courage – or was too astute – to cross his personal Rubicon.

IV

It is here appropriate to cast our analytical net more widely. Though, as we have seen, Labour’s most senior figures played key roles during the first phase of the war, it must also be stressed that previously middle-ranking figures emerged to play a crucial part in the guidance of the party. As such they too assumed a central role. Greenwood, as already discussed, was the most important, becoming Labour’s leading political figure from May 1939. Moreover, even upon Attlee’s return,

¹¹⁵ *Hansard*, vol. 353, 16 November 1939, cols. 876-8.

¹¹⁶ Greenwood’s status was seemingly undamaged by the episode, but Morrison and Dalton were to pay a heavy price. In the elections to the PLP Executive held the next week, Morrison’s position in the poll fell from first place (which he had retained since 1936) to eighth, while Dalton fell from third to tenth – David Butler and Gareth Butler, *Twentieth Century British Political Facts, 1900-2000* (eighth edition) (London, 2000), p.152.

¹¹⁷ Dalton did immediately scurry to try and repair his relations with Morrison, sending him a note which stated ‘The way of earth shifters is hard in this political allotment and I am not inclined to do any more digging at present. Yours, with undiminished regard’ – Dalton Diary, ‘November 1939’ (p.313).

he remained publicly more visible than the leader, for example constantly pressing the government in the Commons. But of equal relevance, however, was the work carried out by Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence. From the outset the two became the key figures in Labour's House of Commons representation and the day-to-day running of the PLP – being even more prominent than Greenwood in that respect – bearing considerable burdens and overseeing the transaction of parliamentary business. Thus, whilst more senior figures occupied themselves with the most vital task of navigating their way towards office, Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence stepped into the breach and got on with the job of keeping the party functioning and ensuring its acquiescence to that strategy. The roles played by the two have been overlooked by historians, but were to place them at the forefront of events in the PLP until Lees-Smith's death in 1941 and, in Pethick-Lawrence's case, until the end of the war.¹¹⁸ They generally spoke in the Commons every day, usually several times, and though neither was a compelling orator they were well-respected and competent.¹¹⁹ Taking on the leading role in running the party, Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence performed an important task which, from late 1939, effectively amounted to a system of dual leadership. The basis for the two men being left in charge of the PLP when the Churchill Coalition was formed thus quickly took shape. The two acted as partners, but Lees-Smith was seemingly the senior of the two; it was he who usually followed the government speaker in important debates.¹²⁰ After Attlee's return from illness, when the leader was not present in the Commons it was not his deputy, Greenwood, who led Labour in debate, but Lees-Smith. In the country, Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence possessed no real stature, and were not even important figures within Labour itself beyond the PLP. Neither was a member of the NEC. But, within Westminster, the two mattered. Performing the unglamorous and laborious parliamentary 'donkey-work', their new role in managing the party permitted the leadership group to focus their energies elsewhere.

But these were not the only middle-ranking individuals for whom the war created significant opportunities; another was Shinwell. Perhaps the most prominent rebel figure in the party at the outbreak of war, and who would go on to become the leadership group's most bitter enemy once they entered office, his career trajectory over the initial period described here is revealing both about political priorities and his subsequent feud with his leaders. In September 1939, Shinwell immediately ceased all his rebellious behaviour and instead became studiously moderate in a sudden about-turn. Even his vituperative feud with Dalton – the latter usually calling Shinwell

¹¹⁸ The two men have received scant attention in the existing literature. For example, Addison, Brooke, and Jefferys have all virtually ignored them.

¹¹⁹ Their speeches read as cohesive and well-ordered. Subjects that they spoke on in this period included emergency powers over local authorities, war damage compensation, pensions, mortgages, personal injury, trading with the enemy and many more.

¹²⁰ This was the case even when Morrison and Dalton were present.

‘Shinbad the Tailor’ in his diary –was restrained. However, this chameleon-like shift, and abandonment of the image of being an ideological firebrand, was motivated not by patriotism or crisis but simple ambition. Shinwell was angling for a role in the coalition which he believed would eventually be formed, and thus set about laying out his claim to a post. The job he sought was the Ministry of Shipping, an area close to his heart and in which he had considerable expertise.¹²¹ Pursuing this role, Shinwell was the polar opposite of the public spokesman for the party’s disaffection that he might be expected to have become, and instead set about servicing his ambitions – which he openly admitted were the driving force of his actions.¹²² Shinwell joined with Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence in doing much of Labour’s work in the Commons.

V

Following the abortive contest, and with Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence overseeing much of the day-to-day work of the party, over the next three months Labour’s senior figures began to undertake a concerted increase in the pressure they brought to bear upon the government. The party’s conduct from late 1939 was thus rather different from that adopted during the first months of war. Its attacks became more frequent and aggressive, eventually precipitating a trial of strength once the façade of co-operation with Chamberlain became impossible to sustain. Whilst this newly combative stance was partly influenced by internal problems, namely the need to appease a party disaffected with ‘constructive’ Opposition and military inaction, the tactic of targeting the government more openly was also determined by simple patriotism, and an inclination to force a confrontation with a prime minister they reviled. It was given impetus by the fact that ‘things were turning increasingly against Chamberlain’ in his own party, with Salisbury’s group the ‘prime agent’ in creating disaffection with the prime minister.¹²³ Yet, this was still balanced by awareness on the part of Attlee that they could not move until an opportune moment presented itself. The leaders thus continued to bide their time, unashamedly exerting their leverage over Chamberlain, while accumulating political capital to be expended when circumstances were fortuitous. In the interim, they persisted in deflecting opposition from their ranks by making further denunciations of the government and presenting fresh policy initiatives along the lines of the peace aims declaration.

¹²¹ See any *Hansard* index. Shinwell spoke on shipping on no less than seventy-two occasions between the beginning of the war and the formation of the Coalition.

¹²² Emanuel Shinwell, *Conflict Without Malice* (London, 1955), pp.146-8; by the same author, *I’ve Lived Through It All* (London, 1973), p.161.

¹²³ Cowling, *Impact of Hitler*, p.373.

Leading for Labour in the debate on the Address on 5 December, Greenwood introduced an amendment assailing the Chamberlain ministry for its failure to organise ‘to the full our human and material resources... [for the] effective prosecution of the war... and for the solution on the basis of social justice of the problems which will arise on the return to peace’.¹²⁴ The amendment was another attempt to extract concessions from Chamberlain. Moreover, in complaining about both the war effort and planning for peace, Greenwood’s speech resonated as much with his own party as the prime minister, countering discontent by focusing on a pair of high-profile symbolic issues and clashing with the government over them. He charged Chamberlain with having dismissed reconstruction planning ‘cursorily’, and of being ‘contemptuous’ towards the subject while calling for the new, expanded role of the state to be made permanent, saying that ‘there can be no going back’.¹²⁵ This strategy of stressing the necessity of unity, and then brazenly requesting concessions, may not have been subtle, but it worked. The prime minister had little choice if he wanted the truce maintained. Such language was useful for emphasising Labour’s independence while actually committing its leaders to no particular course of action. They had also threatened to oppose Chamberlain’s attempt to prolong the life of the current Parliament.¹²⁶ Earlier, Shinwell savaged the government’s economic co-ordination, whilst explicitly making clear that he was posing the most difficult questions at the beginning of the debate so as to allow the government time to reply, further evidence that Labour expected to be granted considerable influence in return for not breaking with Chamberlain.¹²⁷

But it was Attlee – now reinvigorated by the task before him, and with the advantages that his style of leadership would lend to its realisation – who took on the most central role in harassing the government. Yet he also confined his critique within certain boundaries and was careful to go that far and no further, ensuring that the party as a whole observed those same limitations. His *Labour’s Peace Aims* pamphlet was published in December, and in January he made a well-received BBC broadcast in which he expertly pushed both sides of his agenda, justifying his position in terms of the need to destroy Nazism and advance socialism while – no doubt worryingly to Chamberlain – suggesting that heavy criticism of the government was the only route to victory.¹²⁸ Over this period, Attlee also frequently targeted the ministry in the Commons, attacking it over the decision to declare war on behalf of India without consulting that country, failures in social provision, inefficiencies in conscription, taxation, and economic organisation,

¹²⁴ *Hansard*, vol. 355, 5 December 1939, cols. 499-506.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Hansard*, vol. 352, 17 October 1939, cols. 725-7.

¹²⁷ *Hansard*, vol. 352, 18 October 1939, cols. 905-20.

¹²⁸ *The Listener*, 18 January & 8 February 1940.

and continued heavy unemployment.¹²⁹ He demanded that Chamberlain be ‘ruthless’ with inefficiency and declared that ‘If the Ministers cannot get on with their jobs then we must get other Ministers’.¹³⁰ The leader displayed little embarrassment in lambasting the government for failing to set out peace aims, the issue which he himself was busy attempting to dodge.¹³¹ Attlee’s assaults were fierce and piled further pressure on the government, while acting to counter the discontent within the party itself that his own strategy entailed. Using them to constantly chip away at Chamberlain, Attlee slowly but surely moved Labour into a strengthened position.

Simultaneously, Morrison likewise worked to increase the intensity of Labour’s public critique, becoming a weekly contributor to the *Daily Mirror*. He covered a diverse range of subjects, and his tone was decidedly partisan, mounting bellicose attacks on Chamberlain and his ministry.¹³² Though this should again be seen primarily in the context of the leadership group’s attempts to both undermine Chamberlain and throw a sop to their rank-and-file, nonetheless Morrison also used the articles as a platform to begin traversing a private course which he was to follow throughout the war. Though this will be demonstrated more fully in later chapters, it is worth pointing out here. From 1939-45, knowing that an overt strike would not be well-received, Morrison’s attempt to dislodge Attlee was predicated upon his efforts to establish an image of himself as more aggressive and partisan than his great rival. He consistently sought to improve his own position by producing speeches and writings denouncing the Conservatives and full of socialist rhetoric. In doing so, Morrison worked to enhance his popularity and standing by adopting a line which appealed to a party disaffected with the restraints into which the leadership – particularly Attlee – had placed it, implicitly flagging up the contrast between himself and Attlee, Labour’s jailor. In reality, of course, this was pure rhetoric; Morrison was as determined as Attlee that the party should be kept in line, and was ruthless in suppressing opposition. But the public posture adopted by the heir apparent from late 1939, and which became increasingly apparent as the conflict wore on, was to prove Morrison’s most useful political tool.

In February 1940, Bevin joined the fray for the first time by issuing a clear threat to the government that if Chamberlain imposed control of labour and wages, ‘I will lead the movement

¹²⁹ See, for example, *Hansard*, vol. 355, 29 November 1939, cols. 98-9 & 28 November 1939, cols. 16-25; vol. 356, 16 January 1940, cols. 43-50, 31 January 1940, cols. 1221-5, & 1 February 1940, cols. 1414-22; vol. 359, 2 April 1940, cols. 44-7 & 9 April 1940, cols. 509-10.

¹³⁰ *Hansard*, vol. 358, 19 March 1940, cols. 1845-53

¹³¹ *Hansard*, vol. 355, 28 November 1939, cols. 16-25. He called peace aims an issue of ‘vital importance’ for it was the ‘spirit’ of ‘free people’ that represented the ‘master weapon’ which would win the war.

¹³² See the *Daily Mirror* from November 1939-May 1940, but Morrison’s most aggressive article appeared on 30 March 1940.

to resist this government'.¹³³ As a non-politician, Bevin remained aloof from parliamentary affairs and had played little role in events thus far, but nonetheless given his power to engineer industrial unrest, this threat probably frightened Chamberlain more than anything Labour had done thus far. Later that month, the leadership demonstrated their ability to hinder the government by flexing their political muscles and forcing thirty-divisions in a two-week period over the Old Age and Widow's Pension Bill.¹³⁴

At the same time as the leadership were attacking the government more openly, they still reinforced their efforts to appease party opinion with another brazen assertion of their own authority. They ordered Labour's pacifists to refrain from publicly criticising the war, and employed the widespread disgust at the Soviet invasion of Finland in November as an instrument to further isolate anti-militarist sentiment.¹³⁵ The leadership thus used the hysteria to entrench the primacy of a new interpretation of geopolitics. Attlee and his colleagues played a central role in stirring up the agitation over Finland, but certainly did not take their own rhetoric literally, and were always opposed to intervention.¹³⁶ The move against the pacifists also represents another indication of the new confidence with which the Labour leaders directed the party. That they were able to move so openly against an important element among their followers suggests that they were now able to wield their power virtually unhindered.¹³⁷

Even as they were concentrating on these efforts, however, the question of peace aims continued to persist into 1940, finally forcing the leadership to move to seal off this well of disaffection. To this end, the party's senior figures continued to try to formulate a suitably explicit statement on the issue, and the NEC International sub-committee accepted a draft by Dalton in late January 1940, referring it to a special meeting of the full Executive.¹³⁸ The NEC, however, still could not agree on its contents. Attlee would not accept Dalton's draft on the grounds of unity, feeling it too

¹³³ Bullock, *Bevin*, vol. one, p.644. He spent much of the first part of the war re-negotiating hundreds of existing industrial agreements to take account of the circumstances of war.

¹³⁴ See *Hansard*, vol. 358, between 21 February and 4 March 1940.

¹³⁵ Dalton condemned the invasion in the Commons as illustrating that democratic nations everywhere were coming under assault from totalitarianism, while Greenwood wrote an article criticising Moscow in the *Daily Herald*, and the paper declared that 'The Union of Socialist Soviet Republics is dead. Stalin's new imperialist Russia takes its place'. The next day it compared Stalin to Genghis Khan. The NCL set up an Aid to Finland Fund, and termed Stalin 'Hitler's accomplice' – *Hansard*, vol. 355, 30 November 1939, col. 291; *Daily Herald*, 1, 4 & 5 December 1939; NEC minutes, 25 January 1940.

¹³⁶ The National Archive, Kew, FO 800/310, Halifax Papers, Noel-Baker to Halifax, 17 February 1940; TNA FO 800/310, Halifax Papers, Halifax to Chamberlain, 10 February 1940. All government papers cited hereafter are, unless noted, located at the TNA.

¹³⁷ More information on the fate of the anti-war movement in the party can be found in the present author's forthcoming article 'What is Happening in Europe? Sir Richard Stokes and British anti-Communism, c.1939-1951'.

¹³⁸ NEC minutes 6 February 1940.

divisive.¹³⁹ He perhaps also felt little inclination to indulge Dalton given his instigation of the leadership challenge the previous November. The meeting resolved that Dalton, Laski and Morrison should immediately re-draft the statement.¹⁴⁰ The NEC met again the next day to discuss the new draft, but Attlee remained unhappy, feeling it too aggressive compared to his own earlier document, *Labour's Peace Aims*.¹⁴¹ Dalton was aggrieved, scathingly dismissing Attlee's statement as 'the classic entitled 'The Rabbit's Peace Aims''.¹⁴² This mutual antipathy among Labour's senior figures again raises questions about their direction of the party. There were evidently potent animosities between them, but they did function effectively in a collective sense. This achievement, together with their relations more broadly, has never been closely considered, amounting to an important deficiency in our understanding of the Labour party's most iconic set of leaders. Yet, in the event, only D. N. Pritt voted against the new draft, those with reservations simply abstaining.¹⁴³ The peace aims controversy had dragged on for months already, and needed to be resolved; it was prudent to placate the party with some sort of statement. The NEC consequently accepted the draft and published it as *Labour, the War and the Peace*.¹⁴⁴ This emphasis upon using policy declarations, literature and other forms of rhetoric was at the very core of the leadership group's strategy. As will become clear below, their careful positioning and language during the preceding months, and reliance on speeches and declarations, was not a set of random statements, but a calculated bid to shape the environment. This document was an explicit signal of the ascendancy of the leadership group over their followers. It now made clear that the war would have to be fought, while still seeking to appease uncertainty by suggesting that the conflict would lead to the spread of socialism.¹⁴⁵ *Labour, the War and the Peace* was more detailed than the previous *Labour's Peace Aims*, and the leadership were to encounter less opposition to their strategy once they had made this formal declaration. The leaders buttressed this with the organisation of almost forty conferences across the country on 'Peace Aims' over the period from Attlee's speech the previous November to the May 1940 Conference.¹⁴⁶ They continued with this campaign to counter the frustrations of their followers with other policy declarations as well, publishing a veritable flood of literature. In March, Attlee ordered an NEC draft on the domestic arena to be re-written, feeling it did not sufficiently stress the line that the war had accelerated the advance towards socialism.¹⁴⁷ On this occasion, he re-drafted it himself, and it was published the following month as *Labour's Home Policy*, the Executive intending it as

¹³⁹ Ibid; Dalton Diary, 'Middle of February' (p.318).

¹⁴⁰ NEC minutes 6 February 1940.

¹⁴¹ NEC minutes, 7 February 1940.

¹⁴² Dalton Diary, 'Middle of February' (p.318).

¹⁴³ NEC minutes, 7 February 1940.

¹⁴⁴ For the full text, see *1940 LPACR*, pp. 188-90.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ *1940 LPACR*, p.24.

¹⁴⁷ Attlee papers, 2/63, Attlee to Grant MacKenzie, March 1940.

a 'comprehensive' statement of domestic policy.¹⁴⁸ The document became the basis for all the party's wartime initiatives, and the leader once again employed reassuring socialist language in affirming that 'there can be no return to the old order...the occasion should be seized to lay the foundations of a planned economy'.¹⁴⁹ Attlee determinedly fought within the NEC, and overruled his subordinates, for language which would resonate with party members, presenting the war as an opportunity.¹⁵⁰

Similarly, Greenwood produced a pamphlet entitled *Why we fight: Labour's case*, declaring the necessity for the implementation of socialist planning if Britain's resources were to be utilized efficiently.¹⁵¹ Dalton too played a part, writing a book, *Hitler's war: before and after*.¹⁵² This displayed to the full its author's pathological anti-Germanism, amounting to the most forceful statement of support for the war made by a member of the leadership group since the previous September. Laski was again deployed, unwittingly, to guard the flank of his leaders. He was tasked with writing another pamphlet, *Is this an imperialist war?*, his ability to argue in Marxist terms making him ideally suited to a propagandist role.¹⁵³ The pamphlet attacked the Communist line and supported the war. In a collection of essays edited by Attlee, Laski also contributed a piece championing the link between conflict and social reform.¹⁵⁴ The degree of control over Laski's involvement in official literature is apparent in that, when he wrote independently, his language was rather different, asserting in a *New Statesman* article, for example, that violent revolution might occur if reform was resisted, a line of argument to which Labour's leaders would never have assented.¹⁵⁵ In offering these largely symbolic statements to appease their followers, the leadership were free to concentrate on their *real* objectives: the opportunity to enter government. As such, their energetic efforts in policy formulation represented a profitable means of giving the impression of activity, even if these initiatives in fact amounted to little more than mere rhetoric. Aggressive attacks on the government in the Commons, particularly by Morrison, also kept the parliamentary party's morale up in early 1940.¹⁵⁶ That this combination of literature, declarations, and public speeches was itself conceived by Attlee and the other leaders as being the substance of their strategy is apparent from the emphasis given to these activities in preparing

¹⁴⁸ NEC minutes, 20 March 1940. For the text of the statement, see *1940 LPACR*, pp. 91-5.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Attlee papers, 2/63, Attlee to Grant MacKenzie, March 1940.

¹⁵¹ Arthur Greenwood, *Why we fight: Labour's case* (London, 1940).

¹⁵² Hugh Dalton, *Hitler's war: before and after* (London, 1940).

¹⁵³ Harold Laski, *Is this an imperialist war?* (London, 1940).

¹⁵⁴ Harold Laski, 'The war and the future', in C. R. Attlee, ed., *Labour's aims in war and peace* (London, 1940).

¹⁵⁵ *New Statesman*, 27 Jan. 1940.

¹⁵⁶ For example, *Hansard*, vol. 356, 1 February 1940, cols. 1309-25; vol. 357, 12 March 1940, cols. 621-33; vol. 358, 15 March 1940, cols. 1523-41.

their report to the annual Conference.¹⁵⁷ Explicitly identifying these measures as the things they had spent the phoney war working on, this is clear evidence of how Attlee and the other senior figures conceived of their role.¹⁵⁸ The prominence awarded to this by the leadership group reinforces one of the central contentions of the thesis of the key role played by such activities and the way in which, far from an excuse for inactivity, they had been intended from the outset – to provide certain political landmarks to their followers and entrench the leaders' own agenda. As such, it underlines the importance of speeches and other calculated rhetoric as tools of party management, something commented on by Philip Williamson as the means by which politicians shape their environment.¹⁵⁹

VI

Having consolidated their grip on the party, Attlee and the rest of Labour's senior figures were well-positioned for what turned out to be the final period of the phoney war. Moreover, having recovered from a position of seemingly inexorable personal weakness, the months since his return had seen Attlee's leadership reinvigorated. In March 1940, it briefly seemed possible that the leaders might depart from their strategy, when the possibility arose of the Labour party entering the Chamberlain government after all, as rumours began to circulate that the prime minister had offered Labour three seats in a reconstructed War Cabinet.¹⁶⁰ At a PLP Executive Committee meeting on 9 April, the possibility of joining a coalition was discussed.¹⁶¹ Morrison and Greenwood were in favour of going in, but Attlee, by contrast, urged caution, and the rest were similarly opposed to accepting.¹⁶² Dalton recorded that the mood of the meeting was that, though the party *should* join a new government when the time came, to serve under Chamberlain would legitimise him.¹⁶³ It was decided that Labour should remain in Opposition for the time being but, if Chamberlain was removed, the matter would be immediately reconsidered.¹⁶⁴ The architect of Labour's course as it gradually manoeuvred to take part in a government was once again not the domineering Morrison or Dalton, therefore, but Attlee. There also remained the question of whether a special Conference would need to be called in the event of a decision to enter office. Greenwood advocated that the upcoming annual Conference be asked to empower the leadership

¹⁵⁷ See *1940 LPACR*, pp. 11-2, p.19, Appendices II and III, pp. 188-95.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Philip Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative leadership and national values* (Cambridge, 1999), p.147.

¹⁶⁰ *Manchester Guardian*, 28 March 1940; John Harvey (ed.), *The Diplomatic Diaries of Oliver Harvey, 1937-1940* (London, 1970), p.340.

¹⁶¹ Dalton Diary, 9 April 1940 (unpublished).

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*; Harris, *Attlee*, pp. 171-2.

to make such a decision, but Dalton felt that to request this before a decision had actually been taken would create suspicion, fuelling fears that the leadership might ‘betray’ Labour.¹⁶⁵

Typically, Attlee disagreed with both strategies, bluntly arguing that they should simply accept office on their own authority and then present their followers with a *fait accompli*.¹⁶⁶ His stance demonstrates both a greater awareness of the location of power within Labour and the extent to which the leaders could simply act and then carry the party with them. It also reinforces the suggestion of Attlee’s new decisiveness. The meeting agreed to the leader’s suggestion.¹⁶⁷

Morrison was aggrieved at the decision not to go in immediately, telling Charles Peake, a foreign office official, that most of the Labour frontbenchers were ‘frightened of power’ and would be unable to add drive to the government.¹⁶⁸ It has been suggested that Morrison favoured joining the government immediately because Chamberlain would regard him, rather than Attlee, as Labour’s leading parliamentarian, presumably awarding him a more powerful position.¹⁶⁹

But, shortly thereafter, the military situation altered irrevocably, as the phoney war ended with the German invasion of Norway in April. It became obvious that the period of biding time was over, prompting Labour’s senior figures to increase their attacks – already straining at the limits of ‘constructive’ Opposition – even further. The Watching Committee and Eden’s supporters – now led by Amery – began to move against Chamberlain, being in ‘constant touch with one another’, and the shift of Conservative support away from the prime minister did much to create the climate which brought him down.¹⁷⁰ Thus, the determination with which the leadership had sought to retain their freedom of action *vis à vis* both their followers and the Conservatives began to bear fruit. That they had completely captured the political initiative in this contest to see who would blink first is reinforced by the complaints of Cuthbert Headlam, the Conservative backbencher, that ‘The sooner some of these damned Labour people are made to join the Cabinet the better’, while recognising the insurmountable problem that ‘the Socialists won’t serve under Chamberlain’.¹⁷¹ Attlee had established himself as the chief power-broker in British politics, and his strategy of manoeuvring into a position from which he could, if not blackmail the Conservatives, at least effectively dictate terms, had worked. From April, the leadership group therefore began to close in on the government. That month the *Daily Herald* ran a series of

¹⁶⁵ Dalton Diary, 9 April 1940 (unpublished)

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, pp. 268-9. Morrison also apparently said that there was ‘no better man’ for the premiership than Chamberlain – Peake to Cadogan, 2 December 1939, cited Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.269.

¹⁶⁹ Harris, *Attlee*, p.173.

¹⁷⁰ Cowling, *Impact of Hitler*, p.382.

¹⁷¹ Stuart Ball (ed.) *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Churchill and Attlee: The Headlam Diaries, 1935-51* (Cambridge, 1999) (hereafter *Headlam Diary*), 5 May 1940, p.195 & 9 May 1940, p.196.

articles by senior figures attacking the prosecution of the war.¹⁷² At the beginning of May, as the British expedition to Norway foundered, Attlee told Dalton that the moment for action had arrived.¹⁷³ However, despite his plotting with Churchill, and the Liberal, Clement Davies – who approached him on behalf of the Watching Committee – he still rebuffed the efforts of dissident Conservatives to persuade Labour to openly challenge the prime minister.¹⁷⁴ Attlee was resolved to resist their efforts to get Labour to make the first move.¹⁷⁵ If Chamberlain was to be displaced, Attlee knew, Labour could play a role, but the main challenge would have to come from his own party. The leader thus marshalled his own strength and forced the Conservative rebels to be his ‘advance guard’ for the attack on Chamberlain.¹⁷⁶ Attlee read the situation better; there is no sign that he believed that the Conservatives would dissent from Chamberlain on a large scale, and he evidently intended that Labour should refrain from getting into close proximity to them until they did. More limited collusion was actively occurring, however. For example, at Churchill’s behest, Morrison pushed the government to attack German shipping wherever it could be found, bolstering the arguments Churchill was advancing within the Cabinet, and bringing further pressure to bear on Chamberlain’s prosecution of the war.¹⁷⁷

As the British forces were evacuated from Norway, however, the prime minister finally became vulnerable enough to provoke his opponents to seek to remove him. Morrison called for Chamberlain’s resignation in the press in ‘the most bitter indictment’ he had ever made, and, on 7 May, Attlee led the attack in the famous two-day debate on the war.¹⁷⁸ Though it was Amery and Lloyd George who landed the most damaging blows, Attlee openly called for Conservative MPs not to support the prime minister, affording government rebels a critical opening to act.¹⁷⁹ Morrison’s own speech so ‘staggered’ Chamberlain that the prime minister immediately made his fateful appeal for the support of his ‘friends’ – a personalising of the issue which quickly proved a mistake given the emergency facing the country.¹⁸⁰ It is clear that the Labour leadership were determined to see Chamberlain fall; yet, from the outset, they had wisely practised caution and adhered to their strategy, refusing to rush in and instead strengthening their own position. Given

¹⁷² See *Daily Herald* 3, 9, 16, 23 & 27 April 1940.

¹⁷³ Dalton Diary, 1 May 1940 (p.332).

¹⁷⁴ Clement Attlee, *As It Happened* (London, 1956), iii; Dalton, *Memoirs*, pp. 311-12; ‘Chips’: *The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon*, ed. by Robert Rhodes James (London, 1996 edition) (hereafter *Channon Diary*), 25 April 1940, p.242; Paul Emrys-Evans (secretary of the Watching Committee) in correspondence with Paul Addison, cited Addison, *Road to 1945*, p.71.

¹⁷⁵ Attlee, *As It Happened*, iii.

¹⁷⁶ Witherell, ‘Watching Committee’, p.1165.

¹⁷⁷ Nuffield College, Oxford, Herbert Morrison papers, draft autobiography.

¹⁷⁸ *Daily Herald*, 6 May 1940; *The Times*, 7 May 1940; *Daily Mirror*, 9 May 1940 (Morrison’s article was entitled ‘I Say Get Out’ and warned that Britain would be defeated if Chamberlain was not removed); *Hansard*, vol. 360, 7-8 May 1940. For Attlee’s speech, see 7 May, cols. 1086-94.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *Hansard*, vol. 360, 7 May 1940, cols. 1251-65; *Sunday Post*, 15 March 1959.

the willingness of Morrison and Greenwood to go into government in March, this is again testimony to the patience of the leader himself. Attlee's view had always been that 'Chamberlain will have to go', but he ensured that the party properly prepared the ground for the achievement of their objectives, rather than prematurely going into either coalition or alliance with the rebel Conservatives at the first opportunity.¹⁸¹

Many accounts of the downfall of the Chamberlain government have been supplied elsewhere, and do not need to be reiterated here. Yet Attlee's deft leadership, guiding Labour through a dangerous and fluid situation, undermines the belief of many contemporaries that he was unsuited to being leader, as well as calling into question prevailing historiographical views of this period. An analysis of events since the beginning of the conflict conveys the impression that it was Attlee, more than any other figure, that was responsible for Labour's exploitation of the crisis and the opportunities of war. At a meeting of the PLP Executive on 8 May, there was disagreement on whether to force a division on the government's motion for adjournment, essentially amounting to a vote of censure.¹⁸² But, as Addison has recognised, Attlee saw the opportunity to now consolidate with the Conservative dissidents and achieve a large anti-Chamberlain vote.¹⁸³ This offered the best prospect of forcing the prime minister's resignation, as well as a boost to Labour's potential strength in office if it now suddenly placed itself at the centre of events. Consequently, he argued in favour of a division, and was supported by the majority.¹⁸⁴ Smart's suggestion that Attlee 'had to be prodded into displaying any killer instinct' thus seems difficult to sustain, and a misreading of the leader.¹⁸⁵ Morrison, unsurprisingly, was similarly keen to effect a change in the political situation by dividing the Commons.¹⁸⁶ A minority, including Dalton and Pethick-Lawrence, were opposed, fearing that it would only entrench Chamberlain.¹⁸⁷ Yet they were outvoted, and the full PLP backed the strategy.¹⁸⁸ It is unclear whether the decision to divide the House belonged primarily to Attlee or Morrison. Morrison later wrote that it was he who persuaded his colleagues to do so, suggesting that they were 'bemused' by the 'shock of the idea'.¹⁸⁹ Attlee, however, also claimed credit, asserting that his rival had in fact been reluctant.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸¹ Attlee interview, cited Harris, *Attlee*, p.165.

¹⁸² Francis Williams, *A Prime Minister Remembers: The war and post-war memoirs of the Rt. Hon Earl Attlee*, (London, 1961), p.30; Morrison, *Autobiography*, pp. 172-3.

¹⁸³ Addison, *The Road to 1945*, p.96.

¹⁸⁴ Dalton Diary, 8 May 1940, p.340.

¹⁸⁵ Smart, *National Government*, p.219.

¹⁸⁶ Morrison papers, 'draft autobiography'.

¹⁸⁷ Dalton Diary, 8 May 1940 (p.340).

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ Morrison papers, 'draft autobiography'.

¹⁹⁰ Harris, *Attlee*, p.173. It has been suggested that Attlee wavered and may have been willing to serve under Chamberlain after all around this time, if not for a 'talking-to' by Greenwood and the Liberal Sinclair. Whilst such a possibility cannot be wholly discounted, and there is the possibility that Attlee's

Regardless, deprived of the support of many of his backbenchers in the division lobby, and with Labour having finally struck at him, Chamberlain's position was untenable.¹⁹¹ While it is evident that his fate was sealed by the withdrawal of substantial Conservative support, the point is that the position which Attlee had crafted for Labour was a strong one. Rather than plunging into alliance with the Conservative rebels, the leadership group ensured that Labour stood back and let others make the first move. From the outset, the Labour leaders had refrained from expending their hard-won political capital. They may have had little choice in 1939 but to adopt a strategy based upon 'wait and see', but that did not mean that they would play a weak hand so adeptly. Thus, the powerful position that Labour received in May 1940 did not simply drop into its lap. This course could easily have come to grief, not least because of the resentment their caution engendered within the party. Dalton recorded that Labour was 'steadily hardening' to the idea of entering a coalition, and that the party would 'go in with both feet if [the] necessary personal demolitions [the removal of Chamberlain and his inner circle] are affected'.¹⁹² On 9 May, Attlee and Greenwood met the prime minister and were 'very rude' in yet again rejecting his overtures to join the government, the leader telling Chamberlain that 'our party will not serve under you, nor does the country want you'.¹⁹³ They did agree, however, to go to the annual Conference, then in session in Bournemouth, and ascertain whether Labour would serve under someone other than Chamberlain.¹⁹⁴ 'Until that moment he thought he could hang on', Attlee recalled.¹⁹⁵ Far from being 'puzzling', this itself, of course, was just another manoeuvre by the leader – as made clear above, Attlee had no intention of asking for permission from his party, and had decided weeks ago that he would simply accept office on his own authority whenever he saw fit.¹⁹⁶

If the phoney war had not come to an end, the Conference would likely have witnessed a clash over the policy of 'constructive' Opposition. The disaffection within the party had been effectively contained but had not dissipated, and would no doubt have erupted. The rank-and-file,

later vocal denunciations of Chamberlain were a case of selective memory, nonetheless this assertion is not consistent with any of the available evidence about Attlee's behaviour beforehand. Perhaps more likely is that the possibility was simply discussed, and the leader's non-committal personality gave a misimpression to someone – See Laurence Thompson, *1940* (London, 1966), p.86; also Smart, *National Government*, p.222.

¹⁹¹ Attlee later recalled his pleasure at seeing 'Conservative MP after Conservative MP' abandon Chamberlain and vote with Labour – Williams, *A Prime Minister Remembers*, p.32.

¹⁹² Dalton Diary, 9 May 1940 (p.344).

¹⁹³ See L. Thompson papers, Attlee to Thompson, 18 December 1964, cited Donoughue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.273; Attlee interview, cited Harris, *Attlee*, p.174. See also the Attlee interview with Williams on this in *A Prime Minister Remembers*, pp. 32-3, which follows this account almost exactly, as well as the *Granada Historical Records Interview*, p.21.

¹⁹⁴ Attlee papers, 1/16, autobiographical notes.

¹⁹⁵ Attlee interview, cited Harris, *Attlee*, p.174.

¹⁹⁶ Smart, *National Government*, p.221.

keen to go onto the attack, remained hostile to the electoral truce.¹⁹⁷ Most significantly, one quarter of all resolutions submitted to the Conference were in opposition to the policy.¹⁹⁸ What the consequences of an open breach would have been are unknowable; as it was, the German attack was timely for Attlee and the others. The NEC decided unanimously that Labour would in fact join a coalition, but only under someone other than Chamberlain.¹⁹⁹ This was the final blow to the prime minister, and whilst his downfall had been facilitated by his own backbenchers, it was Labour that finally forced him from office. The NEC also agreed that the Conference should be informed of the leadership's *decision* to enter the government, rather than a *recommendation* to do so, presenting the action simply for symbolic endorsement, not authorisation.²⁰⁰ This was the *fait accompli* that Attlee had advocated the previous month. Labour's leader clearly had few qualms about wielding his authority in such a manner, regardless of what his party thought. The Executive tasked him and Greenwood with returning to London to inform the prime minister of the decision, and Chamberlain immediately resigned.²⁰¹ Attlee then met with his successor, Churchill, and quickly agreed upon the distribution of offices in the new ministry. With two seats in a five member War Cabinet, the extent of Attlee's success in engineering a strong position for Labour in the Coalition is immediately apparent; moreover, this was a product of the strategy of biding time that he had advanced since the beginning of the war. While perhaps on the surface his direction of Labour gave an impression of inactivity, in reality it created the basis for a very favourable deal from the Conservatives. The other members of the leadership group had not played a central role in the formation of the government. Bevin was not present at Conference – although he told Attlee that he concurred with his decision – and Dalton and Morrison remained in Bournemouth.²⁰² Instead, the crucial decisions were taken by Attlee himself.

Some members of the NEC were reticent over entry, chiefly due to the fact that Chamberlain was to remain in the War Cabinet.²⁰³ Morrison, particularly, was unsure, stating that he was not inclined to join the government after all.²⁰⁴ He told the meeting that 'this didn't sound like a government that would stand up any better than the last one'.²⁰⁵ However, Morrison's reluctance most likely stemmed from the fact that he was not in the War Cabinet, having been offered the Ministry of Supply. Dalton certainly believed that his prevarications stemmed from

¹⁹⁷ Cowling, *Impact of Hitler*, pp. 327-3; *New Statesman*, 30 December 1939.

¹⁹⁸ NEC papers, 'Resolutions for annual Conference 1940'.

¹⁹⁹ NEC minutes, 10 May 1940; Dalton Diary, 10 May 1940 (pp. 344-5).

²⁰⁰ NEC minutes, 10 May 1940.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² M. Webb, 'The Rt. Hon. Herbert Morrison, MP', in H. Tracey (ed.), *The British Labour Party, volume III* (London, 1948), pp. 37-8.

²⁰³ NEC minutes, 11 May 1940; Dalton Diary, 11 May 1940 (p.345).

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

disappointment at not receiving a more senior post.²⁰⁶ Morrison was also anxious that his old enemy, Bevin, was to become Minister of Labour. He later wrote of the ‘somewhat Napoleonic’ Bevin that ‘his weakness was jealousy of other people’.²⁰⁷ Morrison, however, ‘expected’ – or, more likely, hoped – that Bevin would encounter ‘adversaries of a very different mettle’ in the government than those he was accustomed to in the unions.²⁰⁸ Apparently worried that Dalton would get a prominent position at his expense, Morrison had earlier tried to discredit his erstwhile ally by spreading rumours that Dalton was pro-Italian.²⁰⁹ Morrison was undoubtedly angry; upon hearing that Attlee and Greenwood were to be in the War Cabinet and he was not, he complained that ‘these aren’t the right people to represent the party’.²¹⁰ As his biographers have observed, Morrison had wished for a different coalition.²¹¹ He hoped to be in the War Cabinet without a department, and later admitted that ‘Supply was hardly a post to run after’.²¹² Stung at being excluded from Churchill’s inner circle, he therefore considered staying outside the government altogether.²¹³ Had he done so, Morrison would have been the party’s sole senior figure not in office, a course that would have afforded him the opportunity to construct a formidable personal power base relative to the rest of the leadership group, creating an even more discernible division between the Labour ministers and the party than was ultimately to occur. Staying out of office in 1940 therefore perhaps offered Morrison the best opportunity he was ever to have to weaken Attlee, being able to exploit disaffection with the Coalition and to ensconce himself as the most effective representative of Labour interests – something he was to attempt to do anyway. The route that Morrison could have taken, and the ramifications of such a decision, has been overlooked by historians. As it was, his instinctive desire to exercise power compelled him to disregard his reservations and accept Supply. If he had not, the history of the period, and indeed the shape of post-war politics, could have been very different.

The NEC approved the substance of Attlee’s negotiations with Churchill.²¹⁴ The following day, 12 May, Attlee informed the assembled delegates of recent events, arguing forcefully the necessity of Labour taking part in the war effort.²¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, he framed this in terms of the

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Morrison, *Autobiography*, pp.201-3.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Morrison interview with W. P. Crozier, in A. J. P. Taylor (ed.) *Off the Record: Political Interviews, 1933-1943* (London, 1973), p.167.

²¹⁰ Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, interview with Grant McKenzie, cited p.274.

²¹¹ Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.275.

²¹² Morrison, *Autobiography*, p.178 and p.211.

²¹³ Dalton Diary, 11 May 1940 (p.345).

²¹⁴ NEC minutes, 11 May 1940; NCL minutes, 11 May 1940.

²¹⁵ *1940 LPACR*, pp. 123-5.

advance of socialism, but made what was described as the ‘speech of his life’.²¹⁶ The Conference then endorsed the decision to enter the government by a majority of more than twenty-five to two.²¹⁷ It was a triumphant culmination to the course that the leadership had plotted almost a year before. Bevan – who had been re-admitted to the party in late 1939, and already established himself as a fierce critic of his leaders, with ceaseless talk of the need for Labour to seize ‘supreme power’ and impose ‘socialism’ – opposed the decision, feeling the party had been ‘outwitted’ in not extracting more offices from Churchill.²¹⁸ Laski, on the other hand, was again put up by the leadership to represent their line, asserting to the delegates that Labour should join with the Conservatives in order to achieve reform.²¹⁹ As before, he was used as a shield and associated with the choices of people who he would soon vigorously oppose. Upon the formation of the Coalition, Addison has argued that the Conservatives were still much more powerful than Labour within the government, holding fifty-two posts to Labour’s sixteen.²²⁰ Whilst it is true that Labour was poorly represented at the lower ranks of the administration, at the top they faced the Conservatives on almost equal terms, with two seats out of five in the War Cabinet. Moreover, Labour’s most senior figures were on the whole somewhat weightier than the leading Conservatives, and would prove to be of superior quality. For all the rivalry among them, the party’s leaders co-operated far more effectively as a group than did the Conservatives, who were now left fractured between eccentric Churchillians like Lord Beaverbrook and Brendan Bracken, and the discredited Chamberlainites. With the Conservative party effectively in ruins, and Attlee having led his so adeptly, the Labour ministers constituted the strongest single faction inside the new government. This position was out of all proportion to Labour’s wholly unimpressive parliamentary representation.

Most of the party’s key figures got jobs, and its War Cabinet representatives, Attlee and Greenwood, wielded considerable domestic authority.²²¹ Attlee became Lord Privy Seal, Greenwood Minister without Portfolio. The latter’s remarkable rise to War Cabinet member was thus complete. Bevin was given the Ministry of Labour, Dalton the Ministry of Economic Warfare and, as above, Morrison got Supply. Considering his standing, and the need for Attlee to

²¹⁶ Ibid. *Daily Herald*, 14 May 1940. Attlee stressed that ‘We go in as partners and not as hostages’ and received three cheers.

²¹⁷ *1940 LPACR*, p.130. The vote was 2,413,000 to 170,000. Most of the unions, but only approximately two-thirds of the local parties, voted with the leadership – Dalton Diary, 13 May 1940 (p.348).

²¹⁸ *Tribune*, 24 November & 1 December 1939, 21 June 1940.

²¹⁹ *1940 LPACR*, pp. 144-5.

²²⁰ Addison, *The Road to 1945*, pp. 104-5. Alternatively, Cowling has seen the Coalition as a genuinely ‘centre’ government, rather than as a Conservative ministry with Labour members. He also subscribes to the notion of a wartime consensus, writing that the Coalition permitted a ‘receptivity in which the central features of Labour thinking became entrenched as normal’ – Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler*, pp. 1-2.

²²¹ For a full list of Labour’s appointments, see Brooke, *Labour’s War*, pp. 54-5. Jefferys, *The Churchill coalition*, has details of all senior office holders throughout the war – see pp. 218-22.

appease possible dissidents, Shinwell was an obvious choice for inclusion in the government. Both Attlee and Churchill were 'very keen' to have both of the most vocal potential troublemakers, Shinwell and Wilkinson, within the Coalition.²²² Wilkinson entered the government as Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Pensions, before joining her patron Morrison upon his move to the Home Office in October 1940. Shinwell's pickiness, however, wrecked his chances. Churchill offered him only the position of Under-Secretary of Food, not the Shipping post he craved.²²³ Put out by the frustration of his ambitions, Shinwell impetuously refused to accept office at all. Despite his later statement that he had 'no bitterness', there is little doubt that he was angry.²²⁴ His actions, and the change in his behaviour, since September were motivated by simple careerism; but with his ambitions in tatters, Shinwell immediately ceased his moderate behaviour and quickly became the most vitriolic opponent of his leaders. Launching endless attempts to destroy the Labour ministers' position over the coming years, Shinwell came to play a major role in the approaching internal struggle, as the entry into office, and consequent division – and diffusion – of power between the Labour ministers and their party threatened to derail Attlee's carefully-crafted course.

VII

Labour's experience of the first months of war had been productive. The largely negative view of the period given by previous historical literature is unfair; far from the 'stasis' imagined by Brooke, the party had not drifted aimlessly during the phoney war.²²⁵ It had instead pursued a calculated strategy. Hence, Jefferys' suggestion that Labour found itself with the 'worst of all worlds' in this period hardly rings true.²²⁶ Even as subtle an analyst of manoeuvre as Cowling has missed the substance of Labour's strategy, seeing the period as 'a non-event'.²²⁷ Subtle but profound political shifts had occurred in the British political landscape over the course of these eight months. Viewed in the context of Labour's tumultuous 1930s, from reduction to a parliamentary rump to a series of prolonged internal clashes, the period from the outbreak of war until the entry into government represented a triumphant climax for the party's leaders and an

²²² Dalton Diary, 18 May 1940 (pp. 12-3).

²²³ Slowe, *Shinwell*, pp. 190-1; Shinwell, *Conflict Without Malice*, p.146. He had shown little concern with anything besides shipping. Shinwell had not spoken on food, and division lists reveal that he had not even attended most debates on food and agriculture. See *Hansard*. For example, vol. 356, 25 January 1940, and vol. 358, 13 March 1940.

²²⁴ In his memoirs, Shinwell wrote that 'I have no feelings of regret...I repeat, there were no feelings of regret' – Shinwell, *Lead With The Left*, p.110.

²²⁵ For example, Brooke, *Labour's War*, chapter two; Addison, *The Road to 1945*, chapter two; Jefferys, *The Churchill Coalition*, p.17.

²²⁶ Kevin Jefferys, 'May 1940: The downfall of Neville Chamberlain', *Parliamentary History*, 10 (1991), pp. 363-78, at p.368.

²²⁷ Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler*, p. 372.

affirmation of their position. Labour's political fortunes had been transformed; moreover, the leadership had worked together effectively, regardless of the differences that existed between them, in order to secure the greater prize of government office. This was especially noteworthy given that their strategy expounded the virtues of essentially doing as little as possible. That Labour retained its unity under such conditions is striking, and indicative of the success of the leadership's cultivation of the opportunity before them, placating their followers while awaiting an opportunity to strike at Chamberlain. Their employment of vague rhetoric to manage their party underlines the way in which political actors utilise symbolic language as a means to enable them to focus on their real interests. The problem of peace aims had been potentially destructive, yet had been deflected adeptly. Moreover, the apparent capitulation by the leadership to their followers on the subject in fact merely amounted to an enticing carrot to offer the party in exchange for continued support. The eventual declaration they gave did not commit Labour to anything specific. Simultaneously, in supporting the war at its outset and publicly adopting a posture of 'constructive Opposition' – intimating political restraint in the national interest – the Labour leaders were establishing a position that would be on record, to considerable benefit, for the future. Before fresh divisions could erupt, Germany had invaded Western Europe, and the leadership moved decisively – and, crucially, on their own authority – to dislodge Chamberlain and take power as members of a new government.

Attlee, more than anyone, had been the central figure in achieving this. Labour's leader has always been an enigmatic figure to historians, and his abilities often overlooked. In fact, his real strength was that he was an excellent *manager* of his party. As John Swift has observed, 'Labour's entry into the government on its own terms was a vindication of Attlee's leadership'.²²⁸ The thesis therefore ties in with recent literature which has seen Attlee as a more skilled leader than has been allowed in the past.²²⁹ Never in its history had Labour wielded such influence as here. They possessed genuine power and leverage, but without bearing the responsibility when things went wrong – an enviable political position. The documentary material shows quite clearly that this is what Labour's leaders were thinking about during 1939 and 1940 – forcing the Conservatives into a corner, extracting an agreement from them on favourable terms, and all the while keeping their followers quiescent. They consciously and consistently awaited this opportunity; they did not simply drift in a political limbo for eight months. Their report to the 1940 Conference confirms that Attlee and his colleagues conceived of their strategy in this way. Political conditions during the period were narrow and restrictive, and the facts of war meant that opportunities were more limited than usual. 'Constructive Opposition' further exacerbated this,

²²⁸ Swift, *Labour in crisis*, p.158.

²²⁹ See, for example, Beckett, *Attlee*; Swift, *Labour in crisis*.

increasing the need to be cautious in public declarations. But conditions were still wide enough to permit skilful positioning. Attlee had made Labour stand back, increase its strength and let others make the first move. Throughout the period he had refrained from expending his hard-won political capital without certainty of a return. The Labour leadership may have had no choice in the autumn of 1939 but to adopt a posture of ‘wait-and-see’, but that did not mean that they would navigate such a dangerous political reef so adeptly. The party could easily have revolted against the straitjacket they imposed on it. Eight months is, in political terms, a *very* long time, particularly to balance on a tight-rope under conditions of inaction and war. Playing a weak hand, the leadership group established a bargaining position strong enough to deliver a powerful role in the Churchill Coalition.

Internal politicking also persisted, the most obvious example being the challenge to Attlee. As it was, the leader faced down his rivals, made them appear careerist and unscrupulous, and entrenched his own position. Escaping his isolation with this victory and outmanoeuvring his potential rivals, Attlee set about re-establishing his authority. Buttressed by his new boldness – as well as the fact that open contest for places during wartime would not be looked on kindly by the rank-and-file – the effect was to make any attempt to remove Attlee while ever the war continued much more difficult. Labour’s senior parliamentary figures were engaged in a long episode of manoeuvre and probing of one another’s position, an episode in which Attlee largely triumphed in November 1939, and in which he then spent the next six months consolidating his authority. But others sought advantage just as openly. It would seem, then, that the circumstances of war had not markedly altered the internal environment of the Labour party. It was only in the restraint shown in curtailing *public* attacks on one another, and to a lesser degree on the Conservatives, that the dynamic of Labour politics changed.

The location of political action in the period is interesting. The NEC and PLP remained important institutional forums, yet the real core to the events outlined here was, in a sense, *non*-institutional. It was in the inherently elastic contest for power between the Labour leaders, Chamberlain and the Conservative rebels, that the centre of action should be seen. Moreover, this was a contest that none of the participants could actually drive. Only external, military, events could permit resolution of this struggle. As such, the real location of action in the context of the Labour party was the thought-world and calculations of the leadership group in awaiting a suitable opportunity to enter office. It was the decision-making of senior actors that constituted the driving force of Labour politics. Only here can be found the real crux of internal politics. But, at the same time, Parliament was also an important venue. While not the central arena, the Commons was a crucial one for Labour’s performance as a party, being the place where the leadership strategy – and

indeed those of the prime minister and Conservative dissidents – would manifest itself. As such, there was an important role for the Commons in providing the environment in which manoeuvre and confrontation, already determined off-stage, would play out.

Despite the success of the course they had chosen, the decision by the leadership to join the Churchill Coalition was something of a leap of faith. Labour had been in office in a minority twice before, and the prospect of again being buffeted by stronger opponents would not have been an attractive one. To enter into a coalition also posed other acute dangers. It was obvious that it would necessitate some degree of distance between those in the government and their followers. This distance could easily provoke a crisis, either of authority – over who controlled the party – or priority – what its leaders should perceive their role to be. Such a struggle could inflict damage to Labour on the scale of 1931. Moreover, Labour had been divided over two previous coalitions, the Lloyd George ministry of the First World War and the formation of the National Government by MacDonald. From our contemporary perspective, we tend to view parties as enduring entities, in which internal divisions may occur but do not threaten its continued existence. But, from the perspective of May 1940, matters appeared rather differently. For the previous sixty years, back to the 1880s, politics had been marked by constant fluidity in the party system, with innumerable realignments and defections. In 1940, political parties did not appear to be enduring; quite the reverse. Yet Labour's leaders displayed little reluctance in entering the Coalition, despite the danger of being overpowered by the Conservatives or thrown over by their followers. They were motivated in large part, of course, by strong patriotism and the exigencies of the international crisis. Political co-operation was vital if the war effort was to be a success. But another crucial motive was ambition; the formation of the Churchill ministry offered a major opportunity for Labour and its leaders. That they joined the government indicated a determination to pursue this opportunity. The entry of the leadership group into the Coalition, despite the dangers inherent in such a course, underlines the drive for power that resides at the centre of all political actors. That they would have refused the opportunity was inconceivable. It remained to be seen what they would make of it.

Chapter three – Office

The previous chapter showed how Attlee fought and won two separate battles – to outmanoeuvre Morrison and retain the leadership, and to take the Labour party with him along a political path of his own choosing. The first year of the leadership group's membership of office was marked, for the most part, by the continued success of the strategy they had pursued. Though in government, their priorities and behaviour changed little. Acclimatising to office and with the war at its most critical stage, the Labour ministers were, despite these distractions, able to retain their internal ascendancy to a remarkable degree. Moreover, it was here that the true scale of the success engineered by Attlee and his colleagues became apparent. This chapter considers the period from mid 1940 to mid 1941 and the realignment of politics which took place. Most significant was the way in which the new Labour ministers were able to continue extending their power even further than that which they had secured in May 1940, across the entire apparatus of government, and completing the transformation in their political fortunes which they had created in the shadow of the national crisis. Inside Labour itself, meanwhile, Attlee, virtually on his own authority, reconstructed the mechanics of the party to entrench this new order by imposing the pliant Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence onto his followers as their acting leaders. But of similar importance, though, was that personal conflict among the leadership – which had dominated from May-November 1939, and influenced Attlee's reassertion of his powers – largely abated over the first year of the new administration. With a war effort to run, the existential threat to Britain from Germany, new jobs to be mastered, and Attlee's ascendancy resulting in a lack of opportunities for Morrison to challenge him, the attention of the protagonists was focused elsewhere – although this did not mean that such conflict ceased entirely. This chapter is thus rather different from the previous chapter, and those that follow. It considers the way in which the leadership group, reaping the rewards of their efforts during the phoney war, worked to continue along the trajectory they had pursued since 1939 of expanding their influence – this time in government – whilst maintaining their authority over the Labour party itself.

Yet, that the first year of the Coalition was broadly a success, did not preclude the development of more worrying harbingers for the future. Disaffection with 'constructive' Opposition had been a constant feature of the phoney war, and this hostility to Labour's 'stasis' diffused at an accelerating rate once the party entered office. By 1941, it was a potent threat to stability as the sheen of coalition began to wear off. This would eventually precipitate recurrent conflicts over Labour's direction. It is thus possible to detect the first signs of the crises which would dominate the period until 1945, in that, despite the success enjoyed by the Labour ministers, their entry into government engendered tensions across the entire party. The fact that its political leaders were in

power, but the rest of the movement was not, created inevitably divergent internal priorities and perceptions of the political world. The root of this was the conflict between the necessity of compromise and loyalty to the Coalition demanded by the Labour ministers, and the pressure towards independence felt by many of their followers. Even actors who were temperamentally similar to the Labour ministers were reluctant about many of their leaders' actions – a reluctance borne from these differing viewpoints and enforced separation between those who were in office and those who were not. It was here that the seeds of future, more open, conflict were sown. This chapter shows how this situation evolved. The chapter is divided into two halves – one which examines the period to late 1940, and assesses the leadership group's collective improvement of their position in the new arena of government, and one which describes the resumption of internal conflict from early 1941.

I

The immediate problem facing Attlee upon the assumption of office was the question of who to leave in charge of the PLP. There was an obvious imperative for the leadership to leave the parliamentary party in the hands of people they could trust to maintain loyalty to the new administration. If those given this task were prominent in their own right – if Morrison had stayed out of office, for example – the Labour ministers could have found their authority challenged, or even rejected. The prospect of a repudiation of the leadership group, and a consequent split, had always been a possibility during the phoney war, and would surely increase now that the Labour ministers were separated from the day-to-day running of the party. As it was, the dependable Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence were the ideal candidates to be entrusted with the role. Likely to be compliant to the decisions of the Labour ministers, they would make useful proxies. Thus, their exclusion from the government was not a slight, for they were tasked with even more crucial work instead. Though Attlee expressed to Dalton the view that Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence were too old for ministerial work, nonetheless it seems unlikely that the leader undertook negotiations for government offices without a plan for who would be left to run and manage the PLP.¹ The two veterans had proven themselves indispensable in recent months. The week after the formation of the Coalition, Attlee – again acting virtually unilaterally – took the decision that Lees-Smith was to become acting chairman of the PLP and Leader of the Opposition, with Pethick-Lawrence his deputy, prior to approval by the PLP and without discussions with other senior figures.² This implies that the leader simply made the choice on his own authority, and

¹ Dalton Diary, 18 May 1940 (pp. 12-3). Page references from Dalton's diary until the break-up of the Coalition refer to Pimlott's *The Second World War Diary of Hugh Dalton, 1940-1945* (London, 1986).

² Dalton Diary 20 May 1940 (p.14), & 21 May 1940 (p.17).

then impressed it upon his colleagues. The decision was then accepted by both the PLP Executive and the full PLP itself.³

The other component of the leadership's plan to maintain their authority became clear days later, when the PLP Executive voted to dissolve itself for the duration of the war, and recommended that an Administrative Committee be set up in its place.⁴ Yet this was deliberately structured to preserve the internal ascendancy of the leaders: Lees-Smith was its head, and it consisted largely of Labour ministers – who were ex-officio members – and loyalist MPs. Attlee was to remain leader of the party, with Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence put in charge of directing the PLP.⁵ This, then, represented in many respects a reversion to the original practice of a PLP chairman who directed Commons duties but lacked real personal power. Brooke has criticised Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence as displaying a lack of 'rigour', arguing that there was a lack of 'effective' parliamentary leadership during the war.⁶ But, surely, this was precisely the point. The Administrative Committee was apparently at first unelected, although the destruction of the PLP minutes makes this impossible to ascertain for certain. It was to consist of twenty-three members, including nine Labour ministers, six members of the old Executive who were not members of the government, and others who sat regularly on the Opposition front bench.⁷ At the beginning of the next parliamentary session, annual elections were held, acting as an important gauge of party feeling.⁸

³ Ibid. Lees-Smith, interestingly, was a titular Leader of the Opposition only; though having to transact the business of the Commons and oversee the PLP, he did not receive the salary that came with the post, nor was he entitled to a secretary. It was instead Attlee who continued to receive the salary. In August, Lees-Smith complained about this to the NEC, which agreed to find him a typing assistant and pay him £100 per annum – NEC minutes, 21 August and 25 September 1940.

⁴ Dalton Diary, 21 May 1940 (p.17).

⁵ Ibid. See also R. M. Punnett, *Front-Bench Opposition: The Role of the Leader of the Opposition, the Shadow Cabinet and Shadow Government in British Politics* (London, 1973), pp. 410-11. Lees-Smith entered into talks with the Speaker of the Commons and Privy Councillors outside the government from other parties about the occupation of the Opposition front bench. It was agreed that the Administrative Committee (whether or not they were members of the Privy Council) and Privy Councillors not in office from the Conservative and Liberal parties would be eligible to sit on the Opposition front bench. This arrangement was to prevail until 1945, although it is unfortunately impossible to know how often Conservative and Liberal MPs actually did sit there.

⁶ Brooke, *Labour's War*, pp. 73-4.

⁷ See R. T. McKenzie, *British Political Parties: The distribution of power within the Conservative and Labour parties* (London, 1967 edition), Appendix D, pp. 664-5.

⁸ Pethick-Lawrence topped the poll in the first election held in November (Lees-Smith, along with Attlee, was an ex-officio member), an indication of his strong internal position. Dalton came second, with Morrison, Alexander and Griffiths all tying for third. Attlee was certainly happy with the results, telling Dalton that 'the party generally knows what it is doing on these occasions'. See Dalton Diary, 13 December 1940 (p.119).

Besides Lees-Smith, Pethick-Lawrence and the ministers, the key figures were J. R. Clynes, Griffiths, Philip Noel-Baker, Shinwell, and Wedgwood Benn.⁹ The Administrative Committee thus became the central institutional arena within the PLP, Labour MPs looking to it for authority and direction. Though the leadership worked diligently to control the PLP, their differing perspectives from others on the Committee posed subtle but problematic issues of party management. Despite being closely linked, the Labour ministers and the rest of the Administrative Committee were separated, in terms of jobs, concerns and physical location in the House. The leadership group could hence no longer control the PLP directly – they had to do it *through* the Committee, in alliance with others, who may or may not be amenable in a given situation. As a result, it is possible to identify three distinct structural components to the Labour party in Parliament between 1940-5: the ministers (including the core leadership), the Administrative Committee, and the PLP itself. This diffusion of power was the central feature of the fluctuating nature of Labour politics. On the other hand, that the Committee was a purely administrative body is underlined by its weakness in the seniority of its membership. Of the twenty-three members, only five had NEC seats; of these, three (Attlee, Dalton and Morrison) were ministers. The others were Noel-Baker and Shinwell. This makes apparent that whilst the Committee played a key role at Westminster, it did not constitute a power base more broadly. As such, it did not pose a threat to the Labour ministers in offering an alternative set of leaders. It would have been a simple matter to give the new head of the PLP and his deputy ex-officio membership of the NEC; that this was not done is telling. Considering Attlee's propensity for taking decisions without consultation in recent weeks, and the lack of evidence about any discussions on this reconfiguration, it seems probable that responsibility for this deliberate weakness should again be laid at the door of the party leader.¹⁰ As he had so often since his engagement with the peace aims controversy, Attlee moved the pieces around the political chessboard in such a way as to reduce the prospect of a viable challenge to the Labour ministers developing from within the party. Griffiths later described the main function of the Administrative Committee as being to sustain the leadership in the government and protect their flank from internal attack – an accurate analysis of the manner in which the Committee was intended to operate.¹¹

Shinwell, fuming at his exclusion from the Ministry of Shipping and already reverting to his more customary manner as a result, was the sole member of the PLP Executive to oppose the new

⁹ For a full list, see McKenzie, *British Political Parties*, pp. 664-5.

¹⁰ NEC papers, Dalton's diaries, or any other source known to the current author, do not contain evidence of any debate on these changes as to how the parliamentary party should now work. The measures seem to have been imposed in one fell-swoop.

¹¹ James Griffiths, *Pages from Memory* (London, 1969), p.69.

arrangements.¹² With his standing recently boosted by accession to the NEC at the 1940 Conference a fortnight earlier, Shinwell now possessed both a prominent platform and the desire to make use of it. Moreover, this opposition was predicated on apparent ambition to become Leader of the Opposition himself, in place of Lees-Smith, or at least to sabotage the Labour ministers' plans for a compliant PLP. At the meeting where the decision to appoint Lees-Smith was taken, 'Shinbad', according to Dalton, was 'in a state of nervous and egocentric volubility' and was 'even worse than usual'.¹³ Savaging the proposed new arrangements, Shinwell complained at having to take the government Whip, but was particularly energetic in arguing against the idea that Lees-Smith should become Leader of the Opposition.¹⁴ Whilst Dalton's loathing of Shinwell doubtless engendered bias, his view that Shinwell 'regards himself as the only possible leader' to replace Attlee, and was angling to get the new job himself, is certainly consistent with Shinwell's ambitions from the 1930s, as well as his bid to push himself to the forefront since September.¹⁵ Shinwell advocated a more vigorous form of Opposition, with the Labour ministers excluded from the ruling body of the PLP, which would turn the Administrative Committee into precisely what Attlee intended it would *not* be – an alternate leadership group.¹⁶ The rejection of Shinwell's proposal, then, is less important than the fact that he had already determined upon engineering a wholesale challenge to the leaders' course – a course with which he had no quarrel until the frustration of his ambitions. When the rest of the Executive acquiesced to Lees-Smith's new position, 'Shinbad [leapt] from his seat and [rushed] from the room in a towering rage'.¹⁷ After missing out on the Ministry of Shipping less than a fortnight before, Shinwell's efforts to stop Lees-Smith had now been rebuffed as well. Already embittered, his manner became one of constant and intransigent resistance to virtually everything his leaders did.¹⁸ As this incident also makes apparent, neither the formation of the Coalition, nor the crisis on the continent, produced much shift in the nature of political behaviour, any more than the declaration of war the previous autumn. As Leo Amery commented around this time, 'However desperate the national crisis, men cannot help thinking of themselves'.¹⁹

The non-confrontational nature of the new political situation at the top, meanwhile, was struck at once, as Commons debates quickly became an occasion for mutual appreciation. The day after the

¹² Dalton Diary, 21 May 1940 (p.17).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid; Dalton Diary, 23 May 1940 (p.19).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid; Harris, *Attlee*, p.180.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ The fact that Shinwell offers no comments whatsoever on his bid to stop Lees-Smith becoming Leader of the Opposition in any of the three volumes of his memoirs is revealing.

¹⁹ *Amery Diary*, 18 June 1940, pp. 625-6.

formation of the Committee, Attlee introduced an Emergency Powers Bill, and was faced at the dispatch box by Lees-Smith, who struck a note of conciliatory politics:

I thank the Lord Privy Seal [Attlee] for his speech...this is not the time for a lengthy discussion. It is a time for action and for showing that the House of Commons can be a completely efficient instrument in the conduct of the war. I have only to say that we [the Labour Opposition] will give the Bill all facilities.²⁰

And so it continued. The speeches of Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence were deliberately minimalist and emollient, often offering no questioning or criticism whatever. But though this new posture, with Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence frequently seeming to be almost government spokesmen, would become deeply antagonistic to many as time passed, given the international situation, for the moment it aroused little animosity. The next day, Pethick-Lawrence made a long speech on the Limitations of Dividends Bill, again displaying a readiness to refrain from any criticism.²¹ He discussed several parts of the Bill that were unclear – and then set out to the House how the Bill in fact already dealt with them satisfactorily.²² Enconced atop the PLP and tasked with a critical job by the leaders, both Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence simply did not press the government with any degree of frequency.

II

Even though they were now in office and had consolidated their position at the head of the Labour party, Attlee and the Labour ministers nonetheless stuck with their tried-and-tested strategy. They ensured that Labour still looked ‘responsible’ to the wider electorate – Lees-Smith lining the party up behind the government’s decision to reject Hitler’s peace proposals in the aftermath of Dunkirk, for example – but this was, as before, just one part of their strategy.²³ From the outset, the Labour ministers were aggressive within the government in pushing their own agenda. Immediately upon the formation of the new ministry, Attlee and Greenwood confronted Churchill and ‘expostulated strongly’ against the inclusion of Chamberlain in the government.²⁴ Though the prime minister’s position *vis á vis* the Conservatives meant that any such move was impossible, he was nevertheless left ‘shaken...considerably’ by the effort to compel him to drop Chamberlain.²⁵ The Labour ministers thus continued to pursue their own personal vendetta against the former prime minister, and, by extension, both exacerbating the damage already

²⁰ *Hansard*, vol. 361, 22 May 1940, col. 152.

²¹ *Hansard*, vol. 361, 23 May 1940, cols. 345-7.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Hansard*, vol. 362, 18 June 1940, col. 61; NEC Emergency sub-committee minutes, 18 June 1940.

²⁴ *Amery Diary*, 11 May 1940, pp. 614-5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

inflicted to the Conservative party and standing firm on a cause – the hated appeasers – certain to win them credit among their followers. Around the same time, in an episode which suggests much about the centrality of self-interest and political strategising even in situations of dire emergency, they brazenly turned this into – or at the very least tacitly encouraged – a full-scale attack against the credibility of the Conservative party, playing a role in a vicious campaign begun following Dunkirk in which virtually the entire spectrum of the Labour movement – including the leadership themselves – repeatedly and publicly assailed the Chamberlain ministry in the press for betraying the country through its foreign policy, placing the responsibility for the crisis squarely on the shoulders of the former government.²⁶ There were obvious advantages for the leadership to pursue this line of rhetoric; moreover, in denouncing Chamberlain, they were by implication attacking the Conservatives as well, marking out valuable political ground with a brazen – and wounding – shot at their partners in office.

Yet, in encouraging such attacks and defining a distinctive Labour position, the leadership quickly re-ignited cross-party tensions just weeks into the life of the new administration. Conservative MPs were angered by their coalition partners openly blaming them, Cuthbert Headlam observing that the electoral truce ‘is only observed by one side...every speech made by the Labour people... is a party speech and is propaganda’.²⁷ This attack by the Labour party, and especially by its leaders, on the record of the Conservatives is all the more revealing for its timing. That they had the time to observe, and indeed, in the first place, whip up, these party attacks for several weeks amid the blackest national emergency for centuries suggests much. Not only did politicking continue as usual, then, despite the confines of wartime and coalition, but it could have fatally damaged the new government weeks into its existence. It is clear that up to this point their holding of office was not accompanied by corresponding changes in how Attlee and the rest positioned themselves against their political opponents. Churchill, again shaken, was forced to insist to the Labour ministers that they cease their attacks.²⁸ Though this plea did have an immediate effect on the leadership group, other assaults continued unabated with the publication of the famous *Guilty Men* book in July.²⁹ Only now did senior Labour figures make an effort to muzzle the criticism, Citrine denouncing the campaign as a thinly-veiled attempt to go back on Labour’s entry into the government.³⁰ Bevan responded by calling for the TUC to rebuke Citrine, attacking the union boss as ‘a political illiterate [who] raises not a flicker of interest in

²⁶ See, for example, *Daily Herald*, 27, 28 May & 1, 3, 5 June 1940; *Daily Mirror*, 26, 27 May & 5, 6 June 1940; *Tribune*, 3, 7 June 1940.

²⁷ *Headlam Diary*, 31 July 1940, p.215.

²⁸ Addison, *The Road to 1945*, p.108.

²⁹ ‘Cato’ (Michael Foot, Peter Howard and Frank Owen), *Guilty Men* (London, 1940).

³⁰ Foot, *Bevan*, pp. 319-20.

anybody...he should confine himself to his filing system'.³¹ Assaults emanating from the Labour party against Chamberlain and the Conservatives continued throughout the war; but, as 1940 wore on, the efforts to suppress them at least reduced their intensity from fever pitch. For the Conservative party, though, the damage to its reputation was already done. What this opportunism suggests about the priorities of the Labour leaders, whose objectives seem to have still been primarily 'political' rather than 'national', is another matter.

The image created is of Attlee and company gleefully dancing on the grave of a severely damaged Conservative party, amidst the worst military situation Britain had yet faced with the collapse at Dunkirk, the bombing of cities, the RAF fighting desperately in the skies above, and the Wehrmacht massing on the other side of the Channel. The Labour leaders, to change the metaphor, were enthusiastically shimmying their way up the greasy pole. There is nothing *wrong* with this, of course; it is the nature of politics after all. But it should at least be recognised.³² The Labour ministers had earlier dug their collective heels in in May when James Maxton, the ILP leader – commanding all of three MPs – asked Churchill to recognise his party as the official Opposition.³³ His biographer has suggested that the romantic Churchill – who fantasised of a grand parliamentary alliance anyway – may have acceded to the request, if not for the fierce hostility emanating from the Labour leadership, who no doubt knew that forcing their party into an effective 'fusion' with the Conservatives was going to lengths to which Labour would not go.³⁴ But the leaders also had little incentive to give up the political double-dividend which they enjoyed by straddling government and Opposition. The leadership sought to assuage discontent among their followers in another fashion, in the form of holding out promised legislative achievements, a tactic they were to persist in – albeit not always successfully – until the break up of the Coalition. The question of precisely what Labour wanted to achieve from the war had been a potent issue throughout the first eight months of the conflict; 'to achieve high office' would perhaps not have sufficed as an answer. Now Attlee, angling for something of substance from the Coalition to give to his party, sought to head off fresh criticism in this direction by pushing within the government in mid June 1940 that the ministry:

³¹ Ibid.

³² The events are reminiscent (if less clear-cut, because the leaders seem to have started the attacks and then stepped back to watch the Labour party take them up) of the behaviour of Conservatives in September 1931 during the financial crisis – see Williamson, *National Crisis and National Government*, chapter eleven, but especially p.401 & p.412.

³³ Gordon Brown, *Maxton* (Edinburgh, 1986), p.299; Punnett, *Front-Bench Opposition*, p.410.

³⁴ Brown, *Maxton*, p.299. Maxton also tried to get the Speaker to revoke Lees-Smith's privileges as Leader of the Opposition, unsuccessfully – See *Hansard*, vol. 361, 4 June 1940, cols. 796-8, 11 June 1940, col. 1166, and vol. 362, 18 June 1940, col. 61.

should put before the country a definite pronouncement on government policy for the future. The Germans are fighting a revolutionary war for very definite objectives. We are fighting a conservative war and our objects are purely negative. We must put forward a positive and revolutionary [statement of aims] admitting that the old order has collapsed and asking people to fight for the new order.³⁵

Though such legislation was not likely to be implemented at the height of military crisis in May and June, nonetheless Attlee, as ever concerned with being the first to shape the environment, was beginning to put down the markers which he would use over the subsequent months.

III

The first few months of Coalition were marked by another major extension of the influence held by the Labour party's representatives in government, and their role in running the country. It was therefore here that the extent of the success they had manufactured during the preceding period became fully apparent. Labour's leader had cut an impressive figure during the phoney war. Moreover, in his negotiation of government places, Attlee secured strong Labour representation, and displayed a ruthless streak in dismissing Pethick-Lawrence and Lees-Smith as 'too old' and 'too slow' for office respectively, whilst engineering for them to be left in charge of the PLP.³⁶ Escaping the isolation and weakness which seemed certain to end his leadership little more than six months before, Attlee's adeptness as a political operator was at its apex in 1940. Once within the government he was faced with a new test, having to cope with huge and ever-increasing ministerial burdens while still retaining Labour party support for his decisions. As a minister, Attlee quickly became a formidable political figure – not through a domineering personality, but a quiet yet critical influence over the entire machinery of government.

From the beginning of the Coalition, Attlee largely dropped from public view, particularly when compared with men like Bevin and Morrison, who became politicians of great national prominence. Hence, the complaints about the leaders' elusiveness, or that Attlee had a poor war, should be seen in this context. Yet this is to underestimate Attlee and neglect his strengths. For the rest of the war, he was a key figure in holding the Coalition together, reconciling Conservative and Labour opinion, and all the while simultaneously balancing the national interest, the imperative for his party to be 'responsible', and his own ministerial work. A founding member of the War Cabinet, Attlee's natural efficiency at committee work meant that he played a central role in that body, particularly in ensuring its tasks were carried out effectively and

³⁵ Nigel Nicolson (ed.) *Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters, 1939-1945* (London, 1960), pp. 99-101; INF I/849, minutes of the Home Policy Committee, 18 June 1940.

³⁶ Dalton Diary, 9-16 July 1940 (pp. 56-61).

meetings did not last for hours due to Churchill's tendency to talk for too long. He was unofficially deputy prime minister from May 1940 (and became so formally later), and was, crucially, the only man to serve (as deputy chairman) on all three of the key committees that directed the war: the War Cabinet, the Defence Committee, and the Lord President's Committee, the last of which Attlee himself pushed for the creation of, and was led by Chamberlain in name alone.³⁷ Moreover, though he did not assume the title, Attlee from the beginning informally acted as Leader of the Commons.³⁸ In the spring and summer of 1940, he immediately began clustering together an ever-increasing range of powers into his own hands and became the key figure in the direction of the home front.³⁹ As a Churchill aide put it, it was widely recognised in Whitehall that, in cross-party conflicts, 'if C.R.A. [Attlee] digs his heels in, he will win'.⁴⁰ From 1940 he made the Lord President's Committee 'the engine of government' on the home front, created in order to save the Cabinet's time.⁴¹ To all intents and purposes he directed it himself, making it his personal fiefdom; Chamberlain's fatal illness allowed Attlee to quickly circumvent him, and Anderson, who succeeded Chamberlain in the autumn of 1940, had little political standing.⁴²

Attlee also chaired both the Food and Home Policy Committees, and sat on Greenwood's Production and Economic Policy Committee.⁴³ Free from departmental responsibilities, Attlee was able to roam freely across the entire field of governance. This wide-ranging brief facilitated a major expansion of Attlee's political reach. Labour's much-criticised leader, then, held a uniquely powerful position; it may have been very much a behind-the-scenes role, but no one was more powerful within Whitehall with the sole exception of Churchill. As Beckett has observed, while

³⁷ The members of the Lord President's Committee were Attlee, Chamberlain, Greenwood, Sir John Anderson (Home Secretary and in charge of civil defence) and Sir Kingsley Wood (Chancellor of the Exchequer). Attlee pressurised for this Committee from the moment he entered office to direct and co-ordinate the work of the individuals above, and within a month Churchill agreed.

³⁸ Harris, *Attlee*, p.180.

³⁹ For reasons of length and historiographical neglect the thesis is concerned primarily with the Labour party itself rather than the Coalition government, and hence events within that ministry and its workings are not focused upon here beyond describing the roles and influence taken on by the Labour ministers. However, those wishing to make further investigations should see the papers of the War Cabinet, the Cabinet and the individual departmental ministries. CAB 65 (conclusions of the War Cabinet), 66 & 67 (War Cabinet memoranda) 68 (reports by government departments), 69 & 70 (Defence Committee), 71 & 132 (Lord President's Committee), CAB 118 (Attlee's files as deputy prime minister) as well as PREM 3, are particularly useful.

⁴⁰ Cited Beckett, *Attlee*, p.165.

⁴¹ Harris, *Attlee*, p.180.

⁴² See CAB 71 & 132 (thirty-four volumes and 223 volumes and files respectively) for evidence on Attlee's role in running and directing the activities of the Committee. In October, when Chamberlain resigned, Attlee had the Lord President's Committee re-structured with new membership – himself, Bevin, Morrison (Home Secretary by this point), Greenwood, Wood and Sir Andrew Duncan (Morrison's successor at Supply) – and officially designated as a 'steering committee' with a wide-ranging brief to oversee economic organization and the general workings of Whitehall. As a result, the committee was utterly dominated by Labour.

⁴³ CAB 74 (Food), CAB 75 (Home Policy) and CAB 72 (Production and Economic Policy).

the prime minister focused on the military conflict, it was Attlee who ‘looked after the shop’, effectively running the home front from the inception of the new ministry.⁴⁴ One biographer has noted the political ‘iron’ in Attlee’s ‘soul’ that became apparent once he guided Labour into office, describing him as ‘the greaser of wheels...at the heart of the government’.⁴⁵ It has been pointed out by Peter Clarke that Attlee’s ‘hero’ was Lord Salisbury, for his understated but ‘well on top of his job’ style of leadership.⁴⁶ Immediately upon entering office, Attlee began an overhaul of the machinery of government, working alongside Greenwood.⁴⁷ They dissolved dozens of committees, centralised decision-making, reduced the ability of ministers to ‘pass the buck’ to others, and produced a considerable improvement in administrative efficiency. Given Churchill’s lack of patience with such matters, in thus providing the drive and expertise, the achievement was Attlee’s. This interpretation of his intention to ensconce himself at the centre of the web of government is reinforced by the fact that he was quick to get rid of a potential rival, when Sir Horace Wilson, Chamberlain’s adviser and powerful figure within the machinery of state, was eased aside during the review. Attlee said that ‘He had a hand in everything, ran everything. We got rid of him at once’.⁴⁸ This was ostensibly due to Wilson’s links with Chamberlain, but, in abolishing his influence so eagerly, the Labour leader displayed little reluctance in dispatching a rival.

An early example of Attlee’s tactics in manipulating his role in government, and his desire to placate his followers while beginning to push for future social reform, was his pressure on the Coalition over the summer of 1940 for a declaration of post-war policy. As we have seen, he raised the issue initially in June, and persisted over the subsequent months. On 23 August, the War Cabinet relented and agreed to set up a War Aims Committee, with Attlee as chairman.⁴⁹ Bevin was also a member.⁵⁰ This met for the first time on 4 October, and though it failed to make much headway in 1940 – Churchill feeling reconstruction planning to be premature – that the leader’s agitation was successful reiterates the scale of Attlee’s influence, as well as enabling the Labour ministers to make reassuring noises to their party. Viewed in the context of calls within the Labour party from Bevan and Laski for nationalisation and socialism, Churchill’s agreement to the establishment of the War Aims Committee was an important victory. Despite the prime minister’s resistance, the Labour ministers could hardly be said to have ‘abandoned’ Labour.

⁴⁴ Beckett, *Attlee*, p.160.

⁴⁵ Beckett, *Attlee*, pp. 159-65.

⁴⁶ Peter Clarke, *A Question of Leadership: Gladstone to Blair* (London, second edition, 1999), pp. 196-7.

⁴⁷ This quest for efficiency was done through the Lord President’s Committee – see CAB 71 & 132 over the summer and autumn months of 1940.

⁴⁸ Churchill College, Cambridge, Attlee papers, notes on draft autobiography, 1/16 fo 3.

⁴⁹ CAB 65, WM 220 (40) 3, 23 August 1940.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* CAB 21 contains the War Aims committee records.

Over the five years of the Coalition, the agitations of Labour's representatives were key in yielding significant legislative achievements. Attlee displayed an adroit ability in manipulation, knowing when to exact concession from the government, when to take a firm line with the Labour party, and when to strike several poses simultaneously. In doing so, he stumbled remarkably infrequently. Moreover, that he was able to do this over the course of five years without precipitating a schism within the government demonstrates once again his skill in managing people and guiding them in the direction he wished them to go – often without their knowledge that he was doing so. Despite the criticisms directed at him by contemporaries for his style, when Attlee's wartime role is examined afresh, it is here, in this period, that we can discern the true extent of his quiet ability in the political arts.

After persuading Churchill to set up the War Aims Committee, Attlee's pressure was no doubt significant in the prime minister's acquiescence in December to the formation of a dedicated Reconstruction Committee.⁵¹ Moreover, the previous month, Bevin had joined the fray by making a speech in Bristol emphasising the need for reform after the war.⁵² His tone was sufficiently partisan to provoke Lord Londonderry to complain that 'I am frankly disturbed by Bevin's rise to power...he is more than useful, but as a director of...policy I see nothing but disaster'.⁵³ We should here identify a highly effective tactic employed by Attlee and the Labour ministers throughout the war, reflecting an astute awareness of their location with regards to both their followers and the Conservatives, as well as their realisation that Churchill could not do without them. The leadership group held office, but the Labour party itself occupied an ambiguous position between office and Opposition, taking the government Whip but still designated as His Majesty's Opposition. As such, the Labour ministers could afford to be relatively partisan in their behaviour, making speeches on the need for reform and pushing a Labour policy line within the Coalition, all the while knowing that as long as they were cautious, the alliance with the Conservatives would hold; as during the phoney war, it may have been readily apparent to Labour's partners what they were doing, but Churchill needed them. Until 1945, the Labour ministers repeatedly utilised a particular technique to secure concessions. They would agitate within the Coalition on a specific issue and push for the setting up of a committee to consider it, laying the groundwork within Whitehall; the NEC would produce a policy document which the leadership could then present within the government as a Labour demand, attempting to force Churchill's agreement. This tactic bore fruit with the War Aims Committee in August 1940 and the Reconstruction Committee in December, and was to bring further success in future.

⁵¹ These records are in CAB 87.

⁵² Londonderry to Halifax, 23 November 1940, cited Addison, *The Road to 1945*, p.124-5.

⁵³ Ibid.

Moreover, Attlee and the rest of the ministers could protect their flank within the Coalition by drawing a crucial distinction between their own understanding of political realities and the irresponsible demands of their followers. Once again, then, the leaders had been able to persist in exactly the same type of tactics that they had used during the phoney war. Their recognition of the dangerous situation facing the country, and instinctive leanings towards the primacy of government, meant that they never pushed this line too far; but it does reflect a willingness on the part of Attlee and his colleagues to exploit their position for all it was worth. It would be an exaggeration to state that they still enjoyed ‘power without responsibility’; but they undoubtedly had the best of both worlds.

Upon becoming a member of the Churchill government and parachuted into Parliament, Bevin entered Labour’s internal politics for the first time. He had never been an MP, or even sat on the NEC. In joining the Coalition, his alliance with Attlee was quickly cemented, a partnership grounded in mutual respect, shared priorities, and a wariness towards Morrison. Bevin’s biographer records that, when Attlee became leader, Bevin held his usual suspicions of him as ‘middle-class’, and Attlee’s foreign policy prevarications in the late thirties did little to endear him to Bevin.⁵⁴ However, once Bevin entered the government, he felt himself bound to Attlee. As Bullock writes, ‘Attlee had the sovereign virtue, in Bevin’s eyes, of being straight: you could rely on what he said’.⁵⁵ The two came to enjoy a genuine friendship. The backdrop to their new axis, of course, was their mutual feud with Morrison. This antipathy did not prevent either of them working alongside their old enemy – Bevin and Morrison retained a ‘façade of amiability’, while, as we have seen, Attlee and Morrison could co-operate on many issues; but it was a source of recurrent conflict.⁵⁶ By the formation of the Coalition, Bevin held an ‘immovable prejudice’ towards Morrison, viewing him as ‘the politician personified’, telling colleagues ‘don’t you believe a word the little bastard says’.⁵⁷ Further, lacking sympathy for the political wing of the Labour movement, Bevin was even more determined than Attlee that the party be kept in its place. He did not have the slightest interest in an arena – party politics – that he regarded as little more than a game. Power, whether in government or in a union, the ability to make decisions, was what interested him. That was the only ‘pole’ that the single-minded Bevin was interested in ascending. But this was not trade union parochialism; far better than any other figure in wartime politics, Conservative or Labour, Bevin instinctively understood what really mattered. Attlee said of him that

⁵⁴ Bullock, *Bevin*, vol. 2, p.113.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Bullock, *Bevin*, vol. 2, pp. 117-8.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Because of his own genius for organisation and his confidence in his own strength he did not fear – he embraced – power. Lord Acton’s famous dictum in power probably never occurred to him. And if he agreed that power corrupts he would have said that it corrupted only the men who were not big enough to use it.⁵⁸

With Bevin considering himself as a representative of the unions, not the Labour party, Attlee was seen by the Minister of Labour as someone who would keep the PLP in line and out of his way. Bevin never even sought membership of the new Administrative Committee. In his mind Attlee, the party leader, was probably Bevin’s ‘lieutenant’, not the other way around.

Nonetheless, their partnership worked, Attlee later remembering that his relationship with Bevin ‘was the deepest of my political life. I was very fond of him and I understand that he was very fond of me’.⁵⁹

Given the organisational environment from which Bevin came, he expected the PLP to fall meekly in line behind the government, an attitude which provoked poor wartime relations with Labour MPs. Hence, Bevin’s authority over the union movement – and within the machinery of government – was not matched within the PLP. Clashes between Bevin and Labour MPs were a regular feature of the next five years, for his bullying style failed to attract support, and he was flustered by their lack of discipline. As a result, the newest member of the PLP was feared and respected, but never loved. As Bullock observed, he was ‘temperamentally ill-suited’ to party politics, and ‘government came more naturally’ to him.⁶⁰ The power that Bevin exercised during the war was such that, within five months of the formation of the Coalition, he had been elevated to membership of the War Cabinet. He did not quickly find his feet in the Commons, however. Though a capable speaker outside Parliament, Bevin took a long time to acclimatise to the House, and was easily provoked by Labour opponents into bad-tempered exchanges.

The Attlee-Bevin axis swung into action for the first time within days of the formation of the new government in May 1940. One of the greatest threats to the unity of the Labour movement – and something which could provoke a revolt against Attlee’s entire strategy – was the task faced by the Labour ministers in reconciling the unions to the new emergency powers of compulsion and direction held by the state. The Emergency Powers Bill of May 1940 – introduced by Attlee himself – in giving the government the authority to direct any person to services required for the war effort, and take over any industrial establishment, could easily be perceived as a major

⁵⁸ Williams, *A Prime Minister Remembers*, p.150.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Bullock, *Bevin*, vol. 2, p.99 & p.107.

weakening of union power.⁶¹ Doubtless, Attlee's introduction of the measure was significant in securing its passage unmolested from the Labour side of the House, and it seems certain that Bevin applied similar pressure to the TUC.⁶² On 24 May, the Minister of Labour addressed a crowd of 2,000 union executives and made an appeal for national unity, emphasising the need for the unions to place themselves at the disposal of the state, identifying this as a 'test of our socialism'.⁶³ He was to employ such language frequently throughout the war. Psychologically accustomed to being obeyed, once out of a union environment, Bevin expected the union movement to do as he wished. To this end, he constantly pushed them to make concessions and be 'responsible'. This engendered difficulties in his relations with the unions, for, with his arch rival now in office, Citrine became all the more determined to exert the TUC's – and his own – independence.⁶⁴ The wrangle with the unions over the new powers to be wielded by Bevin continued for some months. In October, Attlee addressed the TUC himself, making similar appeals to those used by Bevin, with the language of national unity and responsibility the major rhetorical instrument again employed.⁶⁵ Precisely as he had employed his doctrine in the past, this posture afforded Attlee, and Bevin, a means to secure compliance while defining themselves to several different audiences as statesmen and not sectional politicians. Moreover, by the time Attlee made his speech, he and Bevin would certainly have been aware that the government may well need to introduce industrial conscription; yet, in his address, Attlee actually gave the TUC the impression that workers' freedoms would be preserved.⁶⁶ This was the Attlee-Bevin 'axis' in action: Labour's leader and the most powerful union figure in the country contriving to deceive the unions so as to avoid a public clash – a demonstration of their sometimes ruthless response to the difficulties of party management in wartime.

Of the other most prominent Labour ministers, Dalton shared with Bevin a distaste for party affairs which was not to ease until 1944, and once in office spent his time thinking of the Labour party as little as he possible, immersing himself in office, and privately fantasising about replacing Churchill.⁶⁷ Interestingly, Attlee's position was further strengthened by the fact that Dalton's hostility towards him cooled somewhat following the efforts of the leader to secure Dalton a prominent ministry. Dalton recorded that Attlee was in 'good form' in his management of party affairs, as well as recording that the leader 'has made his selections and omissions for

⁶¹ *Hansard*, vol. 361, 22 May 1940, cols. 154-85.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *The Times*, 25 May 1940.

⁶⁴ Bullock, *Bevin*, vol. 2, pp. 131-3.

⁶⁵ *1940 TUC Conference Report*, pp. 269-70.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*; Harris, *Attlee*, p.183.

⁶⁷ Dalton Diary, 22 & 23 May 1940 (p.19), 26 June 1940 (p.48) 20 July 1940 (p.66) & 12 November 1940 (pp. 99-100).

government posts very well'.⁶⁸ Dalton relied heavily on Attlee over the next five years to shield him from the machinations of Conservative enemies such as Bracken. Whilst he remained favourable to seeing a change of leader, this improvement in relations was significant – though Dalton lacked little independent sway as a power-broker, his persistent willingness to ferment crises had made him a disruptive force. By the end of the year, Dalton described an evening the two spent together as 'extremely friendly'.⁶⁹

Like Dalton, Morrison largely dropped from sight within Labour upon assuming government office, although in his case this was only temporary. Though he had not wanted Supply, Morrison worked to master the post and, like Bevin, was a more prominent public figure than Attlee. By July, Churchill wanted to bring Morrison into the War Cabinet, but retreated under pressure from the 'Tory machine', as the appointment would 'disturb the balance of the parties'.⁷⁰ Morrison was a major success at Supply, addressing serious administrative problems with characteristic flair. Consumed with the demands of office, and with no suitable opportunities on the horizon, Morrison was, for the moment, compelled to forego efforts to displace Attlee. His neglect of the Labour party annoyed some – as had been the case in the autumn of 1939 – Citrine complaining that Morrison was 'much too entangled with his officials...he is disinclined to see people without them'.⁷¹ Nonetheless, Morrison did remain very much taken up with his own long-term career prospects and the question of the Labour leadership. Harold Macmillan, Morrison's Under-Secretary, said that whilst he worked under him, Morrison 'thought more about publicity than armaments'.⁷² After just five months in the post, in response to the stress placed upon the country by the Blitz, and the perception that the personality of Anderson was too bland to inspire the necessary resistance, Churchill moved Morrison to the Home Office in October. For the heir apparent this was a career milestone; though he was not a member of the War Cabinet until 1942, Morrison quickly became one of the most powerful and prominent politicians on the home front – a prominence which stood in stark contrast to the obscurity in which his rival Attlee toiled. Morrison was to make a great success of this job as well, elevating him to a public stature greater than that enjoyed by any other Labour minister with the possible exception of Bevin – providing him with the ideal platform for a remarkable war and a long, often veiled, campaign to seize the leadership from Attlee.⁷³

⁶⁸ Dalton Diary, 18 May 1940 (pp. 12-3).

⁶⁹ Dalton Diary, 13 December 1940 (p.119).

⁷⁰ W. P. Crozier interview with Beaverbrook, 24 August 1940, cited in Taylor, *Off the Record*, pp. 198-9.

⁷¹ Dalton Diary, 14 August 1940 (pp. 73-4).

⁷² Simon Ball, *The Guardsmen: Harold Macmillan, Three Friends and the World They Made* (London, 2004), p.221.

⁷³ Morrison thus remained highly influential on the NEC, attending most of its meetings as well as those of the Emergency, Policy, Elections and International sub-committees.

Hence the best strategy open to Morrison, and the one he adopted, was to work to strengthen his own credibility and prestige within the party via partisanship and his public stature, whilst awaiting a suitable moment to strike. After dropping from view upon entering office, Morrison became taken up again with Labour party affairs by early 1941, particularly the crucial task of attempting to define his position to an internal audience as being more representative of Labour opinion than the incumbent leader. Though circumstances necessitated patience, he therefore quite deliberately laid the groundwork for the future from early on in the lifetime of the Coalition. As will be seen below, he was to begin to push this line more forcefully during early 1941, humiliating Attlee amid the most contentious internal struggle since 1939, and re-igniting their feud.

Greenwood, in contrast, was already struggling to cope with his ministerial work. Just a month after the formation of the new ministry, Dalton noted Greenwood's poor performance, describing him as 'very slow' and 'unimperative'.⁷⁴ Attlee, too, was soon 'dissatisfied' with his 'slowness and inertia'.⁷⁵ This was an unfavourable contrast to his earlier conduct. The deputy leader's ministerial career, then, had already failed. Attlee's unhappiness was probably fatal for Greenwood's prospects, for, without his leader to protect him, he was to prove an easy target for those who wished to see him demoted. By December, he was being mooted as Ambassador in Washington, but this possibility was quickly dismissed – most likely because Churchill wanted someone more capable in that post.⁷⁶ But, just two weeks later, Greenwood was the main victim in a reshuffle of the War Cabinet. He was moved from his chairmanship of the Production and Economic Policy Committee and shifted, largely as a sop to Labour opinion, to the new Reconstruction Committee, tasked with overseeing a study of post-war problems.⁷⁷ But Greenwood's spectacular rise had come to an ignominious end. He displayed a visible 'lack of drive', and, though he was to remain a member of the War Cabinet, Labour's deputy leader was now in no way a leading figure.⁷⁸ That Churchill did not take reconstruction seriously is clear – the Reconstruction Committee did not even begin to meet until March 1941, and did little of substance until 1942, when Greenwood was no longer in office. Greenwood was obviously too lacklustre for such an important job as oversight of the economic field; the committee over which he had presided instead became a Production Executive, directed by the altogether more formidable Bevin. The combined influence of the Attlee-Bevin 'axis' within the government then,

⁷⁴ Dalton Diary, 18 June 1940 (p.42), & 8 August 1940 (p.72).

⁷⁵ Dalton Diary, 8 August 1940 (p.72), 24 August 1940 (p.77), & 13 December 1940 (pp. 119).

⁷⁶ Dalton Diary, 14 December 1940 (p.121). Halifax was eventually sent to Washington.

⁷⁷ See CAB 65/10, WM 308 (40), 31 December 1940.

⁷⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 7 January 1941.

was now even higher, with both men holding multiple key posts. Greenwood, in comparison, was already finished, and he quickly entered into a steep decline from which he was never to recover. The impressive stint of 1939-40 had proven a fluke, and, after proposing something of a revisionist interpretation of Greenwood in the previous chapter, we are compelled to revert to the traditional historical judgment of him as a political failure. Though his position as deputy leader shielded him for a while, by late 1940 Greenwood's alcohol-induced inefficiency had effectively called time on his ministerial career. But this does not subtract from the fact that, overall, it is clear that the efforts of the Labour ministers in government were meeting with considerable success and – through the work of Attlee, Bevin and Morrison particularly – they established themselves as the most powerful group within the new ministry.

IV

But despite the consolidation by the leaders of their position, nonetheless as soon as they were in office the men who would become their most vehement opponents immediately exploited the removal of senior figures from the day-to-day running of the party. Shinwell, fuming as we have seen over not getting the Shipping post, became a venomous critic. Bevan set about establishing himself as the leading parliamentary opponent of the government and, in doing so, began to build up a position which would make him a major figure later in the war. Of most significance, however, were the activities of Laski. The influential and popular intellectual constructed a powerful institutional platform on the NEC, taking the leading role in its activities and eventually driving it single-handed. Combined with his alienation from the Labour ministers, Laski was to become their most troublesome internal enemy, and entered into a vituperative personal conflict with the normally unflappable Attlee which lasted until 1945. These rebel figures concentrated every bit as much as the leaders upon expanding their own influence, and became the leading articulators and motivators of disaffection. What made them so dangerous was not that they could threaten to themselves overthrow and replace the leaders but that their ability to seize hold of, and lead, the existing resentment towards the Labour ministers would threaten to derail the latter's carefully-chosen course.

Having failed to prevent Lees-Smith from becoming Leader of the Opposition in May, Shinwell spent the second half of 1940 becoming a persistent nuisance for the leadership, constantly opposing their choices. Most of these activities continued to take the form of simple personal conflict and feuds with his leaders. Shinwell and Dalton always despised one another, and their rows became a regular feature of PLP meetings. But he now also began to display much antipathy

for Attlee as well, Shinwell perceiving him as a weak leader.⁷⁹ The most significant of Shinwell's feuds, though, was with Bevin. The skilled orator Shinwell exploited the Minister of Labour's frequent faux pas in the Commons, adopting a condescending tone and regularly embarrassing his opponent in bad-tempered exchanges.⁸⁰ Shinwell's predilection for this has been termed 'Bevin-baiting', and their spats often dominated both parliamentary and party debates, Bevin considering him to be an 'undisciplined Jew'.⁸¹ His disparaging manner towards the Labour ministers had the effect of both elevating Shinwell into their leading critic, as well as exacerbating the growing reluctance within the party to offer the meek acquiescence the leaders demanded. But this was not yet a powerful force in 1940, and, as a result Shinwell's attacks led to him being widely disliked, and in fact often only united the Labour party behind their representatives in government. In August, for example, after denouncing both Bevin and Greenwood in the Commons, he found himself reprimanded at a PLP meeting by unions MPs.⁸² His vituperative manner eventually provoked Harvie Watt, Churchill's PPS, to approach Shinwell in the Commons tea-room and tell him that 'You know, the Chief (Churchill) has a lot of worry and trouble just now. He doesn't deserve to be annoyed and aggravated...After all, you mustn't forget the PM has great military gifts. His ancestor was the Duke of Marlborough'. Shinwell responded with the acidic put-down that 'if military genius can be handed down like that, then I should be a good critic. My ancestor was Moses'.⁸³ Nonetheless, while his attacks were for the moment largely unrepresentative, Shinwell had already established himself as the most fiery enemy of his leaders.⁸⁴

Laski, similarly, began to agitate against the careful balancing-act performed by the leaders, taking advantage of his influence on the NEC to bring pressure to bear on the Labour ministers. In June, he produced a new pamphlet, *The Road to Power*, which the Executive refused to publish because it was too inflammatory, in which he called for complete nationalisation of all the nation's resources.⁸⁵ Shortly afterwards, Laski exacerbated the Labour ministers' awkward position by demanding the need for 'the enactment of at least a number of definitely socialist measures'.⁸⁶ Yet, though this, and other efforts, were contained effectively – for example, after calling repeatedly over the summer for extensive nationalisations, he received a severe drubbing at the NEC and left 'with his little tail between his little legs' – nonetheless his barrage of

⁷⁹ Shinwell, *Conflict Without Malice*, p.150.

⁸⁰ See, for example, *Hansard* vol. 364, 7 August 1940, cols. 300-9.

⁸¹ This phrase is Slowe's. See Slowe, *Shinwell*, p.203. Shinwell said of the Minister of Labour that Bevin disliked the fact that 'it was impossible to treat MPs like subordinate officials of Transport House' – Shinwell, *Conflict Without Malice*, p.150.

⁸² Dalton Diary, 14 August 1940 (p.73).

⁸³ Shinwell, *Conflict Without Malice*, pp. 153-4.

⁸⁴ For other examples, see *Hansard*, vol. 367, 27 November 1940, cols. 231-50, and vol. 371, 6 May 1941, cols. 784-92.

⁸⁵ NEC minutes, 26 June 1940.

⁸⁶ NEC Campaign sub-committee minutes, 16 July 1940; NEC minutes, 23 July 1940.

requests, interventions and pushing of a line quite different from that of Attlee meant that, just two months after the formation of the government, dissension against the Labour ministers was already been heard both in the parliamentary party and the NEC.⁸⁷ Even though tying up Laski's time in this way, tasking him with drafting documents and then simply re-drafting them to make them more acceptable, was an astute method of dealing with him, it did not deter him from persisting in his efforts, and he was not so easily contained for long.

In October – in an assault given context by Churchill's refusal to give a statement of peace aims, and the lack of progress from Attlee's War Aims Committee – Laski launched an overt, and blistering, attack on the Labour ministers in the *Daily Herald*, under the headline 'An Open Letter to the Labour Movement'.⁸⁸ Asking readers to 'Demand War Aims' and appealing for Labour to extract concessions from the Coalition, Laski demanded 're-negotiation' of the terms on which Labour had entered the government by asking for the leadership to press for a publication of war aims as the 'title-deeds' to the Labour-Conservative alliance.⁸⁹ He also accused the party's representatives of 'betraying' the working-class in failing to lead a 'great rebellion' against capitalism and secure 'socialist measures' from the government.⁹⁰ Given that Laski had earlier described such rhetoric, when espoused by John Strachey, as 'the raving of a lunatic', it is possible that his new posture was simply an angry response to the constant snubs his NEC efforts over 1939-40 had received. This public critique of the 'failures' of the Labour ministers was the most open attack on them so far. In doing so, Laski defined his own position – to great benefit – as being an authentic representative of the party against a leadership who had betrayed it. The NEC immediately held a special meeting of the Emergency sub-committee to discipline him on 5 November, and which Dalton characterised as being for the purpose of putting Laski 'on the mat'.⁹¹ Laski was censured for his behaviour.⁹² But this meeting also saw the igniting of the feud between him and Attlee that was to dominate NEC politics until the end of the war, as the two engaged in a vicious row about the record of the Labour ministers.⁹³ Laski had worked alongside Attlee as an adviser in early 1940, but this proximity encouraged a belief that such an uncharismatic figure, lacking 'an ounce of leadership', was not fit to hold Labour's top job.⁹⁴ This mutual antipathy triggered an effort by Laski to engineer the destruction of Attlee's credibility in the party's central arena, the NEC. Overt personal clashes were hardly characteristic of Attlee; yet

⁸⁷ NEC Policy sub-committee minutes, 16 August 1940; Dalton Diary, 16 August 1940 (p.74).

⁸⁸ *Daily Herald*, 21 October 1940.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ NEC minutes, 23 October 1940; Dalton Diary, 5 November 1940 (unpublished).

⁹² NEC Emergency sub-committee minutes, 5 November 1940.

⁹³ *Ibid.*; Dalton Diary, 5 November 1940 (unpublished).

⁹⁴ University of Hull, Laski papers, Laski to Alfred Cohn, 12 April 1940.

no-one matched Laski's ability to get under the leader's skin. Laski had been disciplined, but, in his public repudiation of the party's entire strategy, he had made a permanent enemy of Attlee. Moreover, the truce secured by his censure held for just five weeks, Laski returning to the attack in December with another public denunciation, this time in the *New Statesman*, in which he heavily criticised both the government, and the Labour ministers specifically, for the lack of sweeping social reform.⁹⁵

Bevan, meanwhile, had played little part in events during the first stage of the war; this was to be expected – he was a minor politician, after all. But with the formation of the Coalition, he quickly took on a new role which, over the subsequent years, established him as a major figure in the political nation. Moreover, from May 1940, he was the most capable parliamentary critic of his leaders and the new government. Despite on the one hand strongly supporting the war – Bevan asked in *Tribune* of those who 'doubt what is their duty...are you a traitor?' – he nevertheless determinedly pushed his own line of rhetoric, heavy with criticism of the government's prosecution of the struggle.⁹⁶ This behaviour quickly brought him into conflict with many both inside and outside the Labour party. By the end of May, Bevan was already calling for the wholesale nationalisation of industry – the obvious flashpoint between the parties – and, having earlier criticised his leaders for not extracting more from Churchill, stepped up the intensity of his barrage still further in July, in asserting of the Labour ministers that 'in the realms of higher policy they have conspicuously failed'.⁹⁷ The next month, he was pressuring the government for a statement of 'revolutionary' war aims.⁹⁸ It was Bevan who led the first sustained parliamentary attacks on the new government, criticising the proposals for a new Emergency Powers Bill in July and accusing the Coalition of preferring to see 'a general system of martial law operating in this country', opposing the government in the first division since 13 May.⁹⁹ This persistent harassment – that summer, his attacks on the Coalition provoked an incensed Labour MP to challenge him to a fight – quickly built up the Welshman's position.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, as even Foot has accepted, many of Bevan's contemporaries 'attributed his performance to a diseased ambition', viewing him as a 'malicious, frustrated... demagogue'.¹⁰¹ Though he won few friends in the PLP – failing to get on the Administrative Committee in the elections in November – his profile was now high. In October, he authored a fierce attack on the leadership in *Tribune*, bemoaning their failure to win

⁹⁵ *New Statesman*, 14 December 1940.

⁹⁶ See, for example, *Tribune*, 24 May 1940.

⁹⁷ *Hansard*, vol. 361, 30 May 1940, cols. 724-30; Foot, *Bevan*, p.318.

⁹⁸ Campbell, *Bevan*, p.98.

⁹⁹ *Hansard*, vol. 363, 16 July 1940, cols. 116-21, 144-48.

¹⁰⁰ Foot, *Bevan*, p.317.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

more concessions from the Conservatives and writing that ‘Blind men are leading us’.¹⁰² Though Shinwell was the more prominent parliamentary critic of the leadership during the initial stages of the war, Bevan quickly rose to prominence, albeit with the status of a ‘national bogey man’.¹⁰³

The wartime House of Commons was the ideal platform for Bevan to advertise himself. With his enjoyment of set-piece attacks in that arena, and dominance of *Tribune* as a regular outlet for his views, Bevan, like Shinwell, entered into a series of venomous feuds with most of the leading politicians of the period. On the Labour side, Morrison and Bevin were his most regular opponents. But, for Bevan’s career, by far the most important was his conflict with Churchill himself. Begun in the summer of 1940, this feud immediately provided a major boost to Bevan’s standing. It aroused yet more animosity, for he was often seen as a traitor, sneakily attacking the great war leader during a time of crisis. Yet on the other hand, feuds with prominent figures are a productive means of establishing one’s own career, and there is little doubt that the confrontation was of great benefit for Bevan’s long-term prospects. He was one of the few parliamentary orators able to debate with Churchill, and their confrontations were gripping. A constant thorn in Churchill’s side and, unlike other anti-government figures, able to stand up to the prime minister’s attacks, from mid 1940 Bevan’s career was in the ascendant. His romanticism about his employment of the Commons chamber as a platform, a conscious sense of theatre, is clear from the fact that he saw himself as playing the role of Fox to Churchill’s Pitt, modelling his conduct on the iconic eighteenth century rebel.¹⁰⁴ Bevan was one of the most calculating and power-hungry politicians of his generation; it is therefore important to probe beyond his rhetoric and recognise that, from the beginning, Bevan was projecting an image of himself. Just as much as for others, his rhetoric was instrumental in its purpose. The Commons, and his desk at *Tribune*, were the only arenas where he could seek to do this for the moment, given his limited standing in the Labour movement as a whole. But by utilising a certain kind of language, he was laying the groundwork for the future. He and these other figures were orienting themselves around the party itself, looking for power and influence in that arena – one quite separate from the concerns of their leaders. The public attacks made by dissentients such as Bevan, Laski and Shinwell in the second half of 1940 played an important role in re-shaping the atmosphere within the Labour party by encouraging open criticism for the first time, and articulating – and legitimising – the resentments felt by much of the party anyway.

¹⁰² *Tribune*, 11 October 1940.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Foot, *Bevan*, p.301. A study of Fox was one of the few biographies with which Bevan was intimately familiar; Foot has written that ‘to study the life of Fox is to know Bevan better, and vice versa’.

The leadership group had acquitted themselves well in government. As we have seen, they were not only able to practise their skills in office and fulfil their ambitions, but pushed Labour interests as well. Within months of taking office, not only was state intervention and ‘planning’ of production more extensive than ever before, but the ministers – particularly Attlee – had almost surreptitiously acquired a unique level of influence within the machinery of Whitehall. This was the situation as it stood at the end of 1940. Addison’s doubts about the position of the party’s representatives seem difficult to sustain.¹⁰⁵ Partly, of course, this was due to the damage done to the Conservative party – in which they themselves, along with Mr. Chamberlain and Herr Hitler, had played such a central part. But it was also due to the governing skill displayed by the contingent of Labour ministers. The individual quality of the Labour leaders was, for the most part, greater than that of the Conservatives. Their ability to follow this course was due in no small part to dependable allies in the PLP and on the NEC, men such as Lees-Smith, Pethick-Lawrence, George Ridley, Tom Williamson and James Walker. The months from the formation of the government until the end of the year thus represented another period of success for Attlee and the rest of the leadership group. Attlee’s attempts to carefully position Labour had paid off. Moreover, they had persisted in virtually the same tactics as they had used in Opposition – preaching a doctrine which demanded acquiescence from the Labour party while ruthlessly imposing themselves on the Conservatives, securing major economic reforms, and *still* exploiting any opportunity to further undermine the credibility of the party which Churchill now led. One can almost see the prime minister fretfully complaining to Attlee about the socialist reforms introduced by his government, whilst the Labour leader professed sympathy and blamed it all on the demands of ‘the party’.

Yet a sea-change was to occur in Labour politics from early 1941. The disillusionment with the continued inaction of the party, which had been building since 1939, finally erupted. With the risk of invasion now low, the political nation turned in on itself again. The result was a sudden reduction in the internal stability of the party, as the ability of the leadership group to impose their strategy declined. With their followers less willing to accept their diktats, Labour became gripped by indiscipline, and, for the next four years, internecine strife between leaders struggling – often in vain – to reassert their authority and a party widely resistant to it. This was at root a reaction against the joint demands for loyalty and inaction – with a resultant restlessness, boredom, and a tendency to fasten upon any prominent issues and turn them into a crisis about what Labour was ‘getting’ from the government. In the minds of many, the party was getting very little indeed. Attlee’s leadership had been inventive and often commanding. But it nonetheless had the effect of leaving much Labour opinion – both among MPs and the rank-and-file – exasperated. He still

¹⁰⁵ Addison, *The Road to 1945*, pp. 104-5.

failed to make much public impression. Traditional, critical, views of the leader are thus not without foundation. Whilst this may suggest an inability to discern that, though the government refrained from making socialist *noises*, it was in reality implementing much of Labour's policy agenda, this did not render the problems faced by the leaders any less acute. Their determination to exercise executive power put them on a collision course with those among their followers who sought to reject the compromises of coalition and pursue a more overtly aggressive strategy, believing that if Churchill would not implement 'socialism', it would be better if the government collapsed. Even those who were temperamentally similar to the leaders became resentful from 1941 – revealing again the divergent priorities which are the result of different political vantage points. Existing in separate environments, the leaders and their party now saw things differently. The result was that Attlee and his senior colleagues were forced to spend the rest of the war reacting to crises in an increasingly problematic effort to keep the Labour party traversing the path they had chosen for it.

V

In early 1941, a series of internal struggles occurred in quick succession and made the period from January until May one of constant conflict. These crises also had the cumulative effect of precipitating a permanent change in the disposition of the Labour party. The first of these struggles occurred in January, after Morrison took the contentious decision to ban the Communist newspaper the *Daily Worker* in response to its 'seditious' activities in opposing the war. Favouring peace with Hitler and advocating 'revolutionary defeatism', the paper had been warned by the government in the summer of 1940 and, by December, Morrison was in favour of banning it.¹⁰⁶ Though the *Daily Worker* was widely loathed, the ban provoked a political storm within Labour on civil liberties grounds, and Morrison was subjected to attack over the issue for much of 1941. Wary of damaging his all-important credentials through unpopular decisions, the Home Secretary attempted to deceive his party over the ban; he decided in favour of suppression some days before actually announcing it, but gave the impression to the NEC in the interregnum that the newspaper would not be banned.¹⁰⁷ Dalton said this was because Morrison 'did not trust some members...and therefore felt he could not say much in front of them, except to try and put them off the scent'.¹⁰⁸ Yet this only protected him for a while: when the ban was announced Labour opinion reacted with fury, and Morrison was confronted by vocal opponents, including Bevan, at an inflammatory PLP meeting on 22 January. The Home Secretary unapologetically made a

¹⁰⁶ CAB 65/10, WM 310 (40), 27 December 1940; CAB 65/21 WM 5 (41), 13 January 1941; WP (41) 7, 11 January 1941.

¹⁰⁷ Dalton Diary, 22 January 1941 (p.144).

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

robust defence and adopted a tough posture emphasising the need to suppress seditious publications, but this only antagonised his critics further.¹⁰⁹ The following week, Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence defended the Labour ministers' flank by continuing to act as virtual government spokesmen, formally lining Labour up behind Morrison in the Commons and backing the need for 'measures [to] be taken against the habitual and persistent publication of material which is calculated to impede the national war effort'.¹¹⁰ But Bevan, determined to confront the Home Secretary, put down a Commons motion opposing the decision, cleverly framing his argument not only as a defence of freedom – 'the government are winning the war against us' – but questioning why Morrison had not utilised legislation against sedition already available to him, instead employing powers meant to apply in the rather more dangerous circumstances of actual invasion.¹¹¹ Combining oratorical flair with a grasp of detail, Bevan's speech may have been the most commanding parliamentary performance of his career to date, and Morrison's hostile response merely confirmed the Welshman's new status in the political world:

If I wanted to find one distinguished member of the [Labour] party, who more than any other, has set aside the democratic decisions of the majority of his colleagues, I think I should choose him [Bevan]. Therefore his democracy is skin deep. He speaks of democracy for himself and not so much for the other fellow.¹¹²

Bevan led half a dozen Labour MPs into the division lobby.¹¹³ Yet, though this registered only a small public revolt, and the NEC approved Morrison's decision in early February, nonetheless there had been widespread disapproval.¹¹⁴ Far from being a victory for the leadership group, the affair was so vitriolic that it exacerbated the more general sense of disappointment which was prevalent among Labour MPs. Morrison's strident resistance to all forms of criticism damaged the internal standing he was so concerned with cultivating. This first controversy thus inaugurated a pattern which was to recur until 1945, whereby Morrison's attempts to strengthen his position, and establish an identity for himself quite different from that of Attlee, were repeatedly undermined by his own decisions as Home Secretary, and unwillingness to be conciliatory when challenged. The *Daily Worker* controversy was the most bad-tempered public split since late 1939, energising the declining willingness to offer unquestioning support. Further, it had been Bevan who articulated it most effectively: even before the row, he gave vent to these feelings when he bemoaned the leadership's direction of the party and declared in *Tribune* that 'It's Time Labour Kicked', charging that the Labour ministers had 'brought about no change of importance

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ *Hansard*, vol. 368, 28 January 1941, cols. 491-4.

¹¹¹ *Hansard*, vol. 368, 28 January 1941, cols. 465-79.

¹¹² *Hansard*, vol. 368, 28 January 1941, col. 516.

¹¹³ *Hansard*, vol. 368, 28 June 1941, cols. 528-30.

¹¹⁴ NEC minutes, 4 February 1941.

on the economic front'.¹¹⁵ By February, he was agitating for the ending of the electoral truce and asserting that Labour MPs should not be bound by the government Whip.¹¹⁶ In April, Bevan declared that the only explanation for the 'failure' of the Coalition was 'lack of political guts on the part of the leaders of Labour'.¹¹⁷

But the increasingly disillusioned frame of mind of the Labour party was more widespread than simply the posturing and self-advertisement of this lone Welshman. Just days after the *Daily Worker* row, in February, an even more serious split appeared over the traditionally combustible issue of the means test. Back in the summer of 1940, Pethick-Lawrence suggested to Attlee that the removal of the much maligned test would offer sound evidence of the administration's integrity.¹¹⁸ Attlee therefore worked to extract this measure from the Conservatives as another of his inducements for loyalty, and in the autumn it was announced that the household means test was to be replaced by an individual test.¹¹⁹ This was initially warmly welcomed, but, when its precise form became clear as it went through Parliament in February 1941, the Bill sparked a fresh clash.

In late January, Pethick-Lawrence, aware of the brewing revolt, asked the NEC to reiterate to MPs the need to support the Bill.¹²⁰ Though Shinwell opposed this, pushing the NEC to stress to the PLP the necessity of seeking the complete abolition of the test, Pethick-Lawrence's request was backed.¹²¹ Yet the Bill ran into more difficulty when it was introduced to the Commons on 13 February, when Bevan put down an amendment for total abolition and calling for a Labour revolt.¹²² This prompted a fierce response by Pethick-Lawrence, who denounced the tactics of Bevan as a deliberate wrecking device to damage the Coalition by raising party tensions and blocking reform for years to come.¹²³ In a blistering attack, the vice-chairman accused the Labour rebels of only backing the amendment 'because they know in their hearts...that [it] will be defeated', and charged that they wanted 'to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. They want to pose as champions of the oppressed while they are playing politics and doing their best to sabotage a great compromise solution'.¹²⁴ Pethick-Lawrence, for one, clearly recognised Bevan's game. Bevan, who had left the chamber, raced back upon hearing of the attack and flew into a

¹¹⁵ *Tribune*, 3 January 1941.

¹¹⁶ See *Tribune* 7 February 1941. His article was under the inflammatory title 'Choose How to Live or Die'.

¹¹⁷ *Tribune*, 18 April 1941.

¹¹⁸ Trinity College, Cambridge, Pethick-Lawrence papers, 1/71, Pethick-Lawrence to Attlee, 21 August 1940.

¹¹⁹ CAB 65, WM 270 (40) 3, 18 October 1940.

¹²⁰ NEC minutes, 27 January 1941, 'Determination of Needs Bill' Memorandum.

¹²¹ NEC minutes, 4 February 1941.

¹²² *Ibid*; See the debate in *Hansard*, vol. 368, 13 February 1941.

¹²³ *Hansard*, vol. 368, 13 February 1941, cols. 1555-62.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*.

rage, calling Pethick-Lawrence ‘stupid’, appealing for support from the PLP, and asserted that the Labour ministers were already planning a special meeting to discipline him for daring to challenge them.¹²⁵ In the division, his amendment was defeated by 173 votes to nineteen – with sixteen Labour MPs following Bevan in voting against the government.¹²⁶

The Labour ministers, along with most of the NEC and Administrative Committee, were furious. Twice in a fortnight, the party had suffered its most inflammatory internal clashes since the war began. Both of these, moreover, were over highly-charged issues about the competence of the Coalition, and hence it is apparent that Labour’s willingness to refrain from public criticism because of the national emergency was dissipating. These public spats therefore highlighted the increasing distance which now existed between the Labour ministers and a substantial number of their followers – partly, it must be acknowledged, as a result of the leaders’ reduced time for party matters. Concentrating so intensively on government, it would perhaps not be an exaggeration to suggest that, after the anti-Chamberlain propaganda of the previous summer, the leadership had taken their finger off the pulse of the Labour party – which they had previously monitored so closely – in the second half of 1940. Of at least equal significance was simply the passage of time and inevitable resentment at the ‘stasis’ into which the leaders had placed the party. Nonetheless, the Labour ministers had ceased to focus on the party itself, and, when they were forced to shift their attention back from early 1941, it proved impossible to prevent discord from taking hold. The day after the revolt, Chuter Ede warned Attlee that the rebels were attempting to bolster their position in anticipation of a counter-strike from the leaders and using the term ‘MacDonaldism’ to refer to the Labour ministers.¹²⁷ Bevan publicly stated that ‘the present policy of the Labour party gives the party no work to do except to take poison’.¹²⁸ Ede recommended that they impose stringent discipline, but Attlee – perhaps wisely – chose not to make the counter-strike that Bevan was banking on, and opted to respond in another fashion.¹²⁹ Though Shinwell was rebuked on the NEC, the rest of the rebels escaped sanction.¹³⁰ Probably Attlee wanted to quickly move on from the dispute with the annual Conference on the horizon; drawing a line under the issue, then, signalled an effort to maintain unity. But the genie was now out of the bottle. For a year, the leaders had managed to obscure the existence of the gulf between them and the Labour party itself, but, by February 1941, this gulf was there for all to see and continually widening.

¹²⁵ *Hansard*, vol. 368, 13 February 1941, cols. 1599-1602.

¹²⁶ *Hansard*, vol. 368, 13 February 1941, col.1614.

¹²⁷ Attlee papers, 2/100, Chuter Ede to Attlee, 14 February 1941.

¹²⁸ Foot, *Bevan*, p.331.

¹²⁹ Attlee papers, 2/100, Chuter Ede to Attlee, 14 February 1941.

¹³⁰ NEC minutes, 28 February 1941.

The stability of the leaders' balancing-act was hit yet again shortly afterwards by another conflict, this time instigated by a major new effort by Laski, and which inflicted considerable damage to the position of Attlee personally. Unlike the previous controversies, this was not a public row but one fought at the heart of the party's institutional machinery itself, on the leadership's supposedly secure power base of the NEC. Yet it was just as threatening in the prospect it raised of a repudiation of the doctrine which they had created, dragging Attlee into a dog-fight in defence of his strategy. Earlier in 1941, Laski had entered into a new struggle with the Labour ministers by marshalling opposition to the efforts of Middleton, the General Secretary, to cancel the annual Conference on the grounds of possible invasion in mid 1941.¹³¹ Laski suspected this to be an effort by the leadership and their allies to avoid giving a public platform to growing internal disaffection – certainly something they were to attempt to do later in the war – and charged as much at the NEC.¹³² Expostulating strongly, he won the support of a majority of the Executive, and also wanted the NEC to compel the Labour ministers to give reports of their work in government to the Conference for consideration.¹³³ Laski also won support for his proposal that the NEC should submit policy resolutions to the delegates for decision.¹³⁴ This was something that the leadership – conscious of the dangers of being boxed in, or provoking more controversy by official commitments to *x* or *y* – was hoping to avoid, preferring an event without any policy formulation at all.¹³⁵ Laski's proposal was patently intended to stir up trouble and challenge the ministers' authority, due to the fact that the party's position between government and Opposition meant that any commitments could neither be implemented nor campaigned on. The episode constituted a clear warning of Laski's ability to play the leadership group's own game of bureaucratic politics against them.

Emboldened by this success, just days later, Laski instigated the most sustained political battle of the war thus far – which also became a contest for personal ascendancy between himself and Attlee. He resurrected the peace aims row, in which he had been so central, by folding it into a wider indictment of the Labour ministers and outlining a full-scale alternative strategy.

Submitting a new memorandum to the NEC, simply entitled 'The Labour Party', Laski asserted that Britain was approaching a 'turning-point' in the war, predicting that Germany would soon fail in her bid to bring the conflict to a quick end.¹³⁶ As a result, it was 'imperative' to consider the 'approach to victory and the use to be made of victory'.¹³⁷ Building on his earlier appeal for

¹³¹ NEC minutes, 21 January 1941.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ NEC papers, Laski memorandum, 27 January 1941.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

‘title-deeds’ to the Coalition, Laski pushed for an open confrontation with the Conservatives on the subject of the future. Calling for a ‘basic agreement upon fundamentals between parties in this country’, his proposal represented another challenge to the policy of Attlee, and the most powerful yet, for any such cross-party agreement on specific measures would obviously be impossible.¹³⁸ Laski’s ‘fundamentals’ were unlikely to prove acceptable to Conservatives. Evidently hoping to provoke a rejection of the Labour ministers’ authority, Laski explicitly charged ‘the Labour leaders’ with having ‘secured nothing’ from the Conservatives ‘that industrial and political pressure could not have secured by what has been termed ‘constructive Opposition’’.¹³⁹ Pouring scorn on the record of Attlee personally, he also wrote that ‘so far as I know, our representatives in the government have not asked for [assurances that the failure to implement social reform following the First World War] will not be repeated’.¹⁴⁰ Laski had not only declared open conflict on the entire strategy of his leaders, then, but seemed to have reversed his support for the Coalition. But the matter of these ‘fundamentals’ was where Laski concentrated his most devastating fire, demanding urgent action on ‘reconstruction’, and in doing so entrenching a new concept at the centre of the political lexicon for the next four years.¹⁴¹ In a transparent attempt to protect himself after his censure the previous autumn, he concluded this attack with the ludicrous statement that ‘nothing in this argument is in any way a reflection of the work of our leaders’.¹⁴² The rebel professor proposed that a joint committee of the NEC, PLP and TUC be set up to co-ordinate action with the Labour ministers, who would then bring pressure to bear upon Churchill.¹⁴³ He wanted this committee to formulate policy and then pass it into onto the ministers, so as to make them ‘fully aware of the principles by which we expect them to be guided’ – in other words, an attempt to challenge the autonomy of the Labour ministers by bringing them firmly under the control of the NEC.¹⁴⁴

With Laski having come out so belligerently against everything he had spent a year-and-a-half building, Attlee was provoked into another furious response. Before the NEC had even considered the document, Attlee wrote to Laski, criticising his proposals and implying that Laski – a non politician – failed to understand the reality of political manoeuvre.¹⁴⁵ The leader bluntly told him that ‘the frontal attack with trumpets...is not the best way to capture a position’, and that pursuing a consensual approach with Labour’s partners was more effective than making

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Hull, Laski papers, Attlee to Laski, 29 January 1941.

demands.¹⁴⁶ Yet this only provoked Laski to redouble his efforts. He foolishly went behind the backs of the ministers and gave Churchill a commitment that he would push the NEC to continue the Coalition after the war, if the government made the necessary reforms – offering his enemies the chance to charge him with offering to sell Labour to the Conservatives if they had known – but apparently escaped discovery.¹⁴⁷ Instead, in an epic example of the Labour bureaucracy in action, in early February the NEC resolved to pass Laski's document to the Policy committee for consideration.¹⁴⁸ Thereafter, the leaders manipulated the NEC's committees to stonewall on it for two months. The proposals were simply moved back and forth, from sub-committee to sub-committee, until April.¹⁴⁹ Laski's conduct so antagonised Attlee that the Lord Privy Seal wrote to his opponent on 1 April and made it clear that he wanted no further contact, official or otherwise, with him.¹⁵⁰ This was, as in November, most unlike Attlee, but reiterates Laski's unique ability to aggravate his leader. To openly cut off a colleague is poor tactics for any politician, but for one as astute as Attlee is doubly surprising. That Attlee's normal air of unflappability – which, after all, was so impenetrable that it had produced so many complaints over the years – was disrupted in this fashion underlines the intensity of the feud that now existed between the two men.

Yet, just when it seemed that Attlee would again come out on top through his delaying tactics, Laski took the step of appealing directly to the leader's rival, Morrison.¹⁵¹ The Home Secretary constituted a formidable political shield for Laski. Moreover, as above, Morrison was keen to establish a certain image of himself as a means to bolster his claim to the leadership – especially in light of the damage he had suffered over the *Daily Worker*. In declaring his own view as being in favour of a push for reconstruction planning, and the party leader's as being in opposition to this, the heir apparent perhaps sensed in the Laski-Attlee exchange the opportunity to gain some political capital and manufacture an embarrassing blow to his opponent. The Home Secretary thus joined in with Laski's efforts energetically. On 21 April, he wrote to Middleton that 'I am a little uncertain as to how far consideration of...economic and financial problems after the war' was being undertaken by the NEC, arguing the case for a special sub-committee to study reconstruction – Laski's proposal in disguise.¹⁵² Given that Morrison was quite aware both that Greenwood was already engaged in this within the government, and of the internal dissidence that

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ PREM 4, 62/5, Laski to Churchill, 3 February 1941.

¹⁴⁸ NEC minutes, 26 February 1941.

¹⁴⁹ After being referred to the Policy committee in late February, when that body finally met on 21 March, Greenwood objected to Laski's proposed policy. Various drafts and re-drafts for a statement on reconstruction to the annual Conference were then written. It was, in the words of Newman, 'painfully slow' – Michael Newman, *Harold Laski: A Political Biography* (London, 1993), p.217. See NEC Policy sub-committee minutes, 21 March 1941 & 10 April 1941.

¹⁵⁰ Hull, Laski Papers, Attlee to Laski, 1 April 1941.

¹⁵¹ NEC minutes, 21, 22 & 26 April 1941; Newman, *Laski*, p.218.

¹⁵² NEC papers, Morrison to Middleton, 21 April 1941.

could result if Labour went down this route – as well as his temperamental unwillingness to tolerate criticism – this can only be read as an effort to assist Laski in isolating Attlee. Middleton tried to block the Home Secretary, replying that work was already been carried out, but Morrison’s unfriendly response was insistent, following Laski’s assertions in arguing that ‘I hardly think that the matters dealt with in your letter [about Greenwood’s study]...meet the point raised in my letter to you’, and that ‘In these circumstances, I should have expected that you would have placed the matter on the agenda’ of the next meeting of the Executive (Middleton, probably deliberately, had not). ‘I shall therefore be glad if you will include the item’.¹⁵³ Two weeks later, Morrison reiterated to the NEC itself that Labour needed to actively prepare its policies for the end of the war.¹⁵⁴ The Home Secretary was deploying his influence and authority to ensure that he was seen as championing a populist line in the face of Attlee’s public resistance. Suddenly intervening in a conflict in which Attlee had made his own prejudices very clear, Morrison thus employed properly for the first time the tactic which was to become his favourite weapon, creating a *rhetorical* divergence between his position and Attlee’s where, in reality, no such division actually existed. It was an attempt to exploit the fact that Attlee had taken a stand and place himself directly between the Labour party and its leader. Morrison, of course, did not want to bring the Coalition down. What he did try to do consistently until 1945 was advertise his own credentials as a Labour stalwart, define his position as speaking for the party’s soul, and, by extension, imply that Attlee did not.

After Morrison’s intervention, the NEC referred the matter once more to the Policy sub-committee, of which he himself was a member, a damaging blow to Attlee’s authority.¹⁵⁵ In May, the Policy committee agreed to recommend to the Executive that a special sub-committee be set up, with Laski as secretary, to consider post-war problems and make recommendations.¹⁵⁶ This proposed body, the Economic and Social Reconstruction sub-committee, was then accepted by the NEC.¹⁵⁷ After a four-month struggle, it was a decisive victory for Laski and – quite visibly outmanoeuvred and isolated – an embarrassment for Attlee. The leader had publicly made a stand against Laski’s challenge and been overruled for the first time since 1939. The affair also demonstrates that the contest for the leadership between Attlee and Morrison remained very much a live, if temporarily latent, issue. Given that Morrison had no instinctive sympathy with Laski’s attempts to derail the government, his decision to intervene in defence of such a stance can only

¹⁵³ NEC papers, Middleton to Morrison, 22 April 1941 & Morrison to Middleton, 26 April 1941. Middleton and Morrison had been enemies since the former defeated Morrison in the contest for the position of party Secretary following the retirement of Arthur Henderson.

¹⁵⁴ NEC minutes, 7 May 1941.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ NEC Policy sub-committee minutes, 23 May 1941.

¹⁵⁷ NEC minutes, 30 May 1941.

be seen in the context of his rivalry with Attlee. He has been described as ‘Not so much disloyal, as watching for a favourable opportunity to be disloyal’.¹⁵⁸ Unexpectedly throwing his weight behind a populist issue which Attlee made a great show of opposing – and on behalf of a proposal obviously calculated to cause problems for the Labour ministers – Morrison’s intervention signalled the re-emergence of the rivalry between the party’s two senior figures. After being roundly outmanoeuvred the previous year, the episode provides a demonstration of Morrison’s ability to get the better of Attlee after all.

Laski secured the leading role in the new investigation, a major job given the scale of the work involved. As his biographer has noted, this was one of the most ambitious projects ever undertaken by a political party.¹⁵⁹ Laski threw himself into new work on the new Reconstruction committee with enthusiasm, quickly setting up a further sixteen sub-committees.¹⁶⁰ In late May, he also took over the Labour party research department.¹⁶¹ Moreover, he grew in confidence after his victory over Attlee, becoming even more active on the NEC itself and the other sub-committees on which he sat, putting forth a constant stream of memoranda, proposals and ideas.¹⁶² He thus became the central figure in the overall running of the Executive. The dissident intellectual had been allowed onto so many sub-committees, and given so much work to do, as a means of controlling him; but now such prominence afforded Laski a secure base and the ability to utilise it to his advantage. Brooke has described him as being at the ‘zenith of his influence’.¹⁶³ It afforded Laski potentially unlimited opportunities to harass the leadership group. Yet here, perhaps, is evidence of Laski’s only limited success. The task was so big that it would occupy much of his time, and offered another method of keeping him busy. Further, his work did not actually commit Labour to anything, as the recommendations of the reconstruction study would have to go through the Dalton-chaired Policy sub-committee, before it even got to the NEC.¹⁶⁴ In addition, though Laski had the freedom to choose the other members, in practice restraints were imposed upon him when the Executive ruled some weeks later that representatives from each of the PLP and General Council would have to be included.¹⁶⁵ The hand of Attlee can perhaps be detected here, yet it is still clear that the party leader had suffered an embarrassing defeat in his specialism – bureaucratic politics – and made by Morrison to look unsympathetic to his

¹⁵⁸ This quote appears in Clarke, *A Question of Leadership*, p.207, but the source is unclear.

¹⁵⁹ Newman, *Laski*, p.218.

¹⁶⁰ NEC papers, ‘The Problems of Reconstruction’, June 1941.

¹⁶¹ NEC papers, ‘Report on the Research Department’, 30 May 1941; NEC minutes, 30 May 1941.

¹⁶² For example, see the pamphlet *I Speak to You As a Socialist* (Labour party, 1941) and the book *The Strategy of Freedom: An Open Letter to American Youth* (New York, 1941).

¹⁶³ Brooke, *Labour’s War*, p.92.

¹⁶⁴ NEC minutes, 30 May 1941.

¹⁶⁵ NEC Emergency sub-committee minutes, 13 June 1941 & 20 June 1941.

followers' concerns. Over an issue of great symbolic importance to the party, it was the biggest reversal Attlee had suffered since the outbreak of war.

VI

Given the reduced willingness of their followers to accede to their demands, in early 1941 the leaders returned to their efforts to mark out certain rhetorical landmarks for Labour with the now-customary emphasis on policy statements, official literature and partisan public speeches. Attlee himself made two major speeches on reconstruction in February and March 1941. In the first, at Tonypany on 16 February, he again used the heady rhetoric of socialist advance, proclaiming that 'there can be no return to the post-war world', whilst the following month, in Glasgow, he stressed that 'Unity in the face of the enemy demands the suspension of party political strife, but this does not mean that people should give up considering political, social and economic questions, or that people should not publicly discuss such questions and state various points of view'.¹⁶⁶ In March, the NEC published the pamphlet *The Labour Party, the War and the Peace*.¹⁶⁷ This consisted of two memoranda that the Executive planned to submit to the 1941 Conference. Stridently pro-war and affirming Labour's 'determination to fight until Nazism and Fascism are overthrown', it rejected any notion of negotiated peace and emphasised that the leaders would 'have no part...in a policy of accommodation, and that the necessary prelude to a just peace is total victory'.¹⁶⁸ This statement, along with the original Bournemouth resolution in support of the Coalition, was to be used frequently by Attlee and the leadership to ward off dissent for the rest of the war. Yet the pamphlet also attempted to reassure the party, by offering numerous sops to Labour opinion: it again attacked the Chamberlain ministry, and stressed the need to 'destroy...the paradox of poverty', making detailed proposals for wholesale social and economic reform – which, naturally, paralleled remarkably closely what the government was already doing, but simply under the alternate guise of 'socialism'.¹⁶⁹

Just weeks later, in May 1941, the NEC published another piece of literature, *Labour in the Government: A Record of Social Legislation in War Time*.¹⁷⁰ With the Conference due to take place the following month, the document self-evidently amounted to another effort to appease both Labour MPs and the rank-and-file in hopes of avoiding confrontation by drawing attention to the manifold successes of the party's ministers. This pamphlet was rather different from most

¹⁶⁶ Both cited in *Labour in the Government: A Record of Social Legislation in War Time* (Labour Party, 1941).

¹⁶⁷ *The Labour Party, the War and the Peace* (Labour Party, 1941).

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Labour in the Government: A Record of Social Legislation in War Time* (Labour Party, 1941).

other political publications of the era; rather than a relatively plain cover, the document was unusually professional and featured nine photographs on the cover of prominent Labour ministers, a presentational device conveying a sense of the authority wielded by these men.¹⁷¹ Reading it, one gets the clear impression that the leaders knew they were faced with a much changed, and less compliant, environment. Alongside the now-familiar denunciations of the Conservative governments, it stressed the role of the Labour ministers in Britain's resistance to Nazi Germany, and asserted that this resistance had been 'a triumph of government' in which the leadership group had played an 'outstanding' part.¹⁷² Continually underlining both the ministers' contribution to the war effort, and the implementation of Labour policies they had secured, the document argued that while the Coalition, because it was a cross-party alliance 'does not always do what any one party would like', nonetheless

Labour in the government has fully justified itself. Labour ministers hold key offices, and are taking a full share in the direction of the war effort. Clem Attlee, leader of the Party, shares with the Prime Minister the great responsibility of leading the country to victory and a successful peace.¹⁷³

Such language constituted an open appeal for support, stressing the great influence that Labour now held. In keeping with this, eight-and-a-half of the pamphlet's fourteen pages were devoted to detailing legislation won by the Labour ministers from the Conservatives.¹⁷⁴ As during the phoney war, then, Labour's leaders were compelled to seek ways of buying their followers' support through the use of particular types of rhetoric. Using language to shape their environment thus remained central to the strategy of Attlee and his colleagues, but, no matter how much of this rhetoric they deployed, changes deep within the Labour party were clearly occurring by early 1941, and starting to make themselves felt.

But despite their increasing difficulties, the 1941 Conference was still another significant public success for the Labour ministers. Advertising their record in office, and placing great weight on two policy statements, 'The War' and 'The Peace', for the second consecutive year the leadership group received acclamation for their activities. 'The War' stridently affirmed the rectitude of the course Labour had chosen, Attlee making a strong speech in introducing the document, stressing the prospects for ultimate victory and discussing reconstruction.¹⁷⁵ As at the 1940 Conference, the Labour leader entered a balanced and effective performance in defence of the controversial

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ 1941 LPACR, pp. 131-4.

trajectory he had plotted, emphasising the righteous ‘cause of civilisation against barbarism’.¹⁷⁶ Making clear the determination of the party to fight on until ‘total victory’, ‘The War’ was passed by a majority of more than 120 to one.¹⁷⁷ ‘The Peace’, meanwhile, emphasised the need to implement socialism in the post-war era, and underlined Labour’s legislative success in office.¹⁷⁸ This too was passed by an overwhelming majority.¹⁷⁹ The centrepiece of the leadership group’s Conference platform, then, was Labour’s record in the Coalition; in pushing this heavily, and backed by union bloc votes, they deprived the recent dissension of a voice. Hence, despite Attlee’s being unable to mark the first year in office with a crowning achievement in the form of announcing the repeal of the Trade Disputes Act – Churchill had refused to budge – the period since the formation of the Coalition had unquestionably represented a successful continuation of the course they had plotted since the outbreak of war.¹⁸⁰

Attlee also seized the opportunity to reassert himself against Laski shortly after the event, for, though his rival received a boost by topping the poll in the election to the NEC constituencies section, the leader nonetheless oversaw changes to the membership of Laski’s Reconstruction sub-committee.¹⁸¹ All members of the Policy sub-committee were henceforth to be made members of Laski’s new body – placing Morrison in the awkward position of either having to endorse policies with which he did not really agree, or rebut proposals he affected to support.¹⁸² It was thus Attlee’s turn to manoeuvre. At the same meeting, Morrison abruptly resigned his membership of the Policy committee.¹⁸³ Why did he do this? The Home Secretary’s explanation was simply that he no longer wished to be a member, and he would rather sit on the Elections sub-committee.¹⁸⁴ Yet, given that the Policy committee was the key arena for developing and advertising new ideas – so central to Morrison’s plans – this seems a slim justification; the only obvious answer was that he recognised that Attlee had outmanoeuvred not only Laski, but him as well, and did not want to be placed in the position of undermining his own efforts to depict himself as Labour’s champion. Attlee had played another political masterstroke. Being wary of having to repudiate the policies of his ally Laski on a committee which Morrison himself had been central in creating seems the only satisfactory explanation for a strange decision. This brief sequel to the Laski episode underlines Attlee’s capacity to impose himself by playing the

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ *1941 LPACR*, pp. 60-5.

¹⁷⁹ 2,413,000 to 30,000 – *1941 LPACR*, pp. 143-7.

¹⁸⁰ Churchill College, Cambridge, Attlee papers, 2/2 folio 11, Attlee to Churchill, no date, but early 1941 (subsequent references to the Attlee papers denote the larger Bodleian collection unless otherwise noted).

¹⁸¹ NEC papers, Result of Conference ballot, June 1941.

¹⁸² NEC minutes, 25 June 1941. See also NEC Policy Sub-committee minutes, 4 July 1941.

¹⁸³ NEC minutes, 25 June 1941.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

bureaucratic game, regrouping after his defeat the previous month and managing to both tie Laski up in new knots and turn Morrison's own manoeuvres against him.

VII

The leadership group's political strategy, orchestrated and implemented so efficiently during the phoney war, had been prosecuted with a similar degree of effectiveness during the first year of the Churchill Coalition. The convergence of three key factors – the skill of the party's leaders, recognition by a majority of their followers of the need to remain in office, and the less-than favourable progress of the war with Germany – had ensured that their high-wire balancing act was not fatally upset. As prior to their entry into government, they had sought to buy the support of their party with measures – both legislative and rhetorical – so as to permit them to continue down their chosen path. This is not to suggest that the Labour ministers did not believe in these measures, or the things they said about planning and reconstruction. But, as actors concerned with avoiding a challenge to their authority, such appeasement was a crucial element of leadership in the circumstances of cross-party alliance. Moreover, this was also a continuation of the tactic they had used between September 1939 and May 1940 to keep their party quiescent while attempting to engineer a seizure of power in a reconstructed ministry, and which they were to persist in employing as a means to ward off dissent until the break up of the Coalition in 1945. Little was changed as a result of the entry into office. In addition, the Labour ministers had exerted their influence across the whole of the governmental machine. Bevin was the key figure in organising the domestic war effort, Morrison held similar prominence on the home front, and the party's other representatives – with the obvious exception of Greenwood – were mostly well-ensconced in office. But, as so often before, it was Attlee who represented the key to Labour's exploitation of their situation. The leader possessed a unique degree of power within Whitehall, having entrenched himself at the centre of government. Further, in constructing the Administrative Committee, and entrusting the party to Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence, Attlee demonstrated his intention to keep Labour on a short leash. By engineering a situation where there were two relatively separate spheres within the Labour party – the NEC and the PLP – the leadership group ensured that they maintained their grip over their followers, remaining the only figures who had sufficient authority in these two arenas to exercise decisive influence in both.

Yet, at the same time, however, storm clouds were gathering from early 1941. Disaffection was reaching worrying levels. Though isolated and largely unrepresentative for most of the first year of office, Shinwell, Bevan, and Laski were all significant manufacturers – and exploiters – of discontent. Moreover, they were now well-established, particularly Laski. Yet, to some extent, the

three were ahead of the tide of opinion within Labour; it was dissatisfaction among the ordinary rank-and-file towards alliance with the Conservatives and a government that refused to make socialist noises (even if much of its legislation was socialist) that was beginning to pose the greatest threat. This resided at the root of the sea-change of 1941. As a result, despite their balancing of competing tensions, the leadership group's newly-acquired executive power was wielded against a backdrop of deteriorating relations within the Labour party itself. Over time, this facilitated a situation in which multiple combustible elements constantly threatened to provoke an open revolt. Even Attlee could do little but attempt to manage these crises. Hence, whilst during the first year of office the party had largely supported its leaders, over the subsequent period the situation was to worsen dramatically. The outcome was a party racked by dissent for the rest of the war, continually kicking against the straitjacket of coalition, a persistent deterioration in the state of internal relations, and gradual weakening of the ability of the leadership group to impose their authority. A new, and vicious, attack by Bevan in *Tribune* just days after the Conference set the tone for what was to come:

It is now clear to all...that the Labour party under its existing leadership is ossified and may soon cease to be an effective political force. We deceive ourselves if we imagine that by a continuation of the present leadership...can [Labour] ever be a vehicle by which socialism can be achieved...[in the] leadership, pygmies have taken the place of giants.¹⁸⁵

More dangerous times lay ahead.

¹⁸⁵ *Tribune*, 6 June 1941.

Chapter four – Decline

The second year of the Churchill Coalition saw the Labour party descend into open internecine strife. The threats which had emerged during the first half of 1941 developed rapidly, weakening the standing of the Labour ministers, and provoking a series of sustained challenges to their authority. Fundamental changes in the stability of the party thus occurred, as the prospect of outright repudiation of Attlee's strategy became a serious possibility.¹ Events since 1939 had established a problematic pattern for the leaders, in that their fragile position depended on keeping the Labour party both happy *and* weak; but it now became impossible to do both any longer. This chapter examines the decline of the Labour ministers' ability to control the party and the series of conflicts which destabilised it. As the prospect of military defeat receded – bolstered by the entry of the USSR and USA into the war – unhappiness was finally given free rein.

Resentment at the Coalition's perceived failure to implement socialism, and its inaction over planning for the future – a symbolic theme which was to be at the core of Labour party politics until 1945 – energised these changes, and gave the enemies of the leaders the means to attack them. The chapter describes how the situation evolved into a sustained effort by much of the party to break free from its restraints and by the leadership to prevent it from doing so. The goals of men such as Bevan, Laski, and Shinwell varied, from destruction of the Coalition to the removal of Attlee, but all constituted, and helped to motivate, serious threats to the leadership group's strategy. More worrying still, even those who were normally loyalist now became sympathetic to revolt.

Despite the veiled struggle between Attlee and Morrison over NEC reconstruction planning in early 1941, from the middle of the year, and with the situation becoming ever more dangerous, the leaders were forced to co-operate to an unprecedented degree. For a time, their shared belief in the importance of the Coalition compelled them to set personal animosities aside and work together as the Labour party convulsed around them. This was not least because senior figures found themselves personally implicated in, and damaged by, these storms. With the political ship he had navigated in danger of being blown onto the rocks, the Labour leader set about working to make it all but impossible for his followers to break with his strategy. Therefore Attlee, as well as the other Labour ministers, embarked upon a path which would, in the period examined in the second half of the thesis, eventually lead them to support continuing the Coalition even after the war, and, in doing so, thus began steering the party towards longer-term alliance with the

¹ The papers of the PLP and the Administrative Committee from mid 1941 are available, being of considerable benefit to our ability to map the internal politics of the party during this period, and are an under-used resource. The Committee met several times a week, while the PLP usually met once a week.

Conservatives. This was the biggest shift in the British political landscape since May 1940, and it was again the Labour leader that was at the centre of it. His rival Morrison, meanwhile, was faced with the outright collapse of his own standing in the party through a fresh row about his activities as Home Secretary. With victory a long way off, and the Conservatives resistant to either future commitments or further wartime reform, the leadership group now had little to offer the Labour party in terms of fresh legislative achievements. The huge extension of the powers of the state since 1939, and the influence exerted within the government by the Labour ministers, failed to appease party opinion. Further, whereas previously the leadership group had simply made vague, reassuring noises on this subject, their ability to so easily placate their followers diminished rapidly from 1941 as their willingness to represent Labour interests within the Coalition became suspect. The notion that the leaders were betraying Labour out of careerism spread widely. Confronted with the emergence of open conflict, the high sounding rhetoric and language used to retain the party's support earlier in the war was now replaced with more forceful measures. Yet, every attempt by the Labour ministers to shore up their position, and every 'victory' in turning back an attack, only exacerbated the situation as each crisis became more serious than the last. During 1939 and 1941, the Labour party had been largely united, at least in terms of common adherence to a particular strategy. From 1941 that all changed.

I

After the damaging rows of the first half of the year, the party's internal cohesion declined rapidly over the summer and autumn of 1941. Growing Labour party pressure to nationalise the railways – which had been increasing for several months – dealt a highly embarrassing blow to the leaders in the summer, when the party formally criticised the government for the first time. Responding to the agitation from their followers, Attlee and the Labour ministers fought stubbornly within the Cabinet for nationalisation of the industry, the leader personally pushing public ownership through the Lord President's Committee twice, only to be overruled by the War Cabinet.² Failure left them exposed, taken as another sign that Labour was getting very little benefit from its membership of the government. The NEC expressed its 'profound dissatisfaction', while Pethick-Lawrence broke with the government in Parliament by putting down a motion advocating nationalisation.³ This was the first time that Attlee's efforts had been the subject of a formal statement of displeasure from the party; it constituted an embarrassment and demonstration of his

² CAB 71/3, LP (41) 104, 'The Railways and the War: Memorandum by the Lord Privy Seal', 1 July 1941; CAB 71/2, LP (41) 26, Lord President's Committee minutes, 3 July 1941; CAB 71/2, LP (41) 29, Lord President's Committee minutes, 8 July 1941; CAB 65/19, WM (41) 70, War Cabinet conclusions, 15 July 1941.

³ Attlee papers, 4/4, Middleton to Attlee, 3 October 1941; *Hansard*, vol. 374, 22 October 1941, cols. 1805-12.

reduced ability to dictate to his followers. The leader's attempts to extract this appeasing measure from the Conservatives having been blocked, Attlee found himself exposed on the front – nationalisation – where the Labour ministers were most vulnerable. In this changing environment, the ministers were forced to rely more than ever on their allies and proxies as their own independent standing declined. Lees-Smith continued to act like a government spokesman (for example, after the loss of Crete, he simply shrugged off the German invasion, made no criticism whatever of the conduct of the war, and declared that Britain remained in a favourable position), and he and Pethick-Lawrence played an increasingly important role in winning backing for ministerial decisions at party meetings.⁴

That the Labour ministers had lost much ground since the turn of the year was reinforced when Bevan – who shortly afterwards became editor of *Tribune* – continued his efforts to mobilise the party against them, announcing that the columns of that newspaper would henceforth be used in a campaign for the purpose of 'revitalising' Labour in order to create a ground-swell of opinion.⁵ He also became increasingly obsessed with the notion of a 'Second Front' to relieve the USSR, pressurising the Coalition and the party leaders on this constantly – much to the discomfort of a government happy to let the Russians absorb the weight of German aggression.⁶ The failure to send direct military assistance to Moscow became one of the most frequent complaints about the Coalition emanating from within the party. Bevan – continuing his tactic of parliamentary skirmishing – also made a series of significant Commons assaults on the leaders, openly attacking Attlee and Bevin for not delivering extensive nationalisation by charging them with failing 'a test of will and courage', accusing the Labour ministers of having an 'exaggerated sense of their own importance', and 'working against the public interest'.⁷ The Welshman also began to move against the Coalition itself, calling for the government to be 'wholly reconstructed'.⁸ Attlee and the ministers had hardly 'abandoned' Labour, as he depicted – in addition to pressurising on railways, Attlee and Bevin were agitating within the government on Indian reform, another traditional Labour cause – but this counted for little; it was how the leaders were *perceived* that

⁴ *Hansard*, vol. 372, 10 June 1941, cols. 63-70.

⁵ *Tribune*, 20 June 1941.

⁶ There is a large volume of Bevan-authored material on the Second Front in on *Tribune*, 4 July 1941, but the theme recurred constantly throughout the year. Bevan's editorial pieces (he had previously been a member of the editorial board) were long and weighty, frequently up to 3,000 words. See also *Hansard*, vol. 374, 23 October 1941, col. 1977. This affiliation with the Russia movement apparently led MI5 to put Bevan under surveillance in 1941 – Foot, *Bevan*, pp. 338-9.

⁷ *Hansard*, vol. 373, 5 August 1941, col. 1844, & vol. 376, 18 December 1941, cols. 2202-6.

⁸ *Hansard*, vol. 324, 23 October 1941, col. 1972-82. Bevan's conduct led the *Western Mail* to condemn his behaviour, describing him as a 'flamboyant egotist' and writing that 'every mannerism that he cultivates, every speech he delivers, even the expression he wears in the most familiar photographs, bears witness to a profound consciousness of his own superiority' – cited Foot, *Bevan*, p.347.

was important.⁹ These, and a multitude of other public rows, did much to create an atmosphere of hostility and non-compliance, and broke the earlier taboo against attacking the leaders while a war was being fought. Laski got to work on his Reconstruction project, and began pressing the leadership group over the need not only for public ownership, but to implement extensive post-war reforms while the war was still taking place. Coupled with his heavy public criticisms of the Labour ministers via regular articles in *Tribune*, the *Daily Herald*, and the *Nation* assailing the leaders over nationalisation, as well as another broadside blaming Attlee personally for the lack of reform under the headline 'Don't Keep Us Waiting, Clem', Laski's efforts added to this now relentless chorus of disaffection.¹⁰ In September, he even put forward another manifesto advocating immediate socialist reform and seeking a confrontation with the government.¹¹ In his fight with Attlee and the Coalition, Laski had continued his efforts of earlier in the year and was now set upon manufacturing an alternative course for Labour, having decided that 'the party has got to be made to stand up for certain vital principles, even against the loyalty of its leaders to Winston'.¹² That the Labour ministers' ability to reassure their dissatisfied followers was declining at a worrying rate is confirmed by the fact that Ede described much of the PLP as distinctly 'restless' with the strategy they were being forced to follow.¹³

II

Faced with this growing willingness to question his leadership, Attlee tried a number of ways to strengthen the position of the ministers. Aware of the enthusiasm shown throughout the Labour movement over the Russian issue, and having been stung by the pressure of Bevan, Laski, and the *Tribune* 'Arms to Russia' campaign, Attlee reacted by publicly aligning himself with this populist cause – even though he profoundly differed from its foreign policy prescriptions – in a blatant attempt to tack back toward his followers.¹⁴ As described in the previous chapter, Attlee recognised that permitting too great a distance to open up between the ministers and the party might prove fatal. Yet over the summer, with Churchill frequently abroad, Attlee was left running

⁹ *Amery Diary*, 27 June 1941, p.695; Bevin letter to Amery, cited R. J. Moore, *Churchill, Cripps and India* (London, 1979), p. 47.

¹⁰ See these publications throughout 1941, but good examples can be found in *Tribune*, 9 May 1941, and *Nation*, 22 March 1941; Harold Laski, *Great Britain, Russia and the Labour Party* (London, 1941); for Attlee's comments on some of Laski's literature, see Attlee papers, Attlee to J. Chamberlain, 2 December 1941.

¹¹ NEC Reconstruction sub-committee minutes, 17 September 1941.

¹² Cited Newman, *Laski*, p.219.

¹³ British Library, Baron Chuter Ede papers, Ede Diary, 1 October 1941 (pp. 18-9). Page references in brackets refer to the published version of the diary: Kevin Jefferys (ed.) *Labour and the Wartime Coalition: From the Diary of James Chuter Ede, 1941-1945* (London, 1987).

¹⁴ For example, *The Times*, 11 July, 21 July and 14 August 1941.

the country, and simply had less time to devote to Labour affairs at this crucial juncture.¹⁵ Nonetheless, many of his public statements came to concentrate upon the theme of applauding Soviet resistance to the German invasion, emphasising that vital assistance would be sent from Britain to Moscow, and the commonality of the struggle now facing the two countries in their 'single fight' against 'the same enemy'.¹⁶ The leader declared that 'Britain does not regard the Russo-German fight in the east and the fight in the west as separate wars'.¹⁷ Attlee also tried to return to reassuring his followers over the old issue of peace aims, warmly welcoming the Atlantic Charter, signed by Churchill and Roosevelt in August, and emphasising that it offered the possibility of a new global order free from the spectre of power politics.¹⁸ Yet the leader's employment of such rhetoric was now less effective in a party so widely disillusioned. The issue of what Labour wanted to achieve from the war again rebounded on Attlee at the TUC Conference the following month, when he was heavily criticised over the Coalition's failure to produce a formal statement of its aims, and was forced to defend the government's record in a hostile debate, making no apology and stressing that while he and the rest of the Cabinet took reconstruction seriously, they were nonetheless 'heavily engaged in seeing that the ship weathers the storm'.¹⁹ Despite his efforts, the leader's attempts to win the support of his followers did not meet with the success of old, for the party could no longer be so easily bought off. Attlee was now fighting what was essentially a rear-guard action; whereas previously he had encountered minimal opposition, from mid 1941 all he could do was attempt to stay one step ahead and avoid major splits. It was not a task made easier by a public row in September between the two big beasts of the union world, Bevin and Citrine, over the Minister of Labour's powers, Attlee ordering them to drop the dispute before it proved 'gravely detrimental'.²⁰

His efforts coming to little, in September Attlee largely abandoned conciliation, or at least added the tactics of the 'stick' to those of the 'carrot'. Faced with the precipitous decline of his ability to command the party, the leader sought instead to try and ensure that Labour would not be able to break free from the government even if it wanted to. Moreover, his decision to do so occurred

¹⁵ Attlee's increased role can be gleaned from the Cabinet and War Cabinet papers and minutes; there are also hints in the Amery Diary.

¹⁶ There are plenty of examples in the Attlee press cuttings file at the Labour party archive. See also PLP minutes, 25 June 1941; NEC minutes, 30 July 1941; *Hansard*, vol. 272, 6 August 1941, cols. 1973-81. Harris, *Attlee*, p.189.

¹⁷ *Hansard*, vol. 374, 9 September 1941, col. 150; NEC minutes, 30 July 1941.

¹⁸ *Hansard*, vol. 374, 9 September 1941, cols. 151-2. Amery, in contrast, called the Charter 'fluffy flapdoodle' – *Amery Diary*, 14 August 1941, p.710.

¹⁹ *1941 TUC Annual Report*, pp. 110-12.

²⁰ Citrine complained of Bevin's powers to compulsorily direct skilled labour, and the *Daily Herald* threw its weight behind Citrine. After Attlee compelled both to restrain themselves, Bevin, amusingly, responded by insisting that 'a vendetta is foreign to my nature'. See Sir Walter Citrine, *Two Careers*, p.95; Churchill College, Cambridge, Bevin papers, Bevin to Citrine, 1 October 1941.

against a background of continuing – and worsening – opposition to the electoral truce, and hostility to Labour’s inactivity at by-elections.²¹ Attlee thus attempted to permanently cement his strategy, and entrench the party’s membership of the Coalition, by trying to *extend* the truce even further. In doing so, he laid the foundations for a bid to prolong the alliance with the Conservative leaders beyond the end of the war. Thus, it is here that we should identify the initial indications of what would eventually evolve into a preference for a longer-term coalition, which became increasingly significant as the conflict wore on, and which Attlee was to fight for until the day the government collapsed. The leader approached Churchill and proposed that the truce and Coalition should now be backed by a joint statement of support signed by Attlee, the prime minister, and Sinclair, for all government candidates at by-elections, regardless of their party affiliation.²² This was a more explicit proclamation of alliance than had existed hitherto, and amounted to a political ‘coupon’ – although that phrase was studiously avoided.²³ Attlee was attempting to bind his followers to the government inextricably, or at least confirm the primacy of his own decision-making. It signified an effort to dam the growing disaffection within the party by establishing a formal appeal for unity as the norm for by-election contests – something the Labour party could only break with at its peril.²⁴ The measure also demonstrated the leader’s willingness to confront his party with the prospect of electoral annihilation in order to keep it on the path he had chosen for it. Attlee and the Labour ministers had no intention of relinquishing the power they had won. Given the controversy over the truce which had persisted for more than two years, this was a bold departure, and not without risks – the ‘coupon’ concept had been an emotive issue since 1918, and Attlee seemed determined to tie the hands of his followers with a similar arrangement. It was the most significant attempt to alter the contours of the political world since the formation of the Coalition and, just as he had played such a critical role in re-shaping that environment during the phoney war, it was again Attlee who sought to instigate it. But that the leader made such an inevitably unpopular move underlines how far the disunity of the Labour party was now imagined to be threatening the ability of the leadership to stay upright on their tightrope.

Unsurprisingly, Churchill agreed to the proposal immediately, and Attlee put it to the NEC the same day.²⁵ Yet, again unsurprisingly, it encountered resistance, with many, including some who were usually supportive of the leader, unwilling to countenance a more formal cross-party

²¹ Evidence of complaints from the rank-and-file about the policy is plentiful in the NEC papers. See, for example, NEC minutes, 30 May 1941; NEC Organisation sub-committee minutes, 9 September 1941.

²² Attlee papers, 2/125, Attlee to Churchill, 24 September 1941.

²³ The phrase ‘coupon’ was never officially employed in official literature or public statements.

²⁴ Threats of what would happen if Labour was not seen as responsible were to be Attlee’s chief means of enforcement for the next four years.

²⁵ NEC minutes, 24 September 1941.

alliance.²⁶ ‘Intense discussion’ took place, and Shinwell was particularly vocal in arguing against Attlee’s policy.²⁷ When a vote was taken, however, the measure was approved, albeit narrowly.²⁸ Shinwell angered his enemies by warning that Labour would rebel, and there would be ‘terrible repercussions’ once it became known that the proposal had been agreed to by such a small margin.²⁹ This was taken to be a threat to reveal publicly how NEC members had voted, a violation of official rules, and earned Shinwell a rebuke on propriety.³⁰

Nonetheless it is clear that, by the autumn of 1941, Attlee was conducting a rear-guard, defensive policy, rather than one of offering positive inducements. It would seem that in the leader’s mind the limits of appeasement had been reached and the struggle simply had to be fought out. His ‘coupon’ also made apparent that, at least to the leaders of the British political nation, the Coalition was more than a marriage of convenience. The government was in fact a genuine alliance. It also demonstrates the scepticism and impatience with which political leaders had come to view traditional party politics. In the summer, Greenwood had declared that all members of the government wanted ‘not merely to avoid the mistakes made after the last war, *but to co-operate to the fullest measure* in working together to restore the shattered fabric of our civilisation’ – a statement which seems to hint at a post-war coalition.³¹ Given this mindset, the basis for ‘consensus’ politics seems evident. Yet while Attlee’s proposal offered a means of attempting to restrict the scope for Labour dissent – by threatening severe consequences for a break with the leader’s strategy – at the same time it only antagonised the party. Forcing Labour even deeper into its alliance with the Conservative party was hardly likely to alleviate the mood of Attlee’s followers. Moreover, the difficulty that he encountered in winning approval suggests that even the arena which had once been his secure powerbase, the NEC, was now reticent to accede to his orders. But the shift in his posture, with its accompanying outbreak of ill-will, indicates how dangerous the internal situation had become, and the imperative to shore up the leadership group’s position by force. The measure signalled recognition that conciliation was now unlikely and other, more direct, means of preventing Labour from escaping its straitjacket had to be sought – even to the point of tacitly threatening it with electoral destruction.

²⁶ Ibid; Dalton Diary, 24 September 1941 (p.286).

²⁷ Ibid; NEC minutes, 24 September 1941.

²⁸ Ibid. The result was 13-10 in favour. Dalton was scathing, recording his contempt for those who continued to question the truce ‘as though we had not moved beyond [that] debate’ – Dalton Diary, 24 September 1941 (p.286).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ *News Chronicle*, 23 June 1941 (my emphasis). For a similar perspective from the Conservatives, in March 1941, at a Conservative event, Churchill said that ‘the ties of friendships which are being formed between members of the administration...will not be very easy to tear asunder’ – Winston S. Churchill, *The Unrelenting Struggle* (London, 1943), p.85.

The leaders did secure another, smaller, victory in late 1941, however, by torpedoing the credibility of their most adversarial critic. After his threat to reveal the scale of disagreement over the coupon, Shinwell immediately became a target for virtually all the Labour ministers. They were aided by the fact that his constantly offensive behaviour did Shinwell few favours among MPs, with whom his previously considerable popularity plummeted in the second half of 1941. Just days after the row over the NEC proceedings, he made a fierce public attack on Attlee and Bevin, and actually charged them with violating official Labour policy in failing to oversee the nationalisation of the mines!³² Attlee was furious, while Bevin made what Ede described as ‘the best speech I have yet heard him make’ in response.³³ A fortnight later, the rebel made the mistake of giving prior notice of his intention to push the PLP to confront the government over aid to Russia, resulting in a series of prepared public drubbings by Attlee, Dalton, and Lees-Smith, and he was humiliated in front of assembled MPs.³⁴ The Administrative Committee denounced his efforts to undermine the leaders as ‘disgraceful’, and details of his behaviour were leaked to the press, causing Shinwell acute embarrassment and making clear publicly what had long been recognised in the PLP – that, since May 1940, he had been a grand-standing egotist.³⁵ In the elections to the Administrative Committee, he was again humiliated by coming second from bottom of those elected – destroying his claim to speak for a substantial section of the party – while the next day it was A. V. Alexander, Labour’s First Lord of the Admiralty, of all people, who flattened Shinwell once and for all, with a brutal assault in the Commons from which his position was never to properly recover.³⁶ By the end of the year, Shinwell’s standing, and with it his long-term career ambitions, had been fatally weakened by the efforts of the Labour ministers to ‘nail’ their opponent and his own self-defeating behaviour. Shinwell’s potential – which had seemed so promising during the previous two years – quickly atrophied, his claim to a powerful

³² PLP minutes, 1 October 1941; Ede Diary, 1 October 1941 (pp. 18-9).

³³ Ibid; Dalton Diary, 1 October 1941 (p.288). Attlee leapt to his feet and shouted ‘That’s a damned lie!’

³⁴ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 14 October 1941 & 21 October 1941; Ede Diary, 14 October 1941 (pp. 19-20) & 21 October 1941 (p.21); PLP minutes, 15 October 1941; Dalton Diary, 15 October 1941 (pp. 294-5), 16 & 17 October 1941 (p.295).

³⁵ Ibid; PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 14 October 1941.

³⁶ PLP papers, 12 November 1941. Ede and Dalton agreed that his low return was ‘the best possible result’, and when the results were read out and his name was not near the top of the poll, his expression ‘became more and more grave’ – Ede Diary, 12 November 1941 (p.23); Dalton Diary, 12 November 1941 (p.310); *Hansard*, vol. 376, 13 November 1941, cols. 1278-48. In a lengthy barrage, Alexander denounced Shinwell’s conduct, read out examples of speeches where he contradicted himself, and asserted that he ‘comes down again and again and stands at [the Dispatch] Box, frequently...lashing himself into a fury, and indeed with a tremendously pontifical air as if he were the only person in the House who knew anything about any subject. I think the House will make the judgement that perhaps the hon. Member has to do something to salve his conscience with regard to not having joined in and accepted the offer of team work on behalf of his nation in the most extreme hour of her need’. The Commons was enjoying the demolition of Shinwell so much that when the First Lord was compelled to cease his attack with the end of the day’s sitting approaching, *Hansard* records: ‘HON. MEMBERS: “OH!”’. There was also apparently discontent with Shinwell in his constituency party at Seaham – Dalton Diary, 19 November 1941 (pp. 316-7).

future role in ruins. Before long he was to be surpassed by Bevan as Labour's rising star outside the government.

But the humiliation of Shinwell did not obscure the fact that the discontent which he had done so much to motivate was now a powerful force. In the same Administrative Committee elections where his fall from grace became apparent, the similarly reduced standing of the Labour ministers was also made abundantly clear. Non-ministers polled much better than members of the government – again underlining the dependence of the latter on their proxies – while the leaders were now so unpopular with MPs that the best performing minister, Alexander, could only manage sixth place.³⁷ Morrison, meanwhile, came in eleventh, indicating that his attempts to depict himself as a more authentic Labourite than Attlee had produced little reward so far, amid persistent ill-feeling about his censorship of the press.³⁸ It would perhaps be an exaggeration to say that the leaders were now held in contempt; but there is no doubt that by late 1941 they were not particularly revered. That proposals for the Labour ministers to be excluded from the PLP's governing body altogether – a potentially grave blow to their influence – were rejected is therefore less significant than the fact that they were heard in the first place.³⁹ Attlee's 'coupon' may have been important in demonstrating his refusal to be diverted, and hinting at a possible political future, but it did little to stabilise the Labour party. Moreover, almost immediately, the dissension which had wracked the party was to erupt into open conflict.

III

Perhaps the defining moment in the increase of tensions came just three weeks later, with the most serious crisis since the formation of the Coalition. Unsurprisingly, this was again centred upon control of industry, when Bevin's new powers to direct the labour force in the National Service Bill were not balanced by inclusion of nationalisation. At a party meeting on 2 December 1941, Bevin was confronted by an Administrative Committee resolution declaring public ownership 'essential', but though he and Attlee had, as usual, fought within the Cabinet for nationalisation, they now adopted a show of solidarity with the Conservatives.⁴⁰ Resisting the complaints of MPs, Bevin even declared himself 'unconvinced' that nationalisation would have any real benefit.⁴¹ He and Attlee asserted that public ownership could not be enacted without a general election mandate, but, while Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence threw their weight behind

³⁷ PLP papers, 12 November 1941. Pethick-Lawrence and Jim Griffiths topped the poll.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ PLP minutes, 12 November 1941; Ede Diary, 12 November 1941 (p.23); Dalton Diary, 12 November 1941 (p.310).

⁴⁰ PLP minutes, 2 December 1941.

⁴¹ Ibid; Ede Diary, 3 December 1941 (p.28).

the leaders, it was obvious that Labour's hostility to the Bill was such that it would prove impossible to force the PLP en masse into the government lobby.⁴² Attlee made an 'ineffective' bid to persuade the party to support the Labour ministers, and drew comparisons between the activities of the rebels and those of the ILP during the second MacDonald administration, but some MPs had obviously determined to oppose the Bill come what may.⁴³ Ede felt that the hostility within the parliamentary party had become so severe that the dissidents – Bevan and Shinwell foremost among them – were attempting to 'kill' the Coalition, and feared that the government would collapse if these antagonisms continued, believing withdrawal of Labour support from the Coalition to be likely.⁴⁴ Churchill could certainly have plumped for a snap election if doubtful about the strength of Labour backing.⁴⁵ For the first time since 1939, then, the leadership group were in danger of losing control of events. Of course, whether the Big Four, or the rest of the ministers, would have left the Coalition even if called upon to do so by their MPs is debatable; Bevin, particularly, would have been resistant. The crisis accelerated when efforts by Lees-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence to broker a compromise came to naught, and a threat by Attlee that he would not go on in government unless the PLP backed him was seen through as the bluff it was.⁴⁶ In the end, more than a third of the PLP abstained, while thirty-six Labour MPs – twenty percent of the total – rebelled and voted against the government in the Commons.⁴⁷ Even more worryingly, as Brooke has noted, many of the rebels were the mining MPs who represented Attlee's natural base of support.⁴⁸

The revolt was not as large as had perhaps seemed likely, but was nevertheless a serious blow. The Labour party was gradually reasserting its independence from the government. Further, with their authority so publicly repudiated by a large section of the party, the Labour ministers were compelled to co-operate with one another more fully than ever before. Their bid to persuade the NEC to warn the PLP to support the government was scotched by Laski, while the crisis was only finally resolved by a firm statement on discipline, read to the parliamentary party by Pethick-Lawrence and almost certainly drafted by Lees-Smith, which affirmed the need for adherence to

⁴² Ibid; PLP minutes 2 December 1941.

⁴³ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 3 December 1941; PLP minutes, 3 December 1941; Ede Diary, 3 December 1941 (pp. 26-9); Dalton Diary, 3 December 1941 (p.329). Dalton thought there was 'much rebel activity in the wings'.

⁴⁴ Ede Diary, 3 December 1941 (pp. 26-9), & 4 December 1941 (p.29).

⁴⁵ It is, of course, possible that the romantic Churchill, with his dreams of grand parliamentary alliances, would not have called an election even if Labour became persistently rebellious, or MPs withdrew their support for the Coalition; but it seems unlikely that he would have neglected the opportunity to smash the Opposition party in such circumstances, or allowed Labour to enjoy even more of a double-dividend than it did already.

⁴⁶ Ibid; PLP minutes, 4 December 1941.

⁴⁷ *Hansard*, vol. 376, 4 December 1941, cols. 1348-50; Ede Diary, 4 December 1941 (p.29).

⁴⁸ Brooke, *Labour's War*, p.83.

the Standing Orders and loyalty to the Labour ministers.⁴⁹ Appealing to the party's self-interest by warning of electoral calamity if Labour broke with the government, the memorandum stated that there was no legitimate reason for ever voting against the official line, and was followed in January 1942 by Pethick-Lawrence's tightening up of the Standing Orders.⁵⁰ These were more effective blows than the Labour ministers themselves – rapidly losing traction with their followers – had been able to land. Yet it was indicative of the mood of Labour politics, as well as leadership uncertainty that it would be accepted, that the warning was not actually put to a vote.⁵¹ An authoritarian rant by Morrison against the effort to disrupt the government – indicating the contrast between his efforts to undermine Attlee earlier in the year, and his true position now that the Coalition was actually in danger – only angered MPs, who complained of his 'Cockney smartness'.⁵² A fault line had thus opened up between the Labour ministers and their followers, isolating the former to a worrying degree. It was the first time Labour politics had slipped into overt conflict since 1939. Oddly enough, however, these precise complaints were being aired at the same time within the Conservative party as well, Amery recording that 'the general feeling of restlessness about the government in our party [is] getting very acute...because they did not feel that there was anyone inside the Cabinet who stood for the Conservative point of view at all'.⁵³ The similarity with the complaints emanating from the Labour party is striking, and indicates that the crux of the issue was that both of the parliamentary parties – the massed ranks of MPs who made up the political nation – were just *bored*. Further, as subsequent events in the first months of 1942 would confirm, the rejection of the Labour ministers' authority on this most emotive of issues virtually destroyed their collective ability to dictate to their followers. They now wielded secure control over neither the NEC nor PLP. Bevan began advocating the break up of the Coalition, 'expecting' the alliance to collapse early in the new year, and some MPs were 'light-hearted' about 'bringing the government down'.⁵⁴ There is little doubt that the tide had turned against the leaders, and, by the end of 1941, the taboo of not attacking the Labour ministers had been decisively broken with; finding themselves powerless to stop it, for the rest of the war the

⁴⁹ Dalton Diary, 8 December 1941 (p.331); NEC minutes, 8 December 1941; PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 11 December 1941; PLP Administrative Committee papers, 'Confidential memorandum on Party Policy', no date, but mid-December 1941; PLP minutes, 17 December 1941. Pethick-Lawrence presided over the meeting because Lees-Smith was taken ill.

⁵⁰ PLP Administrative Committee papers, 'Confidential memorandum on Party Policy', no date, but mid-December 1941.

⁵¹ PLP minutes, 17 December 1941.

⁵² Ede Diary, 19 December 1941 (p.36).

⁵³ *Amery Diary*, 18 December 1941, p.754. Amery went on that 'There [is] considerable regret...that Winston had been made leader of the party for it deprived the party of someone who could speak on its behalf to Winston and stand up to him'. Moreover, there was little love lost between most Conservative MPs and both Churchill and his deputy, the former 'glamour boy', Eden. They both neglected the party much more than did the Labour leaders, and indeed thought little of it in the first place. Moreover, Churchill's inner circle were long-standing eccentrics and despised by most Conservatives.

⁵⁴ *Tribune*, 5 December 1941; Ede Diary, 19 December 1941 (p.36).

leadership group was never again to enjoy the relatively secure position *vis à vis* their party that they had occupied between 1939 and 1941.

Moreover, before the year was even out, events in late December indirectly precipitated a series of even more destabilising internal disputes early in 1942, culminating in a bid by Laski to engineer the collapse of the Coalition and overthrow Attlee himself. The event which began a new cycle of fratricidal conflict was the seemingly unrelated matter of the death of Lees-Smith in December, a bitter blow to the embattled leaders.⁵⁵ After allowing tempers to cool for several weeks after the National Service Bill rebellions, in January, Attlee – again largely on his own authority – had Pethick-Lawrence appointed his successor.⁵⁶ Immense pressure was brought to bear from what Dalton termed ‘the machine’ to ensure that no other names were put forward, and Wilkinson was ‘bullied’ into withdrawing the more independent Jim Griffiths’ name.⁵⁷ Yet his stint in the job lasted only a matter of weeks, for, in early February, Churchill undertook a Cabinet re-shuffle and sacked the ineffectual Greenwood from the government altogether. While the fact that Attlee did not move to save Greenwood is telling, that the deputy leader’s performance in office had been poor cut little ice with a party already suspicious of the Coalition.⁵⁸ Ede recorded that the mood of the PLP was one of fury.⁵⁹ At the next PLP meeting, Attlee took the chair himself and simply shunted Pethick-Lawrence aside and imposed Greenwood in his place.⁶⁰

That the prime minister had dared to dispense with Labour’s deputy leader provided yet another issue for the party to hit out at its leaders, even though many were sceptical about Greenwood’s capacity to perform his new duties.⁶¹ Yet the re-shuffle was hardly a weakening of the Labour

⁵⁵ For comments on his death and his performance as acting leader, see Ede Diary, 19 December 1941 (p.34); Dalton Diary, 18 December 1941 (p.226); *Hansard*, vol. 376, 19 December 1941, cols. 2270-1. The Lees-Smith press cuttings file at the Labour party archive contains useful material. Dalton described him as a ‘first-class colleague...his place will not be easily filled’, while Attlee said he was someone ‘we could ill spare’.

⁵⁶ PLP minutes, 21 January 1942. It was evident from the start that Pethick-Lawrence would be his replacement – Dalton Diary, 18 December 1941 (p.336).

⁵⁷ Ede Diary, 21 January 1942 (p.40); Dalton Diary, 21 January 1942 (pp. 351-2). As Dalton noted, Griffiths was an ambitious young man who was frequently aggressive towards the government. As an NEC member, the job would also have enabled Griffiths – who on simple merit may well have been the best man for the job – to straddle the crucial institutional bridge that only the leaders (and Shinwell) currently occupied.

⁵⁸ There is no documentary evidence which suggests that Attlee made any attempt to save Greenwood, a conclusion shared by the leader’s biographer. See Harris, *Attlee*, p.195.

⁵⁹ Ede Diary, 25 February 1942 (p.57). See also the PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 3 March 1942, where it was impressed upon Attlee the need for reconstruction planning to be continued and to resist Conservative attempts to bury the issue.

⁶⁰ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 26 February 1942; Ede Diary, 26 February 1942 (p.58).

⁶¹ Many members of the Administrative Committee were sceptical about Greenwood’s capacity for work, Griffiths and Shinwell both emphasising to the deputy leader that if he took the role he would have to

party, otherwise seeing another extension of Labour's grip on the domestic front (Dalton became President of the Board of Trade, and Attlee formally deputy prime minister) and no sign of a Conservative reassertion.⁶² Attlee was largely responsible for fresh progress on the Indian issue, a populist cause in Labour circles, in early 1942 as chair of the Cabinet India Committee, while he also vetoed Churchill's plan to make Beaverbrook Minister of Production and overlord of the entire economic front.⁶³ He warned the prime minister that Bevin would resign and the Labour party rebel en masse; the matter was promptly dropped.⁶⁴ From a rational perspective, the Labour party stood at the apex of its influence, and its leader remained the vital power-broker in British politics. The party had never before enjoyed such power as it wielded by the middle of the Second World War. But, strange as it may seem, this counted for little. Further, with the USA now in the war following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, Attlee remained busier than ever, running the country in Churchill's increasingly frequent absences.⁶⁵ With the time he could devote to Labour politics increasingly constrained, Attlee's most troublesome opponent, Laski, was able to exploit the perception of a serious diminution of Labour's influence to launch a fresh attack on him. A furious Laski argued that the re-shuffle, and the decision not to nationalise industry, signified the failure of Attlee's leadership, and, having already decided that a change of leader was necessary – telling his wife in late 1941 that Labour would make no progress 'until we blow Attlee up' – he now launched an overt effort to change the party's direction and dislodge Attlee from his position.⁶⁶

Laski did this by trying to set an ambush for the deputy prime minister at the NEC meeting called to consider the re-shuffle, by writing to other members of the Executive beforehand – including Morrison – and questioning Attlee's suitability for the top job, as well as urging the necessity of finally resolving the 'leadership issue'.⁶⁷ He confided to his wife that he aimed to use the furore

attend Parliament 'constantly' – suggesting doubts about his ability or willingness to do so. *Ede Diary*, 26 February 1942 (p.56). Greenwood was in fact to perform rather better in his new job, evidently preferring life as a big political fish in a small pond.

⁶² Attlee also became Secretary of State for the Dominions, but this carried few departmental responsibilities, and the leader continued to act as a roving administrator. He was replaced by Cripps as Lord Privy Seal.

⁶³ *Amery Diary*, 27 February 1942, pp. 754-5; Moore, *Churchill, Cripps and India*, pp. 54-5; CAB 91 minutes and papers, November 1941-March 1942 (there are also comments on Attlee's role in the *Amery Diary* throughout late 1941 and early 1942); see also Attlee to Churchill, 9 January 1942, in CAB 65/25 WM (42), 8, 12 January 1942; Attlee memorandum, 'The Indian political situation', 2 February 1942, CAB 66/21 WP (42) 59; Attlee interview, cited Harris, *Attlee*, p.194.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* Thereafter a mutual loathing existed between Attlee ('a miserable little man') and Beaverbrook (an 'evil man').

⁶⁵ See CAB 65, 66 & 67 from December 1941 to March 1942 for evidence of Attlee's vastly-increased ministerial role. He ran the country for a full month at the turn of the year alone while Churchill was in the United States.

⁶⁶ Hull, Laski papers, Laski to Frida Laski, undated but late 1941.

⁶⁷ Hull, Laski papers, Laski to Frida Laski, 1, 2, 3, & 4 March 1942.

surrounding the dismissal of Greenwood as a means to precipitate the outright repudiation of Attlee's leadership and push for withdrawal from the Coalition.⁶⁸ He intended to persuade the NEC to send a delegation to Churchill demanding Greenwood's readmission, and, if the prime minister refused – as Laski clearly hoped – 'that gives me a chance of fighting [at the upcoming annual Conference] for our exit from the government'.⁶⁹ Apparently deluding himself that he was some sort of king-maker, at the NEC Laski argued that the party's position in the Coalition had been fatally damaged and questioned as to why this had been allowed to occur – a barb unmistakably directed at Attlee.⁷⁰ The rebellious academic then stirred up fears that the reshuffle was an effort to exclude Labour from reconstruction planning altogether.⁷¹ Yet, for the moment at least, the Labour ministers managed to weather the attacks. The leader and Bevin, who went along to the meeting, vigorously defended their representation of the party, while Morrison – again being loyal with so much at stake – failed to move against Attlee.⁷² In the end, the NEC expressed its 'concern' with the sacking, but no demands for redress were made.⁷³

Days later, having failed to get the Home Secretary to strike at Attlee, a desperate Laski tried to persuade Bevin ('easily the most outstanding figure in the Labour party', 'a fighting leader' who should become 'the first man') and later even Dalton ('the only viable alternative' to Attlee) to move against the leader, only to be ignored by both.⁷⁴ These efforts indicate not merely Laski's questionable political judgement, but also that his actions were motivated simply by blind personal hatred for Attlee. Their feud had now come to dominate Laski's career. But he did find a more productive angle of attack when he openly targeted Attlee in the *New Statesman* two weeks later, accusing the leader of failing to defend Labour's interests in the War Cabinet.⁷⁵ As he had earlier posited to his wife as the means to collapse the government, he then approached Churchill personally and demanded that the Coalition carry out a socialist transformation of Britain.⁷⁶ When the prime minister rejected this, as Laski anticipated, this provided him with the platform – and ostensible justification – he sought.⁷⁷ Days later, Laski submitted to the NEC a powerful ten-point indictment of the Labour party's entire political strategy since 1939, an assault directed at Attlee personally and evidently aimed at providing the basis for a decisive confrontation with his

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ NEC minutes, 6 March 1942.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Hull, Laski papers, Laski to Bevin, March 1942; Dalton Diary, 21 April 1942 (p.413). Dalton wrote in his diary that 'this little fool lives in an unreal world of his own making'.

⁷⁵ *New Statesman*, 21 March 1942.

⁷⁶ Hull, Laski papers, Laski to Churchill, 26 March 1942; Martin, *Laski*, p.153.

⁷⁷ Hull, Laski papers, Churchill to Laski, 27 March 1942.

enemy.⁷⁸ What is remarkable is that his attacks had little, if anything, to do with the cited reason for them – the sacking of Greenwood. Though Laski asserted that ‘no personal considerations [vis à vis] Mr. Attlee’ had informed his action, this was an obvious untruth, and fooled no-one.⁷⁹ In a bitter attack on virtually everything Attlee had done since 1939, Laski charged that the rank-and-file were ‘gravely perturbed’ by the ‘drift’ and ‘inaction’ that the leadership group had chosen, and declared that Labour was ‘being dragged along at the tail of the Conservative party’.⁸⁰

Stressing the ‘failure’ of the Labour ministers to secure legislative concessions, he stated that ‘in return for a handful of social reforms, none of them fundamental in character, we are assisting the vested interests of this country’.⁸¹ Laski also challenged directly Attlee’s doctrine of party management, arguing that ‘I do not think it is an answer to...say that coalition government is a process of give and take. I suggest that on all the fundamental matters we do all the giving and the Tories do all the taking’.⁸² He went on to demand that ‘steps must be taken [to implement socialism] before the cessation of hostilities’.⁸³ Now openly trying to provoke the collapse of the government, the memorandum proposed an end to the electoral truce, asserting that ‘I do not think we are entitled to go on with Mr. Churchill’ and called for the NEC to formulate a ‘minimum programme’ which should be demanded from the prime minister, ‘and then stick to that programme at all costs. If it be said that this risks the break-up of the government we must take that risk’.⁸⁴

Laski had made the most overt challenge yet launched to Attlee and the direction of the party. Despite his ludicrous disclaimer that he was not attacking the leader personally, it was clear to all that this was in fact precisely what Laski was doing, the minutes of the NEC meeting where the proposals were discussed beginning with the simple statement that ‘The chairman suggested that Mr. Attlee should give his views regarding Mr. Laski’s Memorandum’.⁸⁵ The leader responded to the assault with a similarly aggressive barrage of his own, as so often unable to maintain his cool demeanour with Laski.⁸⁶ In a powerful invective, Attlee accused his opponent of ignoring the ‘fundamental facts’ of the situation, in that Labour was vastly outnumbered by the Conservatives, and hence wholesale ‘socialism’ was simply unfeasible.⁸⁷ Further, he asserted that there was no

⁷⁸ NEC papers, Laski memorandum, ‘The Party and the Future’, early April 1942.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid (Laski’s emphasis).

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ NEC minutes, 9 April 1942.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

clear public support for a 'socialist policy', and a wartime general election was impracticable.⁸⁸ Pouring scorn on Laski's proposition that the Conservatives should be confronted with a choice between submitting to blackmail or the collapse of the Coalition, Attlee again raised the spectre of electoral rout in warning that, if Labour pulled out of the government 'when things looked black', the party would be perceived as having run away from its duty, with 'disastrous' consequences in an election – 'we should be out of it'.⁸⁹ Just as he and Bevin had done in late 1941, a defiant Attlee once again rejected the notion that formal nationalisation of industry was necessary, and declared that 'It [is] not true to say...that Labour was doing all the 'giving' and the Tories all the 'taking'. The Tories [hold] the other point of view'.⁹⁰

Attlee turned back Laski's attack, but only narrowly. The 'general feeling' of a divided NEC was that, though that there was much dissatisfaction with the government's measures, the break-up of the Coalition would be 'disastrous'.⁹¹ As he had over the unpopular by-election coupon, then, Attlee – lacking any more sophisticated means of bribing his followers – had got his way, and seen off Laski, by an open appeal to the instinct of simple self-preservation. It is again worth reiterating that the relevance of all this to the Greenwood issue seems doubtful. Rather, the struggle had been a duel between Laski and Attlee over the party's course, with that issue simply exploited by the former as a means to strike at the leader he despised. However, though Attlee had succeeded in putting his enemy back in his box – before long, Laski, fuming at his failure to galvanise the party into a break with its leaders, was raging impotently at Attlee that 'If you don't want to give a lead, get out and give way to someone who will' – nonetheless his victory was a very limited one.⁹² The clash constituted a vicious attack on his leadership and, worryingly, one which clearly attracted considerable sympathy in the upper echelons of the party. Laski's assault thus demonstrates how vulnerable the position of Labour's representatives had become. With both the NEC and PLP increasingly uncertain about the Labour ministers' course, and the party gripped by a near-constant series of crises, for Attlee, it was a 'victory' in name alone.

IV

Things soon got worse for the leaders in March 1942, when a new crisis developed which acted to destabilise the already fragile Labour party even further. It is also worth re-focusing our interpretative prism slightly here, for this latest split was centred upon Attlee's great rival and the

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Hull, Laski papers, Laski to Frida Laski, 23 June 1942.

party's heir apparent, Morrison, over the employment of his repressive powers as Home Secretary. As a result, it not only inflicted considerable fresh damage to the authority of the leadership group as a whole, but also to Morrison personally. Attlee's rival thus remained centre-stage in party affairs, though not quite in the way that he would have wished. Despite his high public profile, the period 1941-2 had witnessed little progress for Morrison's ambition to usurp Attlee. Having spent much of 1939-40, and parts of 1940-1, attempting to do just that, in the period analysed in the current chapter his fortunes stood at a low ebb, frustrated in his efforts to prepare the way to become leader by a lack of opportunities. Moreover, the controversies aroused by some of his actions as Home Secretary – particularly the suppression of the *Daily Worker*, and willingness to censure the press – still hindered him, as evidenced by his significantly reduced support in the 1941 elections for both the Administrative Committee and the NEC. This fall in popularity did not augur well for a man dedicated to becoming leader, particularly with Attlee himself arousing profound disillusionment. Moreover, the mood of crisis which was afflicting the party was not predicated upon hostility to Attlee specifically, but the leadership group as a whole, both depriving Morrison of the possibility of exploiting this situation and forcing him to co-operate with the other leaders. He was even compelled to forego efforts to rhetorically cleave Attlee away from the party, to which he had devoted energy in the past, and join with his rival in resisting the challenges to the Labour ministers' ascendancy.

Now the position of the heir apparent was weakened further, when Morrison employed his powers against sedition, under defence regulation 2D, to warn the mainstream *Daily Mirror* to cease undermining 'national morale' in its published output, or face severe consequences.⁹³ The threat provoked much opprobrium within Labour's ranks, the Home Secretary becoming the subject of vilification far worse than during the *Daily Worker* episode a year earlier.⁹⁴ But Morrison refused to back down, lest it be thought that he had 'surrendered to the Bolshies'.⁹⁵ Bevan immediately launched into a feud with Morrison that would last thirteen years, by trying to put down a Commons motion opposing the decision – amounting to a vote of censure on the Home Secretary.⁹⁶ He hawked it around Labour MPs, asking for their support to give the leadership another bloody nose.⁹⁷ But though the Administrative Committee relented to pressure from the leaders by quickly denouncing Bevan's efforts as 'intolerable', a third of Labour MPs voted in favour of his censure motion at a party meeting.⁹⁸ The Welshman had successfully stirred

⁹³ CAB 65/25, WM 32 (42), 9 March 1942; CAB 65/25, WM 35 (42), 18 March 1942.

⁹⁴ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 24 March 1942; Ede Diary, 25 March 1942 (pp. 66-7).

⁹⁵ Morrison interview with W. P. Crozier, 28 May 1942, cited Taylor, *Off the Record*, p.322.

⁹⁶ Ede Diary, 25 March 1942 (pp. 66-7).

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid; PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 24 March 1942; PLP minutes, 25 March 1942; Ede Diary, 25 March 1942 (p.67).

up a hornet's nest. In a debate on the freedom of the press in Parliament on 26 March, which turned into the biggest Commons set-piece attack since the fall of Chamberlain, Bevan – who had ostentatiously stayed away from the PLP meeting, presumably in order to ensure that his confrontation with Morrison was a public one – humiliated Wilkinson, the Home Secretary's closest ally, and then crossed swords with Morrison himself in an explosive encounter.⁹⁹ Both men manoeuvred for support in a vicious exchange, hurling insults at one another and attempting to undermine the credibility of the other. Bevan assailed the Home Secretary for insincerity in being so determined to defend 'national unity' when it was something he had shown little concern with when himself using the *Daily Mirror* as a platform to undermine the Chamberlain government, reading out embarrassing excerpts from Morrison's articles.¹⁰⁰ The rebel declared that 'I do not like the *Daily Mirror*, and I have never liked it. I do not like that form of journalism. I am sure the Home Secretary does not take that view. He likes the paper. He is taking its money'.¹⁰¹

Morrison fired back that Bevan's friend Michael Foot was currently working for the offending publication, but Bevan challenged Morrison to be as personal as he liked: 'As far as I am concerned, I do not mind how direct the right hon. Gentleman is, because in this matter, the harder the hitting the better I like it. But the right hon. Gentleman will not be able hit back as hard as I can hit him'.¹⁰² In a devastating attack on the Home Secretary, Bevan – the lone Fox – then went on:

I [am] suggesting that the right hon. Gentleman in his writings in the *Daily Mirror* did many things which he is now accusing the *Daily Mirror* of doing...He is the wrong man to be Home Secretary. He has been for many years the witch-finder of the Labour Party. He has been the smeller-out of evil spirits in the Labour Party for years. He built up his reputation by selecting people in the Labour Party for expulsion and suppression. He is not the man to be entrusted with these powers because, however suave his utterance, his spirit is really intolerant...The right hon. Gentleman exorcised with bell, book and candle from the Labour Party a gentleman who has now been taken into the War Cabinet (Cripps)...It is a shameful record.¹⁰³

Morrison was apoplectic and, fending off constant interjections from Bevan and Shinwell, targeted the Welshman in response, caustically calling Bevan 'comrade', deriding him as 'thoroughly irresponsible', and pointing out that Bevan attacking him for writing for the *Daily Mirror* was hypocritical as 'My hon. Friend has written, I believe, for the *Daily Express*, the

⁹⁹ Ibid; *Hansard*, vol. 378, 20 March 1942, cols. 2247-92.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Evening Standard, and other organs of enlightened opinion'.¹⁰⁴ The Home Secretary then exposed the façade of Bevan's position by charging that there had been 'considerable manoeuvres' among the rebels to ensure that the government's offer to hold a division was rejected, and embarrassed Bevan by implying that he had shirked the opportunity for a vote because he knew that in reality he could command little support.¹⁰⁵ But though the balance of the argument perhaps lay with Morrison, it was Bevan who had landed the most damaging blows, portraying the Home Secretary as a repressive dictator. Coupled with the unpopularity of many of his other decisions, the episode inflicted severe damage to Morrison's standing in the eyes of the Labour party, and he was subjected to fierce press attack.¹⁰⁶

It was yet another destabilising outbreak of discontent. It was, moreover, deeply wounding, and humiliating, to Morrison personally. As his biographers observed, 'it was not a happy experience' for the Home Secretary.¹⁰⁷ For all the earlier efforts to mark out his own credentials as leader, his popularity had fallen significantly during the preceding twelve months, and the episode reinforced both the contradictory nature of Morrison's tactics in pursuit of Attlee's job – his determination to win the support of the party, but caring little for what it thought – and that, though he enjoyed a more public role than his rival, this was in an office that rarely produces popular decisions. Yet, while Attlee would perhaps not have been particularly worried by a blow to the standing of his leading rival, in the present climate any adverse vote would be seen as a vote against Labour's membership of the Coalition, and he was forced to vigorously defend the Home Secretary at the PLP.¹⁰⁸ In addition, in getting the better of Labour's leader-in-waiting, Bevan's strategy of staying away from the PLP meeting had been vindicated. In choosing the time and place of their encounter this also again reinforces the perception of Bevan as an attention seeker. A commanding performance and demonstration of his abilities at parliamentary harassment, the row confirmed Bevan's rapid emergence as the PLP's most prominent rebel figure in the wake of Shinwell's self-destruction.¹⁰⁹

The leaders had suffered a series of public schisms with their followers over four long months of internal strife, precipitating the collapse of Attlee's efforts to keep internal tensions low. The

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Morrison was denounced by *The Times*, *Manchester Guardian*, *News Chronicle* and even the *Daily Herald*, while a mass protest was held in London – *Daily Express*, 12 April 1942.

¹⁰⁷ Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.300.

¹⁰⁸ Attlee was compelled to help protect his rival, snapping at Bevan during a PLP meeting in February that those who railed against Morrison's suppression of the press would be living under the Nazis in Europe – PLP minutes, 11 February 1942; Ede Diary, 11 February 1942 (p.49).

¹⁰⁹ Bevan was already making demands to the Commons that the government satisfy him personally in its legislation. See, for example, the debate on the Determination of Needs Act, *Hansard*, vol. 378, 12 March 1942, cols. 1275-9.

result was a state of open conflict. The situation in early 1942, it must be noted, was unfavourable all around, with the Japanese on the rampage and Germany once again on the offensive. Political and public morale sunk very low. The pervasive mood of disenchantment in the party should thus be seen in this context of a renewed sense of 'crisis'.¹¹⁰ The willingness of the Labour party to obey its leaders was now questionable at best. The seriousness of this situation was reinforced around the same time, when a fresh bid to remove the Labour ministers from the Administrative Committee altogether was made by a backbencher, and Bevan, Shinwell, and Griffiths, among others, spoke in favour of reversion to traditional Opposition.¹¹¹ Attempts were made by senior figures to argue against the suggestion, Morrison warning of the dangers of the party dividing into two camps, and Pethick-Lawrence threatened that if Churchill sprang a 'coupon' election only Labour's representatives in the government would survive, but these were largely ineffective, and it was only an intervention by Greenwood – who followed Attlee in now no longer basing his arguments on high sounding principles but simple self-interest – that persuaded the NEC and Administrative Committee that the status quo should be maintained.¹¹² The deputy leader warned that both national unity and 'Labour's future' would be 'gravely imperilled' if the PLP formed an 'Opposition'.¹¹³ With their authority so repeatedly rejected, the party openly dissatisfied, and their prestige low, from early 1942 the collapse of the leadership group's balancing-act through mass revolt seemed a real possibility. This was a position which could hardly have been more different to that of a year earlier. Only common sense, and the blunt truth of Attlee's doctrine – responsibility or electoral annihilation – was preventing the party from casting off its restraints.

With the annual Conference – sure to be the scene of more disorder – approaching, in April, Attlee attempted to respond forcefully to the increasing likelihood of rebellion against the Coalition. As a result, he resumed his efforts of the previous autumn to force the Labour and Conservative parties closer together, giving further indications of his developing views on coalition. Yet, in doing so, the leader committed what was perhaps his biggest blunder of the war to date, for in his determination to protect the government's flank he picked an unnecessary fight with his followers. After a wave of by-election defeats for the government in early 1942, there was a sense within the party that Labour should be placing itself at the head of this tide of anti-Conservative feeling. Some local Labour parties opted to defy the truce and assist Independents;

¹¹⁰ Ede feared that if these crises continued, an 'alternative government' named in the House on 12 March by the Conservative, Captain A.S. Cunningham-Reid, and including Shinwell, Griffiths, Clem Davies, Earl Winterton, Sir John Wardlaw-Milne, and Sir Roger Keyes, would actually start to be taken seriously – Ede Diary, 17 March 1942 (p.64).

¹¹¹ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 3, 10 & 17 March 1942; PLP minutes, 4 & 11 March 1942; Ede Diary, 4, 10 & 17 March 1942 (pp. 60-4); Dalton Diary, 11 March 1942 (p.391).

¹¹² NEC and PLP papers, Arthur Greenwood, 'The Labour Party and the Future', March 1942.

¹¹³ Ibid; Ede Diary, 4 March 1942 (p.60); NEC papers, joint meeting of NEC and PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 26 March 1942.

by March, the Coalition had lost two by-elections where this occurred.¹¹⁴ A worried Attlee returned to the issue of the truce and now went even further than the joint ‘coupon’ he had secured the previous October.¹¹⁵ His new measures represented another effort to entrench the Coalition as a feature of the British political landscape, at least until he, not his followers, decided otherwise. In early April, he proposed to the NEC that speakers from the Labour party should now actually be able to appear on Conservative platforms at by-elections, and vice versa, to speak in support of the government candidate.¹¹⁶ While this proposal makes patently clear the leader’s refusal to permit his party to derail the government, Attlee was widely seen to have given even loyalists a clumsy poke in the eye.¹¹⁷ The result was a very public fight to the finish in the approach to the Conference as he attempted to impose the new policy.

Though he secured the backing of other Labour ministers, when put to the NEC the proposal sparked another fierce row.¹¹⁸ Dalton’s view was ‘Are we in favour of the government or not? Are we in favour of the war or not? If the answer to both questions is yes...how can we refuse to support a member of the government, who happens to be either a Tory or a Liberal, against an opponent of the war?’, but, after an energetic defence of his proposal, Attlee did again manage to procure the support of a majority of the Executive for the measure.¹¹⁹ Yet this success quickly turned out to be *still* not enough for the leader; despite heavy criticism from Laski and others, as well as a myriad of rank-and-file protests, Attlee ignored the opposition and pressed on even further, determined to take Labour even deeper into the cross-party alliance as a means of preventing its escape.¹²⁰ With this policy in hand, in early May Attlee now proposed still more extensive intervention on behalf of Conservative and Liberal candidates.¹²¹ He was assisted by the fact that the NEC Elections sub-committee – through which by-election policy was directed – was comprised, besides Attlee himself, of Shepherd (the National Agent), Middleton (the General Secretary) and the miners’ James Walker, all of whom backed his latest proposal.¹²² The leader thus turned the sub-committee into his personal instrument. On 13 May, it recommended to the NEC that Labour henceforth adopt a formal policy of giving official backing to all government

¹¹⁴ NEC Elections sub-committee minutes, 27 March 1942.

¹¹⁵ Attlee had in fact made fresh efforts to strengthen the truce immediately after the National Service Bill revolt. In January, he submitted a memorandum, ‘Platform Propaganda’, to the NEC, in it emphasising the necessity of not launching any efforts at ‘party aggrandisement’ for the sake of Labour’s political future – NEC papers, Attlee memorandum, ‘Platform Propaganda’, January 1942; NEC minutes, 28 January 1942.

¹¹⁶ NEC minutes, 9 April 1942.

¹¹⁷ See *Daily Herald*, 15 April 1942; *Tribune*, 14 & 21 April 1942.

¹¹⁸ NEC minutes, 9 April 1942; Dalton Diary, 9 April 1942 (p.408).

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*; NEC minutes, 9 April 1942.

¹²⁰ NEC papers, Laski memorandum, 3 May 1942; See also, for example, NEC papers, letter from South Wales Regional Council of Labour, 14 April 1942.

¹²¹ NEC Elections sub-committee minutes, 13 May 1942.

¹²² *Ibid*.

candidates at by-elections.¹²³ This was a significant extension of his ‘coupon’ policy, and even his efforts of the previous month, where he had wanted to have the *option* of backing the candidates of other parties; now he wanted to enshrine a firm *obligation* to do so. Moreover, it was to be Attlee’s Elections sub-committee, not the NEC itself, which would determine the form that intervention in each case would take.¹²⁴ Under the plan, the sub-committee would be able to compel the local Labour party to employ its machinery in support of the government candidate.¹²⁵ Evidently, then, the leader did not see the splits within the party as any reason to divert from his tried-and-tested methods of manoeuvring his followers into a position where they had little choice but to follow him; rather, Attlee redoubled his efforts.

The deputy prime minister, and the other senior figures as well, had now moved away from a mere truce and towards much stronger emphasis on their alliance with the Conservatives.¹²⁶ Moreover, not only was Attlee throwing in his lot with the Conservatives, but he was demanding from his party not simply passive, but *active*, support for the Churchill government. Short of dissolving the parties, it is difficult to see what more explicit signal Labour’s leaders could have given of their unwillingness to permit disruption of the status quo. The extent of their commitment to the alliance they had crafted, as well as their growing impatience with divisions along conventional party lines, could not be clearer. Coupled with the statements by both Labour and Conservative politicians on the strength of their partnership cited earlier in the chapter, the mental direction in which the country’s leading politicians were travelling is clear. Yet Attlee’s amended proposals were a step too far for most of the Labour party – the earlier version had been contentious enough – and, when the NEC considered the plan on 22 May, just three days before the opening of the annual Conference, it was rejected.¹²⁷ A formal stance of supporting Conservatives was seemingly too much.¹²⁸ But, despite this, the party leader was not defeated yet, for with the Conference imminent Attlee had the advantage that an official position of some sort had to be formulated, and quickly. As a result, the NEC tasked the Elections sub-committee with redrafting its recommendation and, days later – with the Conference actually underway – Attlee submitted a virtually identical proposal, with the added caveat that the ‘views’ of local parties would be taken into account.¹²⁹ Whether this amounted to a significant shift is questionable. But with the Conference having begun, the NEC needed a policy, something which no doubt

¹²³ NEC Elections sub-committee minutes, 13 May 1942.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Dalton certainly backed the new stance, as did Morgan and Shepherd. There is no indication of opposition from either Bevin or Morrison; presumably they supported the policy as well. Given the line adopted by the latter at Conference, this supposition seems likely to be accurate.

¹²⁷ NEC minutes, 22 May 1942.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid; NEC minutes 25 May 1942.

encouraged Attlee to cynically resubmit his original idea. This time the NEC accepted the proposal, and instructed the Elections sub-committee to begin implementing it, authorising stringent disciplinary sanctions of disaffiliation or 'reorganisation' against local parties which violated it.¹³⁰ The NEC also affirmed Labour's support for the electoral truce.¹³¹

In spite of needlessly picking a fight – the number of by-elections where local parties broke the truce was sustainable, and Attlee could have waited until after the Conference to suggest the measure – the Labour leader had won through. Every bit as much as his manoeuvring and careful positioning during the phoney war, if we examine Attlee's posture from 1942 to 1945 it is possible to identify a consistent strategy in his attempts to bind the party into its alliance with the Conservatives in an all-party government. Whether he had already come to favour extending the lifetime of the Coalition is impossible to ascertain, but, as we have seen, others were certainly thinking along these lines. At the very least, he was keeping all of his options open, and post-war coalition was indeed soon to become his preference. Attlee's latest unilateral initiative represented an important success, securing a formal policy of positive intervention on behalf of Labour's coalition partners and an additional means of protecting the ministers' membership of the government with measures which were dangerous to publicly dissent from, and further tacit threats of electoral rout. Attlee had managed to place his party in a position where it was virtually impossible for it to break with the course he had chosen without the risk of shattering its political credibility.

V

Of course, the prospect of being routed did not mean that the Labour party would cease its efforts to escape these restraints. Despite Attlee having secured the measures he sought, the Conference was a difficult event, a public demonstration of the weakened position of the Labour ministers and the conflicts which now gripped the party. The hostility of recent months was unleashed, and a similarly antagonistic event was not to be witnessed until the notorious 1952 Conference at Morecambe. Attlee made a strong speech to open the event, calling for a return to unity and warning that

We have had two years of working in this government, and there may be some who think that we have now turned the corner in this war and can afford to return to party strife... They make a great mistake. In partaking in this government we necessarily had to work with those who do not share our views... We

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

cannot dictate to others the acceptance of our socialist programme...in the give-and-take of government...you have to work by agreement.¹³²

His arch-rival Morrison – giving the first of several notable wartime Conference performances – joined with him, the two old enemies again working together to shore up their position.¹³³

However, the Home Secretary did little to mollify the delegates with an uncompromising attack on discontent fully in keeping with the ‘witch-finder’ image depicted by Bevan:

The main point that is worrying delegates is that Labour ministers...are not getting all their own way. Anybody who says we are not getting any of it is really talking nonsense...The fact is that this party is never happy when it is in government. It is not happy with Labour in this government, because the Party has got too much the mind of perpetual opposition, because it has too much of the perpetual minority complex, and because some of you have too much of the perpetual inferiority complex as well.¹³⁴

This was astonishing, an open attack on the party by the man who styled himself as its leader-in-waiting. Rather than attempting to bridge the gap between the Labour ministers and the party, Morrison had revelled in it, displaying his combative instincts to the full. Morrison, however, was displeased at being put in this position, complaining to a journalist that ‘I have to do all the dirty work [of defending the official line] on these occasions. Really it’s Attlee’s job, not mine, but they put it to me...when there’s a really nasty job like this I have to do it’.¹³⁵ He ascribed the party’s instability to Attlee personally, blaming him for ‘too much soft leadership in the past’.¹³⁶ The leaders did make substantive efforts to appease their followers with their keynote policy statement on reform, *The Old World and the New Society*, which had been written by Laski but re-drafted to actually make its proposals *more* detailed – a clear indication of their desperation to find a position which would resonate with the rest of the party.¹³⁷ Though it still stopped short of calling for reform during the war itself, it did represent a significant shift by the leadership in a willingness to be more explicit.¹³⁸ This signified their recognition of that fact that, if support was to be retained, they would have to offer more concrete declarations of intent. As a result, for the first time they broke with the practice of making reassuring, largely vague pronouncements. The document was adopted unanimously.¹³⁹

³² 1942 LPACR, pp. 99-100.

³³ 1942 LPACR, pp. 102-4.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Morrison interview with Crozier, 28 May 1942, cited Taylor, *Off the Record*, p.322.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ NEC minutes, 4 February 1942 & 22 April 1942; NEC Reconstruction sub-committee minutes, 10 February 1942; *The Old World and the New Society* (Labour Party, 1942).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ 1942 LPACR, p. 142.

Yet these proposals were populist, and hence hardly likely to precipitate a new round of conflict. The difficulties facing the Labour ministers in maintaining the backing of the rank-and-file instead became apparent elsewhere, when they sustained several severe public humiliations. Morrison again came under fierce attack for his suppression of the *Daily Mirror* and, in a vitriolic debate, his manner towards the delegates earlier in the Conference proved a mistake.¹⁴⁰ A new attempt to censure him was put forward and defeated by the humiliating margin of just 13,000 votes.¹⁴¹ This was a *very* narrow result. Moreover, for the Home Secretary himself, it constituted yet another major blow and acute embarrassment, having come dangerously close to being censured by the party he intended to lead. Given his usual popularity with the rank-and-file, it was a double indictment. The internal standing of the Labour ministers then hit rock bottom in the election to the NEC constituencies section, when Laski, Shinwell, and Griffiths topped the poll, and Morrison fell to sixth out of seven elected.¹⁴² An even more damaging rebuff came, however, in the crucial debate on the maintenance of the electoral truce. This amounted to a referendum on membership of the Coalition itself. The disappointment with the government was given free rein in the debate that Laski had earlier identified as the means to overthrow Attlee.¹⁴³ Bevan made a fiery denunciation of Attlee's co-operation with the other parties, while local delegates joined with several major unions – the MFGB, NUDAW, NUR and AEU – in opposing continuation of the truce and calling for a return to open party conflict.¹⁴⁴ Morrison made another stern defence of the official line, but the scale of the internal conflict within the Labour movement was now clear.¹⁴⁵ In the end, the Conference voted to maintain the truce, but only by another humiliating majority of just 66,000 votes.¹⁴⁶ As a vote on the leadership group's strategy over the preceding three years, it was hardly a ringing endorsement. Labour was now divided between those who wanted to end the Coalition and those who wanted to continue it; moreover, many of those who backed the leaders were themselves profoundly disillusioned, and there was no guarantee that they would continue to do so for long. The defection of several unions with large bloc votes was especially worrying. Fifteen months of crisis had ended with the leadership group almost toppled from their tightrope. They had come within less than 70,000 votes of overt repudiation of the Coalition, something which would have provoked a very difficult test of loyalty for the Labour ministers, and makes clear how fragile support for the core of Attlee's strategy – membership of the government – had become. The Conference had seen the leaders suffer the most damaging

¹⁴⁰ 1942 LPACR, pp. 122-30.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² NEC papers, 'Result of Conference ballot', May 1942.

¹⁴³ 1942 LPACR, pp. 145-50.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

rebuffs they had yet been subjected to, and the Labour party was now in a state of undeclared civil war. The success of Attlee and the others in securing a powerful position in office, and the extension of state power, counted for little with a party left bored by their journey. Though defeat – which might have brought down the Coalition, or precipitated a formal schism – had, for the time being, been averted, by mid 1942 the position of the leadership group was more tenuous than ever.

VI

The phrase ‘what a difference a year makes’ could hardly be more appropriate. Whereas the initial eight months of the war had seen Labour willing to be quiescent, something largely duplicated in the first year of office, the second year of cross-party alliance had seen an explosion in opposition to both the government and their own leaders. Attlee and the Labour ministers were clinging on, the attacks they had suffered evidence of the fact that their strategy was increasingly rejected by a party restless and no longer having to worry about the prospect of a cross-channel expansion of the German Reich. By the middle of the war, the possibility of a decisive schism between them and their followers, in the form of the party crossing effective ‘red lines’ for the Labour ministers, looked a very real one, with all their attempts to steady the ship coming to naught. Further, as the chapter has shown, Attlee’s ability to impose his authority was now uncertain, and the leadership compelled to set their personal animosities largely aside. Only common sense and a will to political survival were preventing wholesale revolt. It is certainly true that disaffection would not precipitate a schism if it did not translate into outright rejection of the leaders and government, and, as a result, the Labour ministers still retained their positions. But the party had stared into the pit at the annual Conference, while the leaders’ grip on the parliamentary party was particularly weak.

Though symbolic questions of ‘nationalisation’, ‘reconstruction’, ‘the future’, and ‘peace aims’ exerted much influence, there is in fact surprisingly little evidence of much of a coherent role for ideology, or wartime radicalisation, in these conflicts. The above phrases were just that, phrases, and the party’s protests lacked much in the way of specificity or substance. There is little clear evidence of detailed thought within the party about those issues which so moved it. It can instead be suggested that the conflicts were largely about simple boredom and the powerlessness to which Attlee had condemned the Labour party in 1939-40. The concern of the primary dissentients seemed more to lie with the prosecution of personal vendettas or self-advertisement, as analysis of when and how they agitated, and the things they seemed concerned with, would suggest. Moreover, these people were now openly favourable to ending the Coalition. While

alliances between parties invariably produce disappointment, it is not perverse to suggest that the leadership were in fact victims of their own success; they had seized the reins so tightly, clustered power in their own hands so effectively, that the Labour party was left not only bored but deprived of much in the way of an identity. Its leaders, Attlee chief among them, plainly thought of it as a troublesome charge on their time. Attlee had devoted himself not to mollifying Labour, which presumably he now realised to be impossible, but to corralling the party into a closer bond with the Coalition. His measures again emphasise his willingness to drag the Labour party with him and make it conform to his choices. Despite the difficulties of this period, the events of 1941-2 thus again rebut the image of a collegiate, indecisive leader, and his willingness to bully, coerce, and cajole his followers is clear to see. The leader's moves towards strengthening the Coalition, which, if they had not already, were to soon evolve into a plan to avoid a return to political independence once the war was over, constituted the most significant development in politics since the fall of Chamberlain, and would have a major impact on the course of Labour politics for the duration of the conflict. But it also reinforces the closed nature of the political nation, and, crucially, how far senior actors now perceived their interests as lying with each other rather than with their respective parties. Harold Macmillan observed that 'all the symptoms are developing which marked the end of the Asquith coalition (a coalition of parties) and the formation of the Lloyd George coalition (a coalition of personalities)'.¹⁴⁷ Attlee's by-election 'coupon', and his decision to commit the party to support all government candidates, signalled his determination to preserve and deepen that alliance against Labour pressure.¹⁴⁸

A precipitous decline had thus occurred in a previously well-ordered situation. That the leaders had been able to thwart these feelings for so long, and manoeuvre their way into such a powerful role in the interregnum, had been a major advance; but it did nothing to lessen the problems which confronted them now. Further, this situation was to barely improve for the remainder of the war. Attlee, already a relatively unpopular leader, had antagonised his followers deeply, while his great rival Morrison had twice only narrowly escaped formal censure. The tightrope that the leadership had chosen to walk in 1939 was looking dangerously frayed, and, with his followers on the verge of turning against him, Attlee's party management skills were to be put to their most severe test in the months ahead.

¹⁴⁷ Cited in Taylor, *Beaverbrook*, pp. 494-5.

¹⁴⁸ Moreover, the documentary material reveals no evidence whatsoever of any split among the leadership group on these tactics.

Chapter five – Crisis

This intermingling of crises and questions about the future was not to decline in significance over the subsequent year, as the continued anxiety about the Coalition, fears that the Labour ministers were failing to capitalise on a national mood which was swinging away from the Conservatives, and the emerging possibility of post-war alliance exacerbated the discontent confronting the party's leaders. New and damaging outbreaks of restlessness – over the progress of the war, coal and the Beveridge report – aggravated Labour's instability. As seen in the preceding chapter, the law of diminishing returns meant that, the more the leadership called for 'responsibility', 'patriotism', and 'patience', the less effect it had. The disillusionment of the party towards its leaders which had erupted in 1941-2 now reached its crescendo.

Attlee and his colleagues thus found their position continuing to weaken, at the head of the Labour party but struggling to actually direct it. Moreover, as during the previous twelve months where they had been forced to rely on their political proxies, now they were thrown onto the power-brokers of last resort of the Labour movement, the trade unions. Recurrent struggles between a disaffected party and a resolute leadership group culminated in the revolt over the Beveridge report, the biggest schism of the war. By 1942-3, the leaders were at best able to muster ad hoc party management, responding to events as they occurred. Any concerted strategy, such as had been pursued during the early stages of the war, was now impossible. The Labour ministers continued to try to balance the tensions under which they lived, but Attlee, Morrison and the other leaders were also willing to dig their heels in and fight vigorously against their followers. Labour politics thus became increasingly adversarial and, finding themselves powerless to arrest this, or broker a compromise, the leaders were forced to turn implacable. Besides examination of these crises, this chapter will also consider a series of incidents in which real opportunities were on offer and which demonstrate the divergent roles played by individuals in collectively giving substance to this account of the Labour party's internal politics between 1939 and 1945. Labour had never been in this position of political power, having previously only been in office for two short spells. Such sustained access to power, and influence over legislation, constituted a shock to the system of the party, and posed problems and presented opportunities its members had never had to deal with. This underlines and binds together the two core elements of the thesis – one an analysis of party management, leadership control, and opposition to this, and the other a story about individuals. Each is only viewable, and comprehensible, through the lens of the other. The key actors within Labour politics played the political system with which they were confronted in distinctive ways – those inside it played it by running it; others played it in an attempt to establish themselves sufficiently to be brought within it; some sought to establish a

new system. The fact that people still behave in this fashion, even when their options are in many cases limited (for some, there were few immediate opportunities to climb the 'greasy pole') serves to underline the value of this interpretation of the political world. Crucially, the period also saw a return to personal conflict between the leaders themselves, something which would then dominate the final two years of the war, as the Attlee-Morrison rivalry was at last fought out. This re-emerged in Morrison's new efforts to prepare the way to become leader. Attempting to rebuild his damaged position, he sought to exploit his high public stature and seize key internal levers. At crucial moments in the chapter, this was central, particularly in the response to Morrison's plotting of his most implacable enemy, Bevin. Attlee, meanwhile, sought ways to re-establish his own authority over the party. He also worked to throw up new obstacles to the destruction of the Coalition, and began to move stealthily towards the possibility of continuing the government after the war.

I

The issue of nationalisation erupted into another clash just weeks after the Conference over the government's new proposals for the coal industry, as embodied in Dalton's White Paper.¹ The President of the Board of Trade had extracted the measures through the teeth of Conservative opposition. Yet his proposals nevertheless fell short of the 'requisitioning' of the mines that the Labour ministers had fought for as an alternative to nationalisation; the White Paper instead proposed a system of dual control between mine owners and the state.² Greenwood enthusiastically welcomed the policy in the Commons and, employing heavily the language of socialism, stated that the White Paper attacked the 'vested interests' of the coal industry who worked against the 'public interest', contrasting this with the patriotism shown by the miners.³ But the effort to line Labour up alongside the government was upset by Griffiths, who made an aggressive speech calling for outright public ownership, while Bevan declared coal a 'test case' of the ministers' influence.⁴ At the annual Conference, Arthur Deakin, Bevin's replacement at the TGWU, had further shaped Labour's attitude in ways unfavourable to its ministers by putting down a motion calling for nationalisation of coal, a resolution passed by both the NEC and the Conference delegates despite the protests of the leadership.⁵ Though an amendment that

¹ *Hansard*, vol. 379, 7 May 1942, cols. 1451-78.

² See Dalton Diary, 21 May to 6 June 1942 (pp. 437-45).

³ *Hansard*, vol. 379, 7 May 1942, cols. 1475-85.

⁴ *Hansard*, vol. 379, 7 May 1942, cols. 1550-59; *Tribune*, 22 May 1942.

⁵ 1942 LPACR, pp. 118-20.

explicitly called for nationalisation even if it meant the break up of the government was defeated, the prevailing mood of the Labour party was clear.⁶

As the proposals made their way through the Commons the following month, with the feeling being that the government had ‘sold-out’ the miners, the prospect of another large Labour rebellion seemed credible, and Dalton’s threat that the ministers would be compelled to resign if not supported by Labour MPs cut little ice.⁷ In the end, a revolt was indeed averted and the leadership’s position preserved – but only in a manner which underlined the limits to their authority and dependence on others. The trade unions were more welcoming than the political wing to the White Paper, perceiving it as a beneficial step forward, particularly in the setting up of an official wages body and a National Coal Board.⁸ Union pragmatism and willingness to accept incremental reform was therefore crucial, and the NCL backed the government, formally giving a lead to the rest of the Labour movement to do the same.⁹ The Labour ministers were thus saved from the wrath of their followers by the intervention of the unions. At the NEC, the NCL’s position proved decisive, and the Executive, reversing its earlier position, voted to give support to Dalton’s proposals.¹⁰ Bevin declared that the miners would ‘miss the chance of a lifetime’ if the White Paper was not implemented, while Greenwood argued that, as the miners’ union had accepted the proposals, Labour MPs could hardly reject them.¹¹

In June, at a joint meeting of the NCL and Administrative Committee, heavy union representation and ‘overwhelming’ support for the policy put further pressure on the PLP to fall into line, Will Lawther and Arthur Horner speaking forcefully to that effect.¹² Eventually, MPs reluctantly agreed to abide by this.¹³ In the Commons, Bevan alone strongly opposed the government’s proposals (declaring them ‘unworthy of the nation’ and terming Bevin’s powers ‘fascism’), and the White Paper was approved by 329 votes to eight.¹⁴ It was an important reprieve. Moreover, the Labour ministers had pushed for the White Paper in the first place because they thought it ‘very important’ to ‘give something to the [miners]’ and the restless Labour party on ‘psychological grounds’, offering further evidence of the way in which the party’s senior figures saw themselves as operating, and the fact that many of their initiatives within the government

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Tribune*, 5 June 1942; Dalton Diary, 4 June 1942 (p.454).

⁸ NCL Coal sub-committee minutes, 5 June 1942.

⁹ Ibid; NCL minutes, 6 June 1942.

¹⁰ NEC minutes, 8 June 1942.

¹¹ Ibid; Dalton Diary, 20 May & 21 May 1942 (pp. 440-3).

¹² Administrative Committee papers, minutes of joint meeting of NCL and Administrative Committee, 8 June 1942.

¹³ PLP minutes, 10 June 1942.

¹⁴ *Hansard*, vol. 380, 11 June 1942, cols. 1269-1302, 1346-50.

remained carefully-calculated by attention to the mood of their followers.¹⁵ Given the buffeting they had been subjected to almost constantly since 1941, it is doubtful that their authority could have survived a full-scale revolt over this most totemic of issues. In the end, the pressure of the trade unions proved critical, and a potentially decisive clash was avoided.¹⁶ But this had little to do with the efforts of Attlee and the others, however, who, as far as the documentary evidence reveals, had been unable to muster any coherent response. They were instead saved by trade union willingness to accept a formal role for the state in running the mines.

Confronted with this alarming loss of the political initiative, over the summer of 1942, Attlee and the leadership were compelled to pursue ways of re-establishing their position. For a full year they had found themselves with only a limited ability to influence events; now they sought to place themselves back in the driving seat. That the leaders did so during the period when the war reached its most disastrous phase is indicative of their fear for the continued tenability of their positions. Yet Attlee also persisted in his manoeuvring to strengthen the Coalition against those who wanted to destroy it and, in doing so, ensure that Labour's political future was dependent on his judgements alone.

Within days of the end of the Conference in late May, Attlee sought to capitalise on his victories for the new position on the truce by attempting to consolidate total control of the policy in his own hands, and remove the influence of the party altogether. Having given no intimation of his thinking just days earlier, Attlee now proposed that the NEC's method of administering the by-election 'coupon', whereby the Executive authorised him to issue the signed statement on a case-by-case basis, would lead to 'undesirable conclusions [being] drawn' if candidates did not receive endorsement in a timely fashion.¹⁷ Attlee – or at least the Elections sub-committee which he dominated – then proposed that the leader himself should be assigned authority to act as he saw fit.¹⁸ Attlee's criticisms therefore represented a convenient smokescreen to gain personal control of the policy. Having already clustered oversight into the Elections committee rather than the NEC itself, this latest measure – like the others proposed out of the blue – enabled the leader to further marginalise critics and deprive them of a voice. Moreover, Attlee was creeping his way towards a position where, by establishing certain political norms of non-opposition for the other

¹⁵ Dalton Diary, 27 May 1942 (pp. 446-7).

¹⁶ In late June, as the coal row neared its end, another spat blew up when some MPs supported an ILP amendment in favour of nationalising the mines. Greenwood and the Administrative Committee, believing they had already navigated the party away from being shipwrecked on the issue, were incredulous, and some were in favour of expelling the rebels altogether. After assurances of future obedience were offered, however, the controversy died down – PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 23 June 1942; Ede Diary, 23 June 1942 (p.80).

¹⁷ NEC minutes, 27 May 1942.

¹⁸ NEC minutes, 7 July 1942.

parties, an environment would be created in which political co-operation would be consolidated and he himself would be free to take the crucial decisions about the Coalition. He had certainly reduced the possibility of the Labour party being able to break with the truce while the war continued. Moreover, as above, though it was not yet clear *at this point*, a consistent intellectual trajectory can be identified between these attempts to protect the coalition and later attempts to preserve it. The proposal was accepted by the NEC, and Attlee thus secured the ability to plough on with his adherence to coalitionism, unfettered by the need to constantly persuade and win the acquiescence of his followers.¹⁹

But the leaders, in alliance with their remaining supporters, also undertook measures which were more likely to prove conducive to appeasing their antagonised party than Attlee's defence of the Coalition. It was, in fact, Greenwood who took the leading role in this, suggesting in June to the NEC that a way to lift the party's mood would be to revive the tactic of publishing a battery of official literature and new policy statements.²⁰ These measures had earlier proven valuable in mollifying anxieties about inaction and 'stasis' by giving an impression of activity. Greenwood appealed to the Executive for the 'immediate issue' of 'directives on policy' for the 'guidance of the movement'.²¹ He proposed an energetic new strategy of policy statements and pamphlets on Labour's ideas for the post-war period, as well as reiterating the success it was experiencing in power.²² The deputy leader also wanted this new raft of measures to include lengthier, more substantive booklets to be produced (the publisher was to be Penguin) as well as increased publicity via the BBC, and £1,000 was allocated to producing a propaganda film about the history of the party.²³ Just as these methods had been employed earlier in the war, they were again explicitly intended as a tactical device to emphasise that the Labour party was not atrophying and its leaders remained energetic in advancing its concerns.²⁴ Further, Greenwood called for Percy Cudlipp, the editor of the *Daily Herald*, to henceforth be invited to attend NEC Campaign sub-committee meetings, so as to facilitate greater publicity for the work of the Labour ministers, as well as outlining similar arrangements with *Reynolds News* and other Labour and Co-operative newspapers.²⁵ As had been the case between 1939 and 1941, it was a deliberate attempt to reshape the political environment through employment of a certain kind of rhetoric and activities. These tactics, therefore, still consciously represented the core of the party management strategy

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ NEC Press, Publicity and Campaign sub-committee minutes, 16 June 1942.

²¹ Ibid. It was quickly agreed to publish a pamphlet entitled *Labour in War Time*, on the advances in social policy secured by the ministers and their role in running the country.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

practiced by the leaders and their subordinates. Cudlipp proved amenable, and suggested that the *Daily Herald* 'was not being used to its maximum potential' as an organ for the official line.²⁶ He also intimated that he would be 'serviceable' to diverting pressure away from emphasis on reform during wartime and towards future reform instead, as well as concentrating more upon the war effort itself.²⁷ Cudlipp asked for 'early guidance' to co-ordinate this.²⁸ The NEC agreed to Greenwood's proposals to change the mood of the party, deciding to set up a standing committee to be led by Greenwood, Citrine and Cudlipp, which would in future determine the 'publicity' treatment of the issues facing Labour.²⁹ This episode can be seen as offering important insights into the true nature of political leadership and party management, with leaders suddenly deciding they had better churn something out in order to keep their followers happy. It also raises questions about how important policy-making – as divorced from *politics* – really is; given the perception of parties as essentially policy-creating machines, this point is potentially significant.

In some respects, the new acting head of the PLP was playing a similarly important role to that which he had carried out between the summer of 1939 to May 1940. He was certainly reinvigorated by leaving office, Ede recording his view that Greenwood was very good in his new job and skilled at handling meetings.³⁰ However, we should also strike a note of caution about the alcohol problems Greenwood continued to suffer; Dalton, for example, noted that he turned up to a dinner with an Australian Labour politician 'half-squiffed' and 'quite deplorable'.³¹ He later wrote of the deputy leader that 'it used to be said in Whitehall...that 'the poor old chap couldn't even sign his name after midday''.³² The personal effectiveness of the head of the parliamentary party aside, though, these new tactics, coupled with a decision to restrict speeches at PLP meetings to five minutes (which would not apply to the Labour ministers themselves, however) in a transparent bid to undercut the platforms of the rebel orators who troubled them, as well as an increase in meetings of the Administrative Committee, and later a ruling that all Commons motions had to be passed to that body first for approval, demonstrate that, by the summer of 1942, the leadership group, rather than retreating, had in fact dug their heels in and were mounting fresh attempts to rebuild their primacy over the party.³³

²⁶ NEC Press, Publicity and Campaign sub-committee minutes, 14 July 1942.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ede Diary, 9 June 1942 (p.77).

³¹ Dalton Diary, 12 May 1942 (p.435).

³² Dalton Diary, 15 June 1943 (p.607).

³³ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 7 July 1942; PLP minutes, 8 July & 11 November 1942; Ede Diary, 12 November 1942 (p.107). If a motion was put down against the decision of the Administrative Committee, disciplinary sanctions, including expulsion from the parliamentary party, was threatened.

II

These efforts to bolster the authority of the leadership were, however, quickly challenged by a threat to the Churchill government's very existence following further military disaster in the fall of Tobruk. After the British defeat, Churchill's personal fortunes, and those of his government, reached their nadir, and it seemed that even with the United States in the war the Axis powers still could not be defeated. The Conservative dissidents, Sir John Wardlaw-Milne and Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, took the opportunity to move against the prime minister by putting down a Commons motion of no-confidence and questioning the government's ability to direct the war.³⁴ This provoked much disagreement as to how Labour should react. Some saw it as an opportunity to consolidate with Conservative rebels and strike at the very foundations of the government, while to the Labour ministers the issue was yet another crisis for persuading their followers to continue backing the Coalition. Bevan, scenting blood, argued in favour of the party aligning itself with Wardlaw-Milne and Keyes, while a strong speech by Attlee against any collusion with the censure attempt had little impact, the PLP only backing the call to oppose the no-confidence motion by a mere three votes.³⁵ A major rebellion by *both* Labour and Conservative MPs seemed to be in the offing, and even Bevin now doubted whether the government could survive this convergence of military and political crises.³⁶

Several days later the leaders tried to shore up support at another PLP meeting, Attlee and Bevin defending the government's ability to direct the war, stressing that victory would come now that the USA had entered the conflict and making appeals to patriotism.³⁷ It also became evident here how formidable the Attlee-Bevin axis could be when deployed in anger. Attlee gave what Ede described as the most forceful speech he had ever heard the leader make, asserting that Labour could not just naively censure the prime minister individually, for it was the Cabinet – and hence the Labour ministers – that was collectively responsible for the prosecution of the war, and thus to censure the government would be to censure their own leaders.³⁸ Attlee also pointed out that it was he, not Churchill, who had been in charge when Tobruk fell, the prime minister being away in Washington.³⁹ The party leader outmanoeuvred those sympathetic to the censure by demanding that the PLP vote there and then on whether they would support or oppose Wardlaw-Milne's no-

³⁴ Ede Diary, 24 June 1942 (p.81); see also *Hansard*, vol. 381, 1 July 1942.

³⁵ PLP minutes, 24 & 25 June 1942; Ede Diary, 24 & 25 June 1942 (pp. 81-2); Dalton Diary, 25 June 1942 (p.460).

³⁶ Churchill College, Cambridge, A.V. Alexander papers, 6/1/3, Bevin to Alexander, 21 June 1942.

³⁷ Ede Diary, 30 June 1942 (p.82); PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 30 June 1942.

³⁸ Ede Diary, 30 June 1942 (p.82).

³⁹ Harris, *Attlee*, p.199.

confidence motion.⁴⁰ Bevin also weighed in with a speech that ‘shattered’ the rebel position, warning the PLP to ‘watch’ those among them who ‘ran with this gang [the Wardlaw-Milne group]’.⁴¹ He charged that the Conservative rebels wanted to force Labour from office – intimating that those MPs who supported them were betraying the party.⁴² He then threatened that the leadership would deal with them ‘drastically’.⁴³ This was one of the few occasions since Bevin had become an MP that the full force of his dominating personality was on show for all the PLP to see, Labour’s most powerful figure rolling straight over the dissidents. His demolition of the rebels aroused much enthusiasm, and, in the vote forced by Attlee, the PLP now voted overwhelmingly to oppose Wardlaw-Milne.⁴⁴ It was a major reassertion of the Labour ministers’ authority.

This success was reinforced when the crucial Commons debate on 1 and 2 July – potentially the most dangerous moment the government had yet faced, and reminiscent of the fall of Chamberlain – saw the rebel position descend into farce when Wardlaw-Milne and Keyes made the blunder of advocating that the Duke of Gloucester be made Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces; this was ‘very ill-received’, particularly because the theme of the argument was that the Duke was ‘the least mental’ member of the Royal Family.⁴⁵ Though Bevan launched a furious attack on Churchill that was perhaps his greatest speech of the war, in the end only eight Labour MPs rebelled for a vote of twenty-five against the Coalition’s 475.⁴⁶

Despite the small scale of the revolt, the PLP’s governing body was furious, particularly as Bevan had indicated that he would fall into line.⁴⁷ Ede thought it ludicrous that any Labour MP could vote with those who saw Beaverbrook as an alternative prime minister and wanted to dismiss both Morrison and Bevin.⁴⁸ Greenwood was tasked with interviewing Bevan, but that the Welshman again attracted so much individual attention confirms that he was now emerging as a major

⁴⁰ PLP minutes, 30 June 1942.

⁴¹ Ede Diary, 30 June 1942 (p.82).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid; PLP minutes, 30 June 1942.

⁴⁵ *Hansard*, vol. 381, 1 July 1942, cols. 224-47; Dalton Diary, 1 July 1942 (p.462).

⁴⁶ *Hansard*, vol. 381, 2 July 1942, cols. 527-41, 610. Bevan, in the highpoint of his parliamentary skirmishing, charged that ‘The country is now more concerned with the Prime Minister winning the war than with his winning a debate in the House of Commons. The Prime Minister wins debate after debate and loses battle after battle. The country is beginning to say that he fights debates like a war and the war like a debate.’ He also asserted that Churchill did not grasp the nature of modern war, stating that he conceived of war ‘in medieval terms...as if it were a tourney’, before making another plea to launch an immediate second front – where he hoped the landing forces would be accompanied by MPs! Foot had argued that it was here that Bevan ‘stepped into his place as a debater of the first order, the only living rival to Churchill in the parliamentary art’ – Foot, *Bevan*, p.377.

⁴⁷ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 7 July 1942.

⁴⁸ Ede Diary, 4 July 1942 (p.84).

political figure in his own right – perhaps not in a party sense (as evidenced by his lack of impact in Administrative Committee and NEC elections), but in Parliament, and the wider public consciousness.⁴⁹ Unlike Shinwell and Laski, Bevan had orbited on the outer edges of the Labour party solar system like a rogue comet, but he was now moving rapidly inwards – insofar as he could not be controlled.

Yet this unexpected success quickly proved to be another false dawn, as Labour was gripped, just weeks later, by another rebellion, the biggest since the party entered office, and then a further outbreak of rancour between Attlee and his enemy Laski. The revolt occurred over the government's new proposals for pensions, perceived by Labour opinion to be a gratuitous slap in the face by not including a commitment to a flat-rate increase. Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence wanted the PLP to support the government, and concocted with Bevin the obvious fix that if he would give assurances in the Commons that the matter would be looked at afresh the following year, a Labour amendment calling for a larger increase in the basic pension rate would be withdrawn.⁵⁰ Yet this stance was at odds with the general tenor of MPs, and even when Bevin gave the arranged assurances the PLP refused to back Greenwood on the floor of the House.⁵¹ Shinwell would not let the amendment be withdrawn, and forty-nine Labour MPs went into the lobby against the government, while only fifty-seven voted with the Coalition – twenty of whom were members of the ministry anyway.⁵² Three members of the Administrative Committee also joined the rebellion, and the rest of the parliamentary party abstained.⁵³ This was the largest revolt by Labour MPs since May 1940; in spite of the recent attempts by the leadership group to reassert themselves, it is clear how tenuous their control remained. Ede heard the view that this latest schism would signal the end of the truce, while, at the Administrative Committee, the PLP Secretary, Scott Lindsay, and Shinwell had to be physically separated when the latter argued that Greenwood and the rest of the Committee had violated the agreed line by backing the government.⁵⁴ Greenwood was seething at the defiance of his authority, threatening that he would have to 'consider his position', and the ministers warned that such revolts could trigger the collapse of the government.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 7 July 1942; Ede Diary, 14 July 1942 (p.86).

⁵⁰ PLP minutes, 23 July 1942; Ede Diary, 23 & 29 July 1942 (pp. 87-8); PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 28 July 1942.

⁵¹ *Hansard*, vol. 382, 29 July 1942, cols. 641-61; Slowe, *Shinwell*, p.197.

⁵² Ede Diary, 30 July 1942 (pp. 88-90).

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Ede Diary, 29 July 1942 (pp. 87-8), & 30 July 1942 (pp. 88-90); Slowe, *Shinwell*, p.197; PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 30 July 1942.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*; Ede Diary, 30 July 1942 (pp. 88-90).

Following this public break between the Labour party and the government, the Commons was kept in recess as much as possible over the summer and autumn of 1942, meeting only fifteen times between August and November. But the sense of crisis within the party raised its head again shortly afterwards, with the outbreak of a fresh clash inside Labour's institutional machinery between Attlee and Laski. As in their past feuding, Laski's hostility towards the leader took the form of a vicious attack which prompted Attlee to explode. Between July and September 1942, Laski published a series of articles in *Reynold's News* which were scathing in their criticism of the Labour ministers, employing provocative language and hurling public accusations of betrayal. To cite merely a few examples, Laski stated that the Coalition was doing 'less than their elementary duty' in not implementing socialist reforms, and took aim at the party leader directly in suggesting that 'No one...can point to any serious effort by Mr. Attlee to make the idea of a partnership with the people a conscious part of the Prime Minister's policy.'⁵⁶ Under the headline 'Leaders are Paralysed' Laski absolved Greenwood and the PLP of responsibility for the current difficulties, charging instead that 'paralysis' had 'settled down like a blight' on the Labour ministers.⁵⁷

The articles precipitated a furious response. The NEC Organisation sub-committee unanimously agreed that they were 'reprehensible and deserving of censure'.⁵⁸ Laski then aggravated this by publishing another article in which he again argued in favour of demanding reform from Churchill via the explicit threat of ending the Coalition.⁵⁹ His language seemed intended to antagonise his adversaries – and it succeeded. When the NEC met on 23 September, the leadership were incredulous, wanting to see Laski publicly demolished for his attempts to turn the party against them.⁶⁰ Laski, rather than being a troublesome but *internal* nuisance was in fact – as evidenced by the frequently public nature of his assaults on Attlee, the audience he reached as a political columnist, and his consistent topping of the polls in the NEC elections – their chief *public* enemy as well. The Executive agreed to hold a special meeting to 'consider the powers [of the NEC]' – an obvious allusion to the possibility of expulsion.⁶¹ Certainly, Dalton felt that the union boss Sam Watson wanted Laski out of the party altogether.⁶²

⁵⁶ *Reynold's News*, 12 July 1942.

⁵⁷ *Reynold's News*, 9 August 1942.

⁵⁸ NEC Organisation sub-committee minutes, 18 August 1942.

⁵⁹ *Reynold's News*, 6 September 1942.

⁶⁰ NEC minutes, 23 September 1942; Dalton Diary, 23 September 1942 (p.494).

⁶¹ NEC minutes, 23 September 1942.

⁶² Dalton Diary, 23 September 1942 (p.494).

That the Labour ministers had decided to carpet Laski once and for all is reinforced by the fact that Bevin, not a member of the NEC, was invited to attend the special meeting on 12 October.⁶³ Described by Dalton as the ‘inquest into the misdemeanours of Laski’, this and another meeting on 28 October were the major confrontations between the leadership and their accuser.⁶⁴ They have been described by Laski’s biographer as ‘the stuff of high drama’, witnessing a protracted demolition of the rebel figure.⁶⁵ Attlee and Bevin led the counter-attack themselves, provoking Laski to reveal his effort to persuade the Minister of Labour to challenge the leader, as well as denying the principle of collective responsibility and claiming that he had a ‘right’ to appeal to the wider Labour movement if the NEC would not listen to his criticisms of Attlee, who he had ‘completely lost confidence’ in.⁶⁶ But this was a mistake, and his loyalty was consequently called into question.⁶⁷ Watson and other union figures now definitely favoured expulsion, and Shinwell, perhaps fearing that he would be next, wasted little time in telling Dalton his view that Laski ‘ought to be expelled’.⁶⁸ However, just when it seemed that Attlee would give Laski a decisive bludgeoning, at the last moment the attempt to do so was suddenly frustrated by Morrison.⁶⁹ Labour’s heir apparent entered the fray and restrained the assault by Attlee, Bevin, and Watson by advocating a conciliatory middle course, emphasising that while Laski’s criticisms were ‘more public than was desirable’, he did not want to ‘muzzle’ Laski, and simply asked Attlee’s *bête noire* to give an undertaking not to attack the leaders through the press in the future.⁷⁰ Laski agreed, pledging to only make personal critiques within the confines of the NEC, and he escaped a bid to expel him by thirteen votes to four.⁷¹ It seems likely that Bevin and Attlee were two of those who opposed Morrison’s solution.⁷² Morrison had frustrated the efforts of Attlee and Bevin to deal with their enemy. The Minister of Labour was furious at the failure to get rid of Laski, continuing to berate him after the vote had been taken.⁷³

Why did Morrison, a natural opponent of dissent, impede the efforts of the leadership group and union figures to permanently squash Laski? Certainly, Morrison had reasonably good personal relations with Laski, but the Home Secretary was ruthless in opposing the efforts of rebels to alter

⁶³ NEC minutes, 23 September 1942.

⁶⁴ Dalton Diary, 12 October 1942 (pp. 500-1).

⁶⁵ NEC minutes, 12 October 1942; Kramnick and Sheerman, *Laski*, p.444.

⁶⁶ NEC minutes, 12 October 1942; Dalton Diary, 12 October 1942 (pp. 500-1).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ NEC minutes, 12 October 1942; Dalton Diary, 23 September 1942 (p.494) and 12 October 1942 (pp. 500-1).

⁶⁹ NEC minutes, 28 October 1942.

⁷⁰ Ibid; Dalton Diary, 28 October 1942 (p.509).

⁷¹ NEC minutes, 28 October 1942.

⁷² Ibid. The others were probably Watson and F. J. Burrows; Burrows had seconded Watson’s attempt to get the NEC to consider expelling Laski.

⁷³ Ibid.

Labour's course. The most credible explanation is that it was of benefit to Morrison if Attlee failed to expel his most recalcitrant critic and re-establish his authority. Thus, while he remained unwilling to brook challenges to Labour's position in the government, to suddenly step in here on Laski's behalf was in fact consistent with both Morrison's past and future response to a certain kind of dissent. It may have been politically astute in the context of his long-term ambitions, but it was also dangerous. Morrison was certainly taking a gamble in playing both sides. Yet he had used Laski as a Trojan horse against Attlee eighteen months before, and he now protected the leader's biggest critic once again. As Brooke has observed, it was no coincidence that Laski was an energetic supporter of Morrison's July 1945 leadership challenge.⁷⁴ Moreover, the Home Secretary was already in the process of restarting his campaign for the leadership. That same day, Wilkinson relayed to Dalton the news that her patron, having been consumed with the demands of office since 1940, was now once again in 'running order' and 'taking much interest in wider questions', particularly the future of the Labour party.⁷⁵

It is therefore almost certain that the Home Secretary was thinking along these lines when he blocked Attlee and Bevin's moves to expel Laski. The fulfilment of his ambitions would require the destruction of the leader's position, and it cannot have escaped Morrison's attention that Laski was well placed to assist in this. The Home Secretary also received a significant boost to his public prestige in November, when he was appointed a member of the War Cabinet, replacing the discredited Cripps, and entering the government's inner circle. He was now on a par with Attlee and Bevin, and, as his biographers have noted, Morrison's 'star was shining'.⁷⁶ Along with the Minister of Labour, he far surpassed Attlee as a national figure, and was probably the most recognisable Labour politician in Britain.⁷⁷ The Home Secretary had, therefore, turned his attention back to the task of winning the leadership, and was doing so from a much improved position. His popularity with the PLP had also recovered.⁷⁸ Holding one of the country's key offices, matched only by Bevin and Churchill as a public figure, and perceived as a man of action and dynamism, Morrison occupied a strong platform for the campaign to replace Attlee which would dominate the rest of his war. Given the near-collapse of his position earlier in the year, this

⁷⁴ Brooke, *Labour's War*, p.98.

⁷⁵ Dalton Diary, 28 October 1942 (p.510). This 'interest' was clearly intended in the context of the leadership, Wilkinson making clear that she was still in favour of seeing Dalton as Morrison's deputy.

⁷⁶ Morrison's promotion was warmly welcomed by the press – see, for example, *Daily Express*, 23 November 1943, *Reynold's News* (which called him 'about the best administrator we have discovered...since Lord Haldane), 29 November 1943, and *The Times*, 26 November 1943; Donoughue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.313.

⁷⁷ Labour published a pamphlet of his recent speeches, under the title *The Spearhead of Humanity*, in late 1942 – NEC Campaign sub-committee minutes, 17 November 1942 and 19 January 1943.

⁷⁸ His standing had much improved since the previous year; in the elections for the Administrative Committee, Morrison climbed to fourth place in the poll – PLP papers, 'Results of Ballot for Administrative Committee', 21 October 1942.

turnaround was even more remarkable. Not for the first or last time, Morrison rebounded with a vengeance, and the question of the leadership was to bubble beneath the surface of Labour politics until 1945.

III

The pensions and Laski affair, meanwhile, did little to assist party stability, as was seen when fresh attempts to remove or reduce the Labour ministers' membership of the Administrative Committee in September and October were only narrowly defeated, Greenwood's casting vote maintaining the status quo.⁷⁹ Stacking the Committee with ministers was key to the leadership's ability to win acquiescence, but the fact that most of the party's pool of talent were already ministers, and removing them would lead to the Administrative Committee consisting of only 'a poor rabble', counted for little against the mood of hostile Labour MPs.⁸⁰ Morrison reacted furiously against the principle of a weakening of ministerial representation – a rather different type of stance from his position when frustrating Attlee several weeks before – but though the leaders had responded more forcefully in recent months, displaying some of the tactical versatility which characterised their conduct earlier in the war, their ability to control their followers evidently remained tenuous at best.⁸¹ The true scale of this power vacuum became clear when the biggest single crisis to affect the political nation between 1940-5 blew up at the end of the year, over the government commissioned study on reconstruction planning, the Beveridge report.

The schism which had been threatening for two years – between those who were within the government and those who were not – thus finally occurred. The Labour party's view on the report was one of expectation – expectation that the government would agree to implement it. Yet Labour's sense was that the government did not take post-war planning seriously. On 10 November, Laski communicated to his wife his view that Attlee's leadership was in danger over the issue of reconstruction, for he had been vigorously attacked at the PLP on the issue.⁸² Shortly before Beveridge was released, Pethick-Lawrence moved a motion in the Commons that the government take 'the necessary legislative and administrative action to implement [reconstruction] without delay'.⁸³ Even Greenwood dismissed the idea that 'post-war planning should be relegated to post-war days'.⁸⁴ The deputy leader thought it sustainable for there to be

⁷⁹ Ede Diary, 7 & 30 September 1942 (pp. 94, 97-8); PLP minutes, 30 September 1942; Dalton Diary, 30 September 1942 (p.498).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Ede Diary, 30 September 1942 (pp. 97-8).

⁸² Hull, Laski Papers, Laski to Frida Laski, 11 November 1942.

⁸³ *Hansard*, vol. 385, 1 December 1942, col. 1043.

⁸⁴ *Hansard*, vol. 385, 1 December 1942, cols. 1043-54.

intense division on reconstruction without it harming the government; as was soon to become clear, this was pure fantasy.⁸⁵ While it was inevitable that an issue such as reconstruction would excite Labour, even Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence publicly nailed their flags to this mast. When the Beveridge report was finally published in December, it was seized upon by the entire spectrum of 'progressive' opinion in the country as a blueprint; though Beveridge himself was a Liberal, the report lit a fire under the Labour party, and became nothing less than a national phenomenon, tapping into a mood of hope for the future after the privations of war.⁸⁶ Bevan demanded in *Tribune* that the government accept Beveridge, and placed the onus upon the leadership to ensure this was done, writing that 'we hope...that the Labour party and the trade unions will go all out for adoption [of the report]...it is now in Labour's hands'.⁸⁷ The following week, Bevan exploited the mood of optimism which accompanied the turn of the military tide at El Alamein by advocating the break-up of the government and a return to conventional party politics, arguing that the Coalition had now served its purpose and Labour would be in a stronger position outside it.⁸⁸

Yet the government refused to be swept up in this popular feeling, and was unwilling to implement the Beveridge proposals during wartime on grounds of cost. This was deeply resented, whether or not it reflected financial realities. The Labour ministers were thus implicated in a posture which failed to reflect the acclaim given to the report, and the spectre of betrayal was raised once again. This was undoubtedly misplaced, for they had fought determinedly for a warmer reception from the government.⁸⁹ But they found themselves in an exposed position nonetheless. On 15 December, a joint meeting of the NEC and Administrative Committee welcomed the report as 'a great advance in the social services', identifying it as the basis for post-war reform, and the NCL expressed a similar view.⁹⁰ The objections of Attlee and the Labour ministers about the impossibility of implementation during the war were overruled, and a motion passed that the NEC and Administrative Committee 'accepts the emphasis of [the report] upon the importance of giving effect to the general policy...before the end of the war'.⁹¹ Rebuffed by the NEC, this was a major slap in the face for the leadership group, and further evidence of their lack of control over the different sections of the Labour movement. It was quickly exacerbated

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Within three hours of its publication, 70,000 copies had been sold. Weeks later, an opinion poll showed that 88% of the country supported its implementation – Harriet Jones, 'The Conservative party and the welfare state, 1942-1955' (unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of London, 1992), p.70.

⁸⁷ *Tribune*, 4 December 1942.

⁸⁸ *Tribune*, 11 December 1942.

⁸⁹ There is much material on the arguments and debate within the government in CAB 65, 66 & 67 from November-December 1942, as well as CAB 71 & 87 (the Reconstruction committee).

⁹⁰ PLP papers, minutes of joint meeting of NEC and PLP Administrative Committee, 15 December 1942; NCL minutes, 17 December 1942.

⁹¹ Ibid (my emphasis).

when the NEC tasked the PLP with ‘improving’ the scheme when it was debated in the Commons, in effect giving MPs formal license to harass the government.⁹² The reluctant stance adopted by the Coalition thus put the leadership group at odds with *every* institutional arm of the Labour movement – the NEC, PLP, TUC and Co-operative movement. This was the most dangerous gulf between the Labour ministers and their followers yet to occur.

Entirely isolated, the clamour against Attlee and the other ministers persisted into 1943. Moreover, out of the blue, a new desire to remove ministerial influence from the PLP’s governing body suddenly surfaced, and, in this mood of hostility, a majority of the Administrative Committee now decided that, at the next annual election, the ministerial representation would be cut to just five, barely twenty percent of the membership.⁹³ This was a severe blow to the already precarious ability of the leadership to direct their MPs, and sure evidence of the degree to which Beveridge had turned the tide against them once more. In early February, with it becoming clear that the approaching Commons debate on Beveridge was to be the scene of a major confrontation between the PLP and the government, the Administrative Committee moved further away from its ministers in agreeing to put down a motion in the House expressing Labour’s wholehearted support for the report and demanding that it be implemented without delay.⁹⁴ Greenwood, sensing the likelihood of a major split, did not want to vote against the government, but it seems doubtful that anything could have stopped a mass revolt.⁹⁵

With the Labour ministers caught helplessly between the Conservatives’ reluctance and the PLP’s fury, the threat of a withdrawal of their party’s support for the government now loomed. It was also possible that Churchill could be provoked into dissolving the Coalition and fighting an election. The leadership group thus desperately intensified their efforts to secure a more enthusiastic response from the Coalition. Morrison, particularly, was vigorous, agitating within the government on the issue. As Addison has observed, the Home Secretary therefore emerged as the leading champion of Beveridge, pressurising the Coalition for a pledge to adopt the scheme.⁹⁶ Yet, as will be seen more fully below, in associating himself so closely with the report, Morrison was also continuing a new personal campaign of partisanship and appealing to Labour opinion in a way quite at odds with his reactionary attitudes towards dissent. The explanation for this is again that, to the Home Secretary, there was obvious political capital to be had in establishing himself as the report’s most ardent supporter. In late January 1943, he circulated a Cabinet paper

⁹² PLP papers, minutes of joint meeting of NEC and PLP Administrative Committee, 15 December 1942.

⁹³ The precise date of this is unclear, as the records do not seem to have been preserved. See Administrative Committee papers, untitled memorandum, circa mid December 1942-mid January 1943.

⁹⁴ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 10 February 1943.

⁹⁵ PLP minutes, 27 January 1943; Ede Diary, 27 January 1943 (p.117), & 17 February 1943 (p.120).

⁹⁶ Addison, *The Road to 1945*, pp.222-3.

on Beveridge in which he asserted that ‘finance is within very wide limits a handmaid of policy’, and argued that the report

represents a financial burden which we should be able to bear, except on a number of very gloomy assumptions. I can see no need to make or act upon such assumptions. I should certainly not like to have to expound or defend them to a nation bearing the full burden of total war.⁹⁷

For Morrison to agitate on Beveridge was, for the moment at least, a win-win situation. Yet he was not the only figure to put pressure on the prime minister. With the Commons debate imminent, Attlee too fought to secure last-minute concessions, submitting to Churchill a lengthy memorandum:

I doubt whether in your inevitable and proper preoccupation with military problems you are fully cognisant of the extent to which decisions must be taken and implemented in the field of post-war reconstruction *before* the end of the war. It is not that persons of particular political views are seeking to make vast changes. These changes have already taken place...My contention is that if...it is not possible...to have a general election...the Government and the House of Commons must be prepared to take responsibility not only for winning the war but for taking the legislative and administrative action which is thought necessary for the post-war situation.⁹⁸

Like Morrison, Attlee was pressing for agreement to implement the reforms *during* the war. The Labour leader called for the Coalition partners to co-operate in agreeing to ‘carry through measures which the course of events and public opinion [demand]’, arguing that this ‘was certainly my understanding when I joined the government’.⁹⁹ But, though this had some effect, Churchill giving a pledge to implement what he called ‘Beveridge-type’ reforms after the war, this was not enough to conciliate a PLP determined upon a break with the government.¹⁰⁰

On 16 February, the first day of the critical Commons debate, the government’s primary speakers, Kingsley Wood and Sir John Anderson, gave ‘inept’ performances and failed to emphasise the changes that the Labour ministers had extracted.¹⁰¹ Appeals for loyalty from Attlee and Morrison – the Home Secretary once again shifting his position, and fighting energetically against the party

⁹⁷ CAB 65/18, WM 10 (43) 2, Memorandum by the Home Secretary, 20 January 1943.

⁹⁸ Churchill College, Cambridge, Attlee papers, 2/2/7-8, Attlee to Churchill, no date, but mid-February 1943.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ PRO, CAB 65/35, WM 29 (43), 15 February 1943; *Hansard*, vol. 386, 16 February 1943, col. 1678.

¹⁰¹ *Hansard*, vol. 386, 16 February 1943, cols. 1615-29; Dalton Diary, 16 February 1943 (p.553). This may have been because ‘ninety percent’ of Conservative MPs, including Churchill, were fiercely hostile to the report – Harmut Kopsch, ‘The approach of the Conservative party to social policy during the Second World War’ (unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of London, 1970), p.109.

when the Coalition was under threat – as well as Greenwood, had no impact, and, at Griffith's instigation, the PLP 'overwhelmingly' opted to force a division and make its opposition to the government clear, prompting Bevin to launch into a bitter rant against his own party and declare that, in the words of one observer, 'this is not the kind of treatment he has been accustomed to, that this is not the way they do things in the unions' and that he would 'refuse to go on'.¹⁰² Morrison again tried to secure new concessions from Churchill, while Attlee 'fought like a tiger' against the prime minister, but to no avail.¹⁰³ The Labour ministers were in no-man's land between the Coalition and what they saw as the 'completely irresponsible' Labour party, the PLP seeming to take perverse delight in declaring war on the government of which they were members.¹⁰⁴ The ability of Attlee and the others to continue to straddle the bridge between party and office was in serious doubt. The leaders were now fighting for their political lives, Beveridge having become the embodiment of all the internal tensions which were a by-product of the path chosen by Attlee four years earlier.

Griffiths was cheered by the PLP while moving the anti-government amendment.¹⁰⁵ Already compelled to undermine his recent efforts to prepare for a challenge to Attlee by showing solidarity with the government, it fell to Morrison – who was widely perceived as the government's political trouble-shooter – to wind up the debate on behalf of the Coalition, mounting a last-ditch defence of the Churchill ministry's policy.¹⁰⁶ Though he himself was 'profoundly dissatisfied' with the resistance of the Conservatives – and doubtless at having to struggle against the MPs he was so keen on cultivating – Morrison came out fighting on behalf of the Coalition in what Ede described as the best speech he had ever heard the Home Secretary make.¹⁰⁷ Even Attlee admitted that 'Morrison was first class'.¹⁰⁸ The Home Secretary reiterated the official line that such extensive post-war financial commitments were impossible to enter into, warning the party that their amendment would 'raise constitutional and parliamentary issues of a serious order', a clear and unsubtle reference to the potential break-up of the Coalition.¹⁰⁹ In a

¹⁰² PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 16 February 1943; PLP minutes, 17 February 1943; Ede Diary, 17 February 1943 (p.120); National Library of Wales, Griffiths papers, D3/20-1, draft autobiography; Dalton Diary, 17 February 1943 (pp. 553-4). Yet Bevin's manner was so venomous that that it only further weakened the Labour ministers' position. The backbencher George Barnes replied and, as Dalton recorded in his diary, 'turns them all against Bevin, saying that if anyone threatens to resign because they are unwilling to accept the view of the majority, that resignation should be accepted. This is loudly cheered'. Also Bullock, *Bevin*, vol. 2, p.230.

¹⁰³ Dalton Diary, 17 February 1943 (pp. 553-4).

¹⁰⁴ Ede Diary, 18 February 1943 (pp. 121-2).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*; *Hansard*, vol. 386, 18 February 1943, cols. 1964-75.

¹⁰⁶ *Hansard*, vol. 386, 18 February 1943, cols. 2030-50.

¹⁰⁷ Ede Diary, 18 February 1943 (pp. 121-2).

¹⁰⁸ Bodleian library, Oxford, Attlee letters to Tom Attlee (this collection was acquired subsequently to, and is kept separate from, the main Attlee papers), Attlee to Tom Attlee, 22 February 1943.

¹⁰⁹ Ede Diary, 18 February 1943 (pp. 121-2).

tremendous performance, Morrison spoke for over an hour, covering the details of the report at length and stressing that the Coalition had broadly accepted the plan; it was simply a matter of timing.¹¹⁰ Dalton felt that if Morrison's speech had been made on the first day 'I am quite sure...there would have been no crisis at all'.¹¹¹ Yet, in the end, even he was unable to shore up support from the Labour benches, and in the division, in what Attlee described in typically understated fashion as 'not a good show', ninety-seven Labour MPs revolted against the government, joining with other rebels in registering of vote of 119 against the Coalition's 335.¹¹² Only two backbenchers voted with the government.¹¹³ This was by far the largest rebellion of the war. The gulf of collective Cabinet responsibility which separated the leadership group from their followers was now unbridgeable. Even more damaging to the leaders, since the PLP had formally resolved to do this, their action was not in fact a revolt; rather, the *real* rebels were the Labour ministers themselves. Despite their best efforts, Attlee and the Labour ministers had been publicly rejected by the great bulk of their MPs, and the size of the adverse vote against them seemed certain to deal a fatal blow to their position and the Coalition. Attlee bemoaned to his brother that 'I fear our people cannot ever understand when they've won'.¹¹⁴ The report had been viewed by the Labour party not only as a route to 'Eldorado', as Churchill described it, but an indication of the influence of the Labour ministers within the government.¹¹⁵ They had failed on all counts. With partisan feeling at its height amid the worst political crisis since May 1940, many felt the collapse of the Coalition to be imminent.¹¹⁶

Attlee, Bevin and Morrison were all indignant.¹¹⁷ At a private meeting of the ministers, an 'incandescent' Bevin wanted to demand that the party either expel or publicly acquit him.¹¹⁸ Yet the PLP was hardly likely to back down, and his threat to resign was leaked to the press, further entrenching the divides.¹¹⁹ The Home Secretary, meanwhile, denounced the PLP as a 'suicide club' that would rather have a romantic defeat than victory.¹²⁰ Dalton, however, was more sanguine, believing that despite of the scale of the revolt, while ever the annual Conference

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*; Dalton Diary, 18 February 1943 (pp. 554-6).

¹¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹¹² *Hansard*, vol. 386, 18 February 1943, cols. 2050-54; Attlee letters to Tom Attlee, Attlee to Tom Attlee, 22 February 1943.

¹¹³ *Hansard*, vol. 386, 18 February 1943, cols. 2050-54; Ede Diary, 18 February 1943 (pp. 121-2).

¹¹⁴ Attlee letters to Tom Attlee, Attlee to Tom Attlee, 22 February 1943.

¹¹⁵ CAB 66/33, WP 18 (43), 'Promises about Post-war Conditions: Note by the Prime Minister', 12 January 1943.

¹¹⁶ Ede Diary, 19 February 1943 (p.122).

¹¹⁷ Dalton Diary, 22 February 1943 (p.557).

¹¹⁸ Bullock, *Bevin*, vol. 2, p.232.

¹¹⁹ Dalton Diary, 22 February 1943 (p.557).

¹²⁰ Ede Diary, 22 February 1943 (p.123).

backed the Coalition, the government would not collapse.¹²¹ He argued that the NEC could not *reverse* a decision of the Conference, and hence the leaders should simply sit tight.¹²² Whilst this judgement on the leadership's ultimate strength was in many respects sound, nonetheless a call from MPs, at least, to withdraw from the government was now certainly feasible. Other ministers wanted the NEC and Conference to 'protect' them from the PLP.¹²³ Though the rest of the leadership were far more anxious than Dalton, the general view was that, despite their isolation, they should hold their course.¹²⁴ It is indicative of the priorities, and enjoyment of office, of the Labour ministers, that there is no evidence whatever of any consideration of leaving the Coalition. More concerned with the horizons of government than the limited ones of party, they had no inclination to bow to their followers. Whether the Labour ministers would have remained in office and defied their party if the NEC or Conference had similarly lost confidence in them, or if the PLP actually called for withdrawal from the Coalition, is unknowable; but it is a reasonable suspicion to hold that they would have. At the very least, the extent to which they were willing to stand firm against the party in support of the government of which they were members had been answered.

The day after, 23 February, Attlee told the Administrative Committee and PLP that they had placed the ministers 'in a very difficult position', while Morrison gave the assembled MPs a stern rebuke, reiterating his view that Labour was akin to a 'suicide club'.¹²⁵ But Greenwood seemed 'paralysed' and unable to control the PLP as the dissension continued to rage unchecked, Shinwell openly advocating that Labour should now 'abandon' its leaders – in other words leave the Coalition – while Bevan, rather fantastically, threatened to launch a rival party.¹²⁶ At the NEC, the Labour ministers suffered an even bigger humiliation when attempts to win even the backing of the Executive also proved unsuccessful.¹²⁷ Attlee made a lengthy speech, emphasising once again that the position of the ministers had been 'very adversely affected', and that the Coalition was simply being cautious.¹²⁸ The leader called for it to be remembered that Labour was in a national, not party, government and hence 'it could not be expected that the full Labour policy would be acceptable in its entirety to the other...parties'.¹²⁹ Dalton backed him, and called if necessary for a special Conference to decide the issue – where no doubt trade union bloc votes

¹²¹ Dalton Diary, 22 February 1943 (p.557).

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ede Diary, 22 February 1943 (p.124).

¹²⁵ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 23 February 1943; Ede Diary, 23 February 1943 (p.125); Dalton Diary, 23 & 24 February 1943 (pp. 557-9).

¹²⁶ Dalton Diary, 24 February 1943 (pp. 558-9); Ede Diary, 23 & 24 February 1943 (p.125).

¹²⁷ NEC minutes, 24 February 1943.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

would be employed to deliver a firm mandate.¹³⁰ However, a majority of the NEC still flatly refused to budge, and the Executive reaffirmed its support for the immediate implementation of Beveridge.¹³¹ Yet, most damaging of all, an attempt by two of the remaining loyalists, James Walker and George Ridley, to propose a motion that, despite the split, the NEC still retained confidence in the Labour ministers was defeated by the overwhelming margin of thirteen votes to four.¹³² This brazen refusal to back the leaders further antagonised Bevin, who was by now apoplectic.¹³³ Having already demanded that the PLP either back down or expel him, he now pushed Deakin to disaffiliate the TGWU from the Labour party altogether, a course the latter unsurprisingly rejected.¹³⁴ The affair permanently soured Bevin's relations with the PLP. He thus announced that he would no longer attend PLP meetings, saying that he refused to play 'the party game'.¹³⁵ It would be more than a year before he recanted. With even the NEC's support for the leadership group rejected by a majority of more than three to one, Labour's representatives in the government to be seemed on the verge of formal repudiation.

Yet politics is about people; parties need people to run them. Even at the moment of their greatest vulnerability, the Labour ministers ultimately remained at the head of their party and ensconced in office. At the same time as the NEC was rejecting them, the leadership at last received a boost when the TUC unanimously passed a resolution expressing full confidence in the Labour ministers.¹³⁶ Moreover, the unions were only with difficulty persuaded from passing another resolution *condemning* the PLP for its behaviour.¹³⁷ Similar speeches were made by union representatives at the NCL, and that body also offered its support.¹³⁸ As over the coal crisis the previous year, the schism saw the Labour ministers and the trade unions aligned against the political wing. The union stance was at root about the implications of Beveridge for traditional trade union prerogatives and, defending their territory, the unions thus once again rode to the rescue. This endorsement was the public symbol that the ministers needed, the guardians of the Labour movement confirming that they had not betrayed it. Yet, as much as any declaration of support by the TUC or NCL, the survival of the leaders was because, in the last resort, there were no candidates to replace them with, no matter the opinions of the PLP, NEC, NCL and TUC. Almost all of Labour's impressive figures were in office; who could their followers put in their place? For all the legitimate sense of crisis, then, the Beveridge episode also paradoxically offers

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid

¹³² Ibid; Ede Diary, 25 February 1943 (p.126).

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Bullock, *Bevin*, vol. 2, pp. 231-2; John Parker, *Father of the House* (London, 1982), p.81.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ TUC General Council minutes, 24 February 1943.

¹³⁷ Ibid; Ede Diary, 24 February 1943 (p.126).

¹³⁸ NCL minutes, 23 February 1943; Dalton Diary, 24 February 1943 (p.559).

a demonstration of just how secure the position of the leadership group was between 1939 and 1945: a direct result of their success in party management and of the settlement that Attlee had constructed during the ‘phoney war’, shackling Labour so tightly as to render the leaders essentially irremovable.

With the backing of the unions, the Labour ministers then went onto the offensive. Attlee was tasked with conveying to Middleton that if anyone were to make the NEC’s refusal to support them public, they would call a special meeting of the Executive and demand a similarly public vote of confidence.¹³⁹ It was now the leaders who were making threats, with the prospect of electoral annihilation, and the Labour party being perceived by the country as having ‘run away’ as in 1931, again heavy in the air. This posture afforded Attlee and the rest of the leadership group their best chance of facing down the challenge, refusing to surrender quiescently and instead coming out fighting. Bevin and Dalton both favoured a special Conference to crush the rebellion decisively.¹⁴⁰ The Minister of Labour even advocated that such a Conference be asked to vote on a motion of no-confidence in the NEC itself, launching into another diatribe about the ‘political side’.¹⁴¹ Bevin also believed that the whole episode was a ‘double conspiracy’ aimed at not only bringing down the government but removing Attlee from the leadership.¹⁴² Presumably he suspected Morrison was behind it all – Dalton, for one, thought that was what Bevin was suggesting – but this was hardly a fair assertion, given how vigorously Morrison had fought against the PLP.¹⁴³ But the point is that even this crisis, as so often before, was again instinctively interpreted through the lens of personal enmities. In the end, the Home Secretary weighed in and sought to damp down the splits, proposing that unless reports of the NEC’s action appeared in the press, the Labour ministers should take no further action.¹⁴⁴ It having earlier seemed likely that the government would fall, in the end, politics moved on and the conflict simply lay unresolved.¹⁴⁵ The Labour leaders had survived.

IV

With the Beveridge revolt fresh in their memory, the leadership wasted little time in turning their attention back to the question of political alignments and, in particular, the long-term future of the

¹³⁹ Ede Diary, 25 February 1943 (p.126).

¹⁴⁰ Dalton Diary, 25 February 1942 (p.560).

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. In late April, a gathering of the NEC, Administrative Committee and Labour ministers agreed to allow the dispute to lapse – PLP papers, joint meeting of NEC, PLP Administrative Committee and Labour ministers, 21 April 1943.

Coalition. Moreover, with military victory now increasingly likely – if still a long way off – the issue of ‘the future’ took on a new and increasingly potent significance. The shape of post-war politics thus moved to the top of the political agenda from the spring of 1943, not least in the minds of Attlee and the other Labour leaders. The crisis over the report had, on the most obvious level, perhaps intimated the need for a return to traditional party politics; yet it also lent itself to another interpretation, that the issues facing government were now so important that it would be both dangerous and potentially impossible to pass legislation to deal with them without all-party agreement. If the recent storms were the shape of things to come, this could hardly have been an enticing prospect, not least in comparison to the amiable co-operation with other political leaders experienced by the Labour ministers in the Coalition. In addition to their own inclinations, this was a development informed by a string of by-elections in early 1943.¹⁴⁶ Reconstruction featured heavily in these contests, with Independents pledging allegiance to Beveridge, and Common Wealth, a pseudo-Labour party, making significant headway.¹⁴⁷ Addison is right to identify this spate of electoral contests as amounting to a return to the cut-and-thrust of partisan politics.¹⁴⁸ Like reconstruction, then, the future of the Coalition and Labour’s post-war independence – or lack thereof – became central.

In late March, Churchill broadcast to the nation on post-war policy and put down markers for maintaining the alliance by making reference to the possibility of continuing the Coalition after the cessation of hostilities. His statement aroused much political excitement, both in support and horror. After the broadcast, Morrison and Dalton met to discuss the issue, agreeing that the Coalition could continue, apparently indefinitely, with a general election held with candidates from all three parties designated as ‘Government’ candidates.¹⁴⁹ This was self-evidently a ‘coupon’ election, and a programme for a prolonged arrangement. The parties would run candidates against each other but stand on one common manifesto, simply varying their policy emphasis.¹⁵⁰ Dalton had apparently been in favour of such a scheme for some time and – as subsequent events would confirm – Morrison, who was afraid of a ‘Khaki’ election, was also favourable.¹⁵¹ This planning reinforces the suggestion that the notion of long-term alliance was far from an outrageous one. To what degree they had a genuine desire to stay in harness with the

¹⁴⁶ For example, there were six in February alone.

¹⁴⁷ By 1945, Common Wealth had won three parliamentary seats at by-elections, and won a substantial proportion of the vote at others.

¹⁴⁸ Addison, *The Road to 1945*, p.225.

¹⁴⁹ Dalton Diary, 24 March 1943 (pp. 569-70). Dalton’s account gives the impression that he suggested the idea, and Morrison agreed. However, it should be noted that this was the precise plan advocated by Morrison over the subsequent period, while Dalton seemed more flexible. Perhaps Dalton suggested it and Morrison appropriated it; perhaps Dalton’s account is slightly misleading, and the plan was in fact Morrison’s.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*; Dalton Diary, 16 February 1943 (p.553).

Conservative leaders, or were motivated by tactical calculations to avoid electoral defeat, is impossible to know; they may well have been open to remaining allied with the Conservatives regardless, but Dalton observed of the scheme that ‘something like this may be the only way out’.¹⁵² Whatever their personal preferences, to the leadership group the continuation of the Coalition seemed both a political necessity and an opportunity.

As noted at the beginning of the present chapter, most of the Labour party felt its ministers to be squandering a golden opportunity to establish Labour as the dominant party by exploiting the unpopularity of the Conservatives. The prevarications of its ministers were thus doubly frustrating. The leadership group, however, took a very different view. They were strongly attached to the Coalition and determined to preserve it while ever the war continued. Moreover, as described above, at least some of the ministers already wanted to maintain the government into the post-war period, and there is no sign that any of them were actually *against* that notion. It is unknown if Attlee, for his part, had already come to this view. It is similarly uncertain if he had wanted to continue the alliance with the Conservatives from the start, or whether he had originally favoured a return to political independence. But it certainly became his position. Though these conflicts will be more critical later in the thesis, it is worth introducing here the calculations, and available policy options, which came to so dominate the remainder of the war. As to precisely *why* Attlee came to support extending the Coalition is similarly uncertain. It was widely feared, especially between the Labour ministers, that a return to political independence would only permit Churchill, as a victorious war leader, to smash the party in a Khaki election. The prospect of heavy defeat and a return to Opposition cannot have been attractive. But some were inclined to remain in harness with the Conservatives regardless, both ‘in order for the peace to be worthwhile’, and because of the genuine affinity which had developed between Labour and Conservatives colleagues.¹⁵³ Coalitionism and loyalty to their partners were thus powerful influences. Simple preference for power over Opposition was also significant. Other concerns included that Churchill might spring a ‘coupon’ election – a fear that Attlee’s own by-election ‘coupon’ made plausible – with the result of either annihilating the party or rending it in two, between those who wielded the ‘coupon’ as members of the government and those who did not. Some wished to remain in alliance for a fixed period to allow Churchill’s victory aura to dissipate, while some seemed to be amenable to carrying on indefinitely.

A full range of tactical possibilities therefore existed in political discussion and at the forefront of the minds of politicians. Coalitionism as a force in its own right may have been airbrushed out of

¹⁵² Dalton Diary, 24 March 1943 (pp. 569-70).

¹⁵³ Ede Diary, 6 April 1943 (p.132).

common historical perceptions of the Second World War, rooted in a romanticism about the parties coming together to meet a national emergency and then separating amicably, but in reality this is a caricature.¹⁵⁴ These fears, calculations, preferences, and anxieties featured heavily in what we can discern of the decision-making and mindset of the Labour leaders. It is unfortunately impossible to determine which motivated Attlee himself. For all the Labour ministers, however, the stance they adopted was one based upon a calculation of self-interest (or survival) – as demonstrated by the constant weighing of options over the next two years – even if their views on the most prudent course varied.

The entire core leadership group – Attlee, Morrison, Bevin and Dalton – thus quickly came to favour maintenance of the Coalition after the war for a significant period of time at least. Whilst the fears of electoral rout were undoubtedly significant, that alone cannot account for the general division of the party into two broad camps on this issue, between leaders – who wanted to maintain the cross-party alliance – and their followers – who did not. The coincidence between favouring continuation of the Coalition and also being a member of the government was marked, to say the least, something which indicates the significance of their personal attachment to office and colleagues. The Churchill Coalition had offered an opportunity for the leaders to exercise power, practice their skills, and fulfil their ambitions. By the same token, not only was the rest of the party restless in its straitjacket, but many were more inclined to bask in the easy adulation of the Labour movement itself. Yet it also cannot have escaped the attention of prominent anti-coalitionists, any more than it did the leaders, that if the government continued they would never have the opportunity to enter the party's inner councils. Some of the most vocal dissentients – men like Griffiths, Bevan, and Shinwell – would probably be in a much more influential position if not frozen out by the stasis of coalition. The problem of 'the future' therefore moved alongside reconstruction as the central issue in Labour politics for the remainder of the war. The question even came to eventually provide the ostensible substance of the final struggle for the leadership between Attlee and Morrison over 1944-5. These divergent positions about the post-war period would therefore divide the Labour party much more completely than even the Beveridge report, eventually subordinating all other internal politics to that issue. Though these conflicts will be more critical later in the thesis, it was here, in the spring of 1943, that the preferences of the Labour leaders first became clear.

¹⁵⁴ There seems to this author a subtle, but quite teleological, or at least romantic, historiographical notion that the politics of the 1914-18 war were, in common with that conflict, a destructive and negative force (messy, for want of a better word), while those of the 1939-45 war were, like the war itself, a just, positive and constructive politics, founded on an intention to tie party politics into a political statement about the outcome of the wars themselves. This may be an attractive literary device, but seems problematic. In fact the cross-party alignments of the two wars were not as different as this image would imply.

When the matter of Churchill's speech was raised at the NEC and PLP on 24 March, the leaders attained a minor success when, 'quite amazingly', there was broad agreement by the Executive that to say anything publicly at such an early stage was unwise – a view to some extent replicated even at the PLP.¹⁵⁵ Attlee warded off criticism from the usual rebels, and Greenwood refused to accept a motion that Labour explicitly rejected a future 'coupon' election.¹⁵⁶ Besides this, there was little in the way of the violent reaction which might have been expected. Perhaps this was due to the fact that the party remained more exercised by the aftermath of the Beveridge clash, or that victory in the war with Germany was still a long way off; Dalton, though, suspected it to be because their followers realised 'how completely' Churchill would dominate the political scene.¹⁵⁷ A belief in the near-invulnerability of the prime minister was to be important in the calculations of the Labour leaders up to – and beyond – the eventual collapse of the Coalition. Two weeks later, Attlee addressed the PLP at length on 7 April on the post-war election and Labour's status as an independent party.¹⁵⁸ In an adept performance, which remained vague and inoffensive, Attlee avoided declarations which would inflame the situation. But nonetheless he began, unmistakably, to cautiously lead Labour down this path, arguing that it was sensible to be 'entirely uncommitted and [remain] free' to take a decision on coalition or independence when the right time arose.¹⁵⁹ Attlee also claimed that the Labour ministers had no preference as to the 'political composition' of any future government.¹⁶⁰ The leader was striking a more conciliatory pose than that which he had adopted during the crises of recent months, the issue offering the ministers a profitable symbolic means of emphasising their loyalty to Labour and tethering themselves to the party once again, while simultaneously making the possibility of continuing the Coalition an acknowledged option. Indeed, given that many of the Labour ministers had already come to favour maintaining the alliance with Churchill, their public posture was somewhat disingenuous. Attlee argued that no-one could know the circumstances which would prevail at the end of the war, and hence commitments were foolhardy – a line which offered the leader another argument to deploy now and then utilise in the future as a reason for continuing in office.¹⁶¹ His route was circuitous and incremental, keeping all his options open while being clearly sympathetic to the Coalition. The PLP accepted the statement, Dalton recording that there had been a visible improvement in the mood of MPs.¹⁶² Moreover, Attlee also released his statement on the option of extending the Coalition publicly to the press, something which reinforces the

¹⁵⁵ Dalton Diary, 24 March 1943 (pp. 569-70); NEC minutes, 24 March 1943; PLP minutes, 24 March 1943.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid; Ede Diary, 24 March 1943 (p.130).

¹⁵⁷ Dalton Diary, 24 March 1943 (pp. 569-70).

¹⁵⁸ PLP minutes, 7 April 1943.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid; Dalton Diary, 7 April 1943 (pp. 575-6).

¹⁶⁰ PLP minutes, 7 April 1943.

¹⁶¹ Ibid; Dalton Diary, 7 April 1943 (pp. 575-6).

¹⁶² Ibid; PLP minutes, 7 April 1943.

suggestion of an attempt to prepare the political ground for a bid to continue the government.¹⁶³ Language and instrumentally-employed rhetoric remained Attlee's most valuable weapon.

Regardless of the agreement to avoid commitment, though, the Labour party at large was certainly fiercely opposed to any retention of the cross-party alliance; Attlee had only successfully courted support by appealing to the party's survival instincts. Further, the leaders were quite clearly treading carefully, attempting to avoid the party detecting the plans which at least some of them had developed, so as to avoid the explosive revolt which would be the inevitable consequence. The privately discussed schemes of Morrison and Dalton, for example, were not mentioned to the PLP as far as can be ascertained, but they provide strong evidence of what the leaders were thinking. Attlee's case is less clear cut, his characteristically impermeable mind compounded by a lack of documentary evidence, but if he had not come to favour continued coalition already he soon would. For the moment, there was no sense in affording their followers the time to marshal opposition. Despite these qualifications, however, the agreement still constituted an important step for Attlee, building on his efforts to consolidate the government the previous year. Giving an impression of loyalty, fealty, and non-commitment, and imploring the party not to afford the Conservatives the means to wreck Labour's credibility, the leadership group, long ago seduced by the Coalition's promise of office, were once again ingratiating themselves with their followers while being fully determined to strike out in their own direction. After experiencing his most trying moments of the war in recent months, and being in serious danger of being abandoned by the party altogether in April, Attlee, as so often before, not only survived but turned things to his advantage.

V

It is here appropriate to briefly refocus attention to the last months of 1942, in order to trace the development of Morrison's latest bid to fulfil his career ambitions. Having signalled when impeding Attlee's moves against Laski in October of his intention to renew pursuit of the leadership, Morrison immediately began prosecuting a new strategy. At the heart of this were fresh efforts to expand his personal credibility and depict himself as a more active and partisan representative of the party than his rival. Nailing his flag very publicly to the populist mast of reconstruction which became so important in the build-up to the release of Beveridge, the Home Secretary not only fought determinedly within the government for a more enthusiastic response to the report but heavily pushed the issue outside the government, in the public sphere, as well. Much of this, of course, was a product of his natural commitment to the reforms contained within

¹⁶³ Dalton Diary, 7 April 1943 (pp. 575-6); *The Times*, 8 April 1943.

it, but there was also obvious political advantage to be gained. Morrison began his campaign in November, with a series of major public speeches on reconstruction over the next three months to packed public meetings across the country, ranging as far afield as London, Newcastle, Swindon and Nottingham.¹⁶⁴ In pushing the reconstruction agenda so aggressively against the backdrop of the Beveridge phenomena, Donoghue and Jones have noted that Morrison ‘undoubtedly’ saw the benefits of the campaign for his prospects of seizing the leadership.¹⁶⁵ Hence, in contrast to Attlee’s determination not to rock the Coalition boat, Morrison displayed no such qualms. The Home Secretary thus established himself as the party’s leading champion of Beveridge and advocate of post-war utopia. His speeches were aggressive, highly partisan, and ranged widely, encompassing such subjects as social security and economic and industrial reorganisation, imbued heavily with the language of socialism, and calling for major reform.¹⁶⁶ This was a line somewhat at odds with the caution of Attlee and the other leaders. Morrison was to continue this for over a year, himself describing the purpose as being ‘to stir things up a bit’.¹⁶⁷ The clamour within Labour over the report presented undeniable opportunities to win the affections of the party by portraying himself as an attractive leader. The heir apparent thus began to use reconstruction to mark out a distinctive personal identity for himself and, as he had in the past, positioned himself politically, rhetorically, and stylistically directly between his rival and the Labour party. The divisions which emerged in late 1942 and early 1943 between the party and its ministers, particularly the embattled Attlee and Bevin, offered an opening which Morrison took full advantage of. The Home Secretary was no doubt aware that his personal standing was much greater than that of the leader. Beaverbrook conveyed to him the opinion that ‘Churchill apart, you are today by the far the biggest figure in the country’.¹⁶⁸ Of the leadership group, he was certainly the most popular figure with the party – and probably the country as well – his dynamism having pushed him far ahead of Attlee.

In late 1942, the heir apparent also resurrected his alliance with Dalton, the latter keen to secure Morrison’s support within the government for his policies on the post-war period. Dalton indicated to Morrison that he would still support him in a post-war challenge to Attlee, and the Home Secretary was soon treating Dalton as a ‘close ally’ once again.¹⁶⁹ Morrison also began attending meetings of the NEC and its sub-committees with greater regularity. Though he

¹⁶⁴ *Evening Standard*, 18 December 1942; *The Times*, 21 December 1942; *Daily Herald*, 21 December 1942; *London News*, January & February 1943; *Manchester Guardian*, 12 January 1943.

¹⁶⁵ Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.324.

¹⁶⁶ *Evening Standard*, 18 December 1942; *The Times*, 21 December 1942; *Daily Herald*, 21 December 1942; *London News*, January & February 1943; *Manchester Guardian*, 12 January 1943.

¹⁶⁷ Morrison interview with Crozier, 22 October 1943, cited Taylor, *Off the Record*, p.383.

¹⁶⁸ Beaverbrook to Morrison, 23 November 1943, cited Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.313.

¹⁶⁹ Pimlott, *Dalton*, p.371; Dalton Diary, 22 March 1943 (p.569).

somewhat undermined all this preparation by being the government's most forceful defender when the Coalition was actually under threat in February, Morrison nonetheless remained in a strong position, and, as part of his pursuit of the leadership, he decided to stand for the party treasurership at the upcoming 1943 annual Conference. His personal base of support, the London Labour Party, nominated him for the post in January 1943.¹⁷⁰ The treasurership carried with it an ex-officio seat on the NEC and all its sub-committees, a powerful instrument in extending one's influence across the Labour movement and something MacDonald and Henderson had successfully employed in the past and pursued for the same reasons by Gaitskell eleven years later. The vacancy was created by the death of George Latham, and, as Morrison's biographers have observed, it is difficult to believe that he did not know of the LLP's nomination beforehand.¹⁷¹ He wanted the post as a public affirmation of his standing and credibility – particularly valuable at a time when Attlee and the rest of the leadership were generally unpopular.¹⁷²

Persisting in these tactics, in March Morrison pushed at the NEC for the upcoming Conference debate on reconstruction to be 'lifted to the highest possible level' – hardly a sign of wanting to avoid partisan controversy – and he was centrally involved in the drafting of the leadership's keynote policy statement for the annual event, *The Labour Party and the Future*.¹⁷³ He also initiated a joint initiative by the Labour ministers to produce a Cabinet paper on reconstruction, in another attempt to bring the government around to a more favourable view.¹⁷⁴ The Home Secretary drafted it himself and his influence was the strongest in its tone and contents, pushing heavily for a commitment to specific reconstruction measures as a matter of priority.¹⁷⁵

Of course, this attempt to portray himself as a more authentic representative of the Labour party than Attlee was in many respects mere presentation, most obviously in his being perfectly amenable to a continued curtailment of his party's independence after the war and advocating holding what amounted to a 'coupon' election. Morrison let his guard down on his true views in May 1943 in an interview with W.P. Crozier, the editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, when he revealed that 'I hope there won't be an election immediately at the end of the war. I don't want an election for twelve months at least after the end of the war'.¹⁷⁶ The Home Secretary also argued

¹⁷⁰ London Labour party papers 9177, 25 February 1943, cited Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.327.

¹⁷¹ Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.327.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ NEC minutes, 24 March 1943; also see NEC minutes and Policy sub-committee minutes, January-June 1943, for the development of *The Labour Party and the Future*.

¹⁷⁴ CAB 118/33 WP(43)255, Cabinet memorandum 'The Need for Decisions', 26 June 1943.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Morrison interview with Crozier, 28 May 1943, cited Taylor, *Off the Record*, pp. 359-60.

that the Coalition could continue *after* an election in which the parties stood on a joint 'Government' manifesto, but each campaigned from a particular angle, and set out the details of such an arrangement.¹⁷⁷ He told Crozier that Labour's recent revolts were 'stupid', and that the party was 'much better' in Opposition and needed to be 'educated for governing' – not the language of someone keen to return to traditional party politics.¹⁷⁸ Moreover, he attributed the internal difficulties to a perpetual 'crisis of leadership', an unsubtle barb at Attlee, and implied that his rival was not up to the job by charging that there was a 'lack of leadership'.¹⁷⁹ Morrison later asserted to Crozier that 'the bulk' of the Labour party 'don't in the least understand the political position', believing that they would sweep to victory in a general election, when, in fact, the Conservatives held all the cards.¹⁸⁰ Morrison's enthusiasm in early 1943 for continuing the Coalition seems clear, as does his antipathy towards the Labour party itself. Morrison's posturing in his speeches, and carefully-chosen sabotage of Attlee's leadership efforts since 1941, were mere rhetoric and easy point-scoring. Like Attlee, the Home Secretary was keeping his options open – building up his position in his campaign to become leader, but with no inclination to give the party what it wanted, in the form of independence, when he did. But the image of partisanship was nonetheless a powerful one and, coupled with his natural dynamism and ministerial prominence, played an important role in pushing the heir apparent ever higher up the 'greasy pole'. By the early months of 1943, Morrison possessed a formidable battery of political weapons.

VI

Although Morrison's prospects appeared promising, in the approach to the annual Conference there is little doubt that the leadership group as a whole remained in a tenuous position. Their success in having the option of future coalition open to them was a long-term prospect and did nothing to alleviate their immediate difficulties. A new outbreak of discontent in May, over the government's pensions proposals, saw another substantial revolt and a warning from Attlee that, having caught the rebellion bug, the party was 'heading for ruin'.¹⁸¹ Dissent remained in the air – Shinwell proposed rescinding the right of ministers to vote at party meetings, Laski produced a

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. Morrison also tried to get Crozier to stress in the article the damage that would be inflicted to 'the fortunes of the Party' if he was removed from the NEC, as would happen if he failed to win the treasurership. Crozier responded by actually publishing in the article a full transcript of Morrison's request!

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Morrison interview with Crozier, 2 July 1943, cited Taylor, *Off the Record*, p.371.

¹⁸¹ The government's Determination of Needs Bill was passed by 236 votes to sixty-one, with only sixty-eight Labour MPs obeying the official line and voting with the government – see PLP minutes, 19 May 1943; *Hansard*, vol. 389, 20 May 1943, cols. 1378-80; PLP Administrative Committee minutes 25 May 1943; Dalton Diary, 20 & 25 May 1943 (pp. 593-6).

scathing new book critiquing the entire direction of the party, while he, Bevan and Shinwell were all openly sympathetic to CPGB affiliation, and even Sam Watson, the miners' official, backed affiliation, although this had more to do with MFGB politics than actual conviction.¹⁸² Attlee fumed at an Administrative Committee report which stressed the necessity of exploiting the anti-Conservative swing at by-elections, telling Scott Lindsay that it read like the report of an Opposition, and the party was told that its basic unity was in 'grave danger'.¹⁸³

The 1943 annual Conference, held in Westminster between the 14th and 18th of June, therefore seemed certain to be a critical test of the leadership's authority. Given recent events, it was perhaps likely that the event would be the scene of revolts worse than even the previous year. The Conference also saw a return to overt manoeuvre and conflict between the leadership themselves as Morrison's bid to seize the treasurership precipitated a new round of intrigue, his recent efforts to push himself forward having re-activated dormant rivalries. The clash thus heralded a return to the personal struggles between the senior figures which had been largely set aside since 1941, and these conflicts – at root about Morrison's pursuit of the leadership – were now to dominate Labour party politics for the rest of the war. The contest for the treasurership gripped the Conference, as an election which Morrison had expected to win easily turned out to be in fact much more difficult. He found himself facing challenges for the post from Greenwood and the mine-workers' union figure, W. Glenvil Hall, provoking intense politicking as the event opened. Morrison deeply resented Greenwood's decision to stand against him, perceiving it as a personal challenge.¹⁸⁴ Having anticipated a painless victory, suddenly the stakes could not be higher. Morrison's fulfilment of his ambitions depended on stimulating an aura of legitimacy; yet, while if he won he would possess the means to dominate the NEC, if he lost he would also lose his membership of the Executive altogether, being unable to stand in the constituencies section election. Dalton, once again acting as Morrison's lead canvasser, worked tirelessly to secure union bloc votes, as well as ensuring that Morrison's winding up speech in the debate for *The Labour Party and the Future* was timed to give him a boost in the ballot.¹⁸⁵ Yet, though each of the three candidates were to be backed by unions of various sizes, it looked immediately that Greenwood, not Morrison, would have a clear majority over the other two.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 1 June 1943; Dalton Diary, 28 May & 1 June 1943 (pp. 598-9); NEC minutes, 28 May 1943; Harold Laski, *Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (London, 1943); Brooke, *Labour's War*, p.98. Griffiths told Dalton that Watson and Will Lawther (head of the MFGB) were forced to publicly back affiliation, a popular cause within their union, out of fear that otherwise Arthur Horner would defeat Lawther for the presidency – Dalton Diary, 28 May 1943 (pp. 598-9).

¹⁸³ Attlee papers, 8/86, Attlee to H. Scott Lindsay, 8 June 1943; PLP papers, Administrative Committee memorandum, 9 June 1943.

¹⁸⁴ Morrison, *Autobiography*, p.231.

¹⁸⁵ Dalton Diary, 11 and 13 June 1943 (pp. 601-4).

¹⁸⁶ Dalton Diary, 13 June 1943 (pp. 603-4).

Central to this reversal, unsurprisingly, was Bevin. Though refusing to attend the Conference in protest against the party's treachery over Beveridge, Bevin ranged the huge bloc vote of the TGWU behind Greenwood in an attempt to prevent his enemy from securing such a prestigious platform and symbol of power.¹⁸⁷ Bevin, of course, despised Morrison to begin with, but the Home Secretary's campaign over reconstruction had only exacerbated this, and Bevin suspected that he was somehow behind the Beveridge revolt. The Minister of Labour recognised Morrison to be manoeuvring himself into a position which he could exploit as a springboard to challenge Attlee.¹⁸⁸ Determined to scupper the Home Secretary's plotting, Bevin therefore aligned the TGWU with the deputy leader, no more than a 'cardboard member' of the union, in the contest.¹⁸⁹ With the constituency parties factored in, Dalton calculated that Greenwood would poll 1,074,000 votes, compared to Morrison's 791,000 and Hall's 470,000.¹⁹⁰ Hall's candidature was significant for Morrison as, if the contest went to a second ballot – which remained unclear because the rules had still not been finalised, even as the Conference opened – it seemed certain that his sole backers, the miners, would switch to the Home Secretary after Hall's elimination, permitting Morrison to trump Bevin and capture the post.¹⁹¹ Certainly the miners' leaders, Watson and Lawther, compelled to support Hall for internal reasons, were in reality eager to back Morrison.¹⁹²

The party thus descended into the old-fashioned intriguing, deal-brokering, and vote-counting of the type in which its leaders had not been able to indulge during the crises of recent years. Dalton engineered an emergency session of the NEC to discuss the issue by having Lawther put pressure for a meeting on Middleton and A. J. Dobbs, the NEC chairman.¹⁹³ Laski, too, worked to assist Morrison, by introducing a motion in favour of a second ballot.¹⁹⁴ Alerted to what Morrison's supporters were trying to do, Greenwood and his own union allies on the NEC – James Walker, W.A. Robinson and George Dallas – were 'in full force and in full cry', trying to shout down everyone else and arguing vigorously against the motion.¹⁹⁵ When a vote was taken, the Executive was tied, eleven votes to eleven, but Dobbs torpedoed Morrison's campaign in using his casting vote against Laski's resolution, and the proposal for a second ballot was defeated.¹⁹⁶

¹⁸⁷ Dalton Diary, 11 June 1943 (p.602); Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.328; Harris, *Attlee*, pp. 224-5.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Morrison interview with Crozier, 2 July 1943, cited Taylor, *Off the Record*, p.370.

¹⁹⁰ Dalton Diary, 13 June 1943 (pp. 603-4).

¹⁹¹ Ibid; NEC minutes, 14 June 1943.

¹⁹² Dalton Diary, 13 June 1943 (pp. 603-4).

¹⁹³ Dalton Diary, 14 June 1943 (pp. 604-6).

¹⁹⁴ NEC minutes, 14 June 1943.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid; Dalton Diary, 14 June 1943 (pp. 604-6).

¹⁹⁶ NEC minutes, 14 June 1943.

After all his efforts to lay claim to the post over the preceding six months, the Home Secretary had apparently been impeded at the last hurdle. Having initially seemed that he would be in a position to dominate the Executive, Labour's leader-in-waiting was thus faced with outright removal from the NEC until he could stand again at the 1944 Conference. But neither he nor Dalton gave up, and the behind-the-scenes manoeuvring, already intense, thus reached fever-pitch, as Morrison tried desperately to overturn the result. Dalton attempted to encourage Lawther to disregard the ruling and actually raise the question on the platform in the Conference hall prior to the vote, hoping that a direct appeal to the rank-and-file would provoke an irresistible clamour for a second ballot.¹⁹⁷ But Lawther was resistant, feeling that the NEC had sealed their defeat and that to defy the decision by re-opening the issue in front of the delegates would only provoke a backlash.¹⁹⁸ Even Dalton's desperate badgering of one of Lawther's mistresses was to no avail.¹⁹⁹ Morrison, for his part, was 'indignant' at the way the contest was to be conducted, telling Dalton that this was the third time 'they' had engineered his defeat – the other two cases being the 1935 leadership election in favour of Attlee, and in 1936 when he was bested by Middleton for the post of general secretary.²⁰⁰ By 'they', he was obviously referring to the unions. The mutual contempt between Morrison and Bevin thus yet again cost the Home Secretary dearly. Moreover, Bevin's intervention underlines the fact that, even during his spat with the PLP, he remained capable of exercising a decisive influence over Labour party affairs. The Home Secretary's carefully-laid plans in ruins, one historian has observed that Bevin had 'cooked [Morrison's] goose'.²⁰¹ Ede attributed responsibility for the scotching of Morrison's victory to the Minister of Labour personally.²⁰² Seeing the entire episode as a calculated effort to retard his growing strength, Morrison disregarded Lawther's warning and determined to provoke a public row in front of the delegates 'if it can still be arranged', making clear that he was quite prepared to go to the brink against his enemies and ask the Conference delegates personally for a second ballot.²⁰³

That day, Morrison entered another virtuoso oratorical performance in the debate on *The Labour Party and the Future*. Attlee opened the debate with a competent speech, but Morrison wound it up with a brilliant display of his platform abilities.²⁰⁴ His speech was again much more aggressive in tone than that of the leader, following the official line on reconstruction but not showing the

¹⁹⁷ Dalton Diary, 14 June 1943 (pp. 604-6).

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Cited Harris, *Attlee*, p.224.

²⁰² Ede Diary, 17 June 1943 (p.143).

²⁰³ Dalton Diary, 14 June 1943 (pp. 604-6).

²⁰⁴ 1943 LPACR, pp. 120-2 and pp. 125-7.

same caution.²⁰⁵ In contrast to the leader, his language was bombastic and distinctly socialist: ‘we *must* have the public ownership of the natural monopolies; we *must* have the socialization...of those restrictive monopolies of capitalism...we *are* going to be triumphant at the expense of our enemies in the field’.²⁰⁶ The speech received a thunderous ovation.²⁰⁷ Morrison had once again very publicly advertised the differences between him and Attlee. His biographers have described it as ‘a moment of triumph’, Morrison appearing ‘an authentic national leader’.²⁰⁸ Making one of the great Conference performances, a symbolic culmination of months of effort, Morrison’s charisma and assiduous manoeuvring since late 1942 had secured him an unprecedented level of internal popularity, and a higher public and political stature than ever before.

Yet, the next day, this was all thwarted by union bloc votes. With the effort for a second ballot having failed, Greenwood won the election, attracting 1,253,000 votes to Morrison’s 926,000, and Hall’s 519,000.²⁰⁹ Morrison had done better than the 791,000 predicted by Dalton, and swept the board with the local parties – another indication of his effectiveness in attracting the rank-and-file over the preceding months.²¹⁰ For all his popularity, though, Bevin and the trade unions had proven decisive. Morrison raged to Crozier that he had only been defeated because of Bevin.²¹¹ He later said that Greenwood attracted support as a ‘sympathetic testimonial for past services rather than a vote of confidence for future work’, while Dalton recorded that ‘the public will not take well the election of Greenwood and the defeat of Morrison. It will strengthen the view that we are bad judges of ability in the Labour party’.²¹²

Morrison’s huge advance since 1940 had been publicly checked, and the Home Secretary removed from the NEC altogether. On the other hand, it would soon prove to be a far from cataclysmic blow. Morrison remained much more visible than Attlee as Home Secretary, was undeniably dynamic, in his element as a minister, and pitched himself as a partisan figure. As a result, we should be careful not to exaggerate the significance of the election. It did not reverse the progress he had made over the previous months, most importantly in his series of acclaimed public speeches, nor the fact that he was now one of the most senior politicians in the country. Rather than losing this particular election, the real problem for Morrison was Bevin. It was this that posed the greatest threat; indeed, most of Morrison’s problems were centred upon this one

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid (emphasis mine)

²⁰⁷ *Evening Standard*, 14 June 1943.

²⁰⁸ Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.327.

²⁰⁹ *1943 LPACR*, p.140.

²¹⁰ Dalton Diary, 13 June 1943 (p.604) & 15 June 1943 (pp. 606-7).

²¹¹ Morrison interview with Crozier, 2 July 1943, cited Taylor, *Off the Record*, p.370.

²¹² Morrison, *Autobiography*, p.231; Dalton Diary, 15 June 1943 (p.607).

implacable enmity. As the Home Secretary had first asserted after the abortive leadership contest of November 1939, his career progress was perpetually frustrated by union domination of the party; he identified even then the necessity of expanding the PLP to include more non-union sponsored MPs. Of course, he still might have won anyway if the party had not been in so militant a mood after the Beveridge crisis, with the non-ministerial figures of Greenwood and Hall attracting backing that may otherwise have gone to him. The Home Secretary, resilient as ever, therefore immediately declared that he intended to continue his efforts regardless, stepping up the intensity of his public statements and speeches: ‘The lines of policy should be clearly laid down, and no one else [is] doing it’.²¹³ Over the preceding period, he had begun to tie together the numerous contentious issues about the post-war world which were animating the Labour party – over Beveridge, reconstruction, the economy, industry, and party politics – into a distinctive sectarian rhetoric quite at odds with the ethos of coalitionism of Attlee, and established himself as a champion of each of them. Exploiting Labour’s anger over these subjects, and playing to the party’s expectations, Morrison was to continue to undermine the leader’s efforts to defuse tensions. His core strategy thus remained unchanged, and hence, despite the election defeat, his long-term prospects remained favourable. Within months, moreover, Morrison was to demonstrate once again his quite formidable powers of resurgence.

Though the Conference witnessed a return to conflict amongst the leadership, the annual event also – and rather unexpectedly – was in fact a major success for the Labour ministers, affording them the public mandates they needed to rebuild their authority. Given that the Conference had seemed likely to witness a potentially decisive confrontation, this was doubly surprising. Thus, while dissent had reached a crescendo in recent months, the leaders were now able to regain control of their party to a significant degree. On the 13th, the day before the event opened, the NEC agreed that Attlee should ‘intimate’ to the delegates that a special Conference would be called at the end of the war to decide Labour’s future.²¹⁴ This was largely meaningless in itself, and did not preclude efforts by the leadership to decide the issue themselves, but it did act to reassure the party. Most importantly, however, the Conference gave numerous important mandates for the Labour ministers’ line. This was vital for their credibility and served to underline how effectively they had managed to ride out the recent crises. *The Labour Party and the Future* emphasised the necessity of continuing the electoral truce, warning that the public would look with hostility towards any party which opted for ‘the short-term satisfaction of partisan politics’.²¹⁵ Attlee told the delegates that they could not naively end the truce while

²¹³ Morrison interview with Crozier, 2 July 1943, cited Taylor, *Off the Record*, p.370.

²¹⁴ NEC minutes, 13 June 1943; *1943 LPACR*, p.127. This was accepted by the delegates without a vote.

²¹⁵ *1943 LPACR*, pp. 7-9.

remaining in the Coalition, it being impossible to conduct by-elections ‘on a kind of limited liability’.²¹⁶ The leader was robust in defending the Labour ministers’ position, telling them flatly that he ‘would not accept’ the ending of the truce: ‘The government must act collectively. Every member must take responsibility for all its actions or get out...the fact remains that a vote for the ending of the electoral truce is a vote for ending this government’.²¹⁷ After yet again threatening the disastrous consequences of a break with his strategy, continued support for the truce was reaffirmed by the overwhelming margin of 2,243,000 votes to 374,000.²¹⁸ This was a crushing defeat for opponents of the ministers, particularly considering how narrow the vote on this same issue had been the previous year. Laski was once again employed to great effect by the ministers as a vehicle for their own policies; though he himself was favourable to negotiations with the CPGB on affiliation, he was put up to introduce the NEC’s stridently anti-Communist statement ‘The Communist Party and the War: A Record of Hypocrisy and Treachery to the Workers of Europe’, and affiliation was defeated by 1,951,000 votes to 712,000.²¹⁹ An attack on the ministers for their speeches and votes on Beveridge was defeated by a majority of two to one, while ‘Labour’s Plan for Reconstruction’ did include an affirmation that Labour ‘welcomes and applauds’ the Beveridge report, and ‘strongly advocates...the speedy preparation of the necessary legislation’, but that the leadership line had ultimately prevailed is clear from its declaration that the scheme ‘should be ready to put into operation *after the war*’.²²⁰

Contrary to all expectations, the Conference was thus the scene of a public renaissance for Attlee and the rest of the leadership group. They were able to reassert their authority and, after two years of conflict, bring the Labour party back under their control. They had managed to see off their internal adversaries, won multiple mandates on key issues, and been publicly reaffirmed in their management of the party. The ministers had even been acquitted for supporting the government in the Beveridge rebellion. Despite the unhappiness of the preceding two years, then, Attlee’s doctrine still held, and the leader’s attempts to box the party in since 1939 – with the language of ‘responsibility’, duty, office, and threats of electoral destruction – had proved their worth. The Conference sent a signal to the Labour party that, whatever the sense of continuing disillusionment, the course plotted by the leadership group simply could not be changed. The Labour ministers utilised this victory to achieve a significant lessening of tensions over the

²¹⁶ 1943 LPACR, p.127.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ 1943 LPACR, p.134.

²¹⁹ 1943 LPACR, pp. 150-1, 159.

²²⁰ 1943 LPACR, p.142; NEC papers, confidential memorandum by Central Committee on Reconstruction Problems, ‘Labour’s Plan for Reconstruction’, for presentation to 1943 Conference (emphasis mine).

subsequent period.²²¹ It represented a public restoration of the leaders' fortunes, and a demonstration of the fact that it was they, and they alone, who directed the Labour party.

VII

The twelve months which had passed since the 1942 Conference had seen the dissent which threatened to topple Labour's leaders both reach its highpoint and then retreat. The recurrent conflicts which had wracked the party constantly since 1941 had not abated, and, for a time, the positions of Attlee and the other ministers were in serious doubt. This culminated in the Beveridge rebellion, the most serious political schism since May 1940, and which saw most of the Labour movement turn fiercely against its ministers. With even the NEC registering its lack of confidence in them, in the end it was only the shield of the trade unions that halted the attacks on the leadership. Yet, ultimately, the Labour ministers managed to retain their positions at the head of the party and remain in office as well. Less skilled leaders who had failed to bind their followers as carefully as Attlee had done would probably have been brought down. However, the Coalition survived and was now virtually certain to be maintained until the end of the war at least. The period had also seen Morrison restart his leadership campaign, working vigorously to take advantage of his rapidly increasing public prominence. But Attlee, and the other leaders as well, also began the most difficult party management task they had yet attempted, preparing for a bid to prolong the Coalition into the post-war period. Carefully extracting continued coalition as a formal option from his followers, it was this, more than any other issue, which was to shape the rest of Labour's war.

The recurrent crisis which had wracked Labour since 1941 could be seen, through a conventional interpretative framework, as indicating the ascendancy of a distinctive left-wing and ideological agenda within the party, provoking a series of conflicts against ideologically-opposed leaders. Yet this seems difficult to sustain, at least depending on how we understand 'ideology'. There was little, if any, significant debate within the party about political ideas or philosophy, and given the closed nature of the wartime body politic, the value of sociological explanations for

²²¹ Bevan immediately complained in *Tribune* about the TUC's domination – or perhaps simply the fact that the trend of TUC voting was in opposition to his position – and argued that the Labour movement should be broadened into a 'Federation' of similar entities, which would include the PLP, the unions, local parties, the ILP, CPGB, the Common Wealth Party and radical Liberals. Bevan wrote of the union delegates that they 'might just as well have been attending a darts club...for all the Socialist intelligence they have displayed', charging the trade union leadership as being 'bovine, inert and irresponsible'. He stated that the bloc votes turned the Conference into a 'monstrous farce', and that the unions were 'no longer paying affiliation fees to the Labour Party. They are paying its burial expenses' – *Tribune*, 18 June 1943.

understanding the Labour party civil war is similarly doubtful. Certainly the protagonists, broadly if simplistically definable as the leaders and the party, nailed their flags to different masts: duty, patriotism, and service on the one hand, and symbolic causes and a socialist comfort blanket on the other. Yet neither position – particularly, and fatally for this mode of explanation, the latter – was well-developed. It simply *was*. Moreover, the type of thing that one set of the protagonists, the Labour ministers, were doing was the ideological embodiment of exactly what the vast majority of their critics would have wished to do in similar circumstances, or been overjoyed to see implemented. As the thesis has described, the Labour ministers, for their part, were committed to achieving a Labour agenda by stealth. Little ideological water therefore separated the two sides; yet their followers opposed them, often vigorously, regardless. Put in its most basic way, the people who were criticising the Labour ministers were their ideological bedfellows. Most of the opposition to the leaders came from the parliamentary party. This was an entity comprised of old-guard, loyalist figures, dominated by pragmatic trade union MPs entirely ideologically aligned with the leadership. Yet it was dissension from this arena that posed the biggest threat to the stability of the party. An ideological explanation for the conflict may be a convenient way to describe an adversarial politics, but when the conflicts of 1941-3 are considered in this way it does not withstand scrutiny. The party's opposition to the leadership was instead a symptom of powerlessness, frustration, isolation from the centre of events, and inability to actually *do* a great deal. The causes which provoked controversy – reconstruction planning, pensions, coal, Beveridge, and so on – were all traditional and fundamental, if not elemental, Labour causes; it was natural that a bored and disaffected party would take them up. This was true of even the leading dissentients, who themselves tended to be drawn by personal vendettas or self-advertisement. The documentary sources provide far more evidence of boredom, hostility, and resentment towards the Labour ministers than suddenly inflexible principles. Plain disaffection ruled, not ideology. For the PLP it was a reflection not of ideological conflict, but the fact that it was these MPs who were on the front lines, carrying out the stultifyingly boring duties that Attlee had sentenced them to. Despite their ideological affinities, then, this outcome was in fact not unnatural. As a result, the internecine struggle which had gripped Labour, and threatened the collapse of support for the leaders, was in reality simply a consequence, and demonstration, of Attlee's success in constraining his followers.

Personal interests, and attention to one's own position and rivalries, always remained foremost in the minds of the individual protagonists. Laski had launched his assaults to try and fatally weaken Attlee; Shinwell had made a point of suggesting that Laski should be expelled, fearing a move against himself, and so on. At the height of the Labour party's worst internal crisis for years in the Beveridge revolt, amid fears that the collapse of the government was imminent, Bevin

instinctively interpreted this as an attack directed by Morrison against himself and Attlee. In this case, such a proposition seems impossible to sustain, but it is very indicative of the priorities of political leaders. The Minister of Labour similarly recognised Morrison's partisanship not as a sudden anxiety over what Labour was getting from the Coalition, but calculated posturing for rather different purposes. The treasurership election – the critical dispute in reigniting active conflict at the top of the party – was shaped by Morrison's attempt to seize a powerful position and Bevin's attempt to undercut his legitimacy. Labour politics had therefore remained driven, on the one hand, by a fight to preserve or overthrow the leadership group's strategy, and, on the other, by personal enmity and ambition. With the struggle against the Axis powers now sure to be won, the issue of 'the future' came to exert a magnetic pull on Labour politics for the rest of the war. The conflicts which would dominate the final two years of the period had now emerged; it remained only to be seen how they would be played out, as the struggle over who would lead Labour into the post-war future – Attlee or Morrison – at last erupted.

Chapter six – Renewal

Following the victory at the 1943 Conference, the leadership group moved to consolidate a new sense of equilibrium. The challenges to their authority since 1941 had reached a high watermark in the period preceding the annual event, but, having secured a fresh mandate, Attlee and the other leaders swiftly seized the opportunity to impose themselves on the party once again. This section of the thesis considers how they sought to do so, simultaneously improving relations with the party while entrenching their own positions. Most significantly, Attlee led an attack to destroy the power base of Laski on the NEC, and Dalton resumed his role as Labour's policy Czar. Aiming to re-establish their grip over the Executive, the leaders undertook serious policy formulation for the first time in four years in an attempt to both appease the party and prepare for the post-war future. The period from mid 1943 until mid 1944 thus saw a resurgence by the Labour ministers as the constant crises which had buffeted them ebbed in intensity. Though they were still to encounter serious obstacles to their authority, nonetheless their efforts to retake the initiative afforded them, particularly Attlee, a renewed degree of control. Away from the public stage, Attlee also continued intriguing over the future of the Coalition and whether to try to remain in alliance with the Conservatives once the war ended. The Big Four went to considerable lengths to keep that option open, while avoiding revealing to the rest of the party their plans.

But though the ministers were able to strengthen their hold over the direction of the party, Labour remained very much in flux. Most significant were events affecting the leaders themselves, as a developing fracture between the senior figures fundamentally altered their relations. Morrison had been publicly weakened by defeat for the treasurership, but while he redoubled his efforts to lay the groundwork to become leader, he found himself increasingly isolated. Though Bevin had always backed Attlee, from 1943 even Dalton moved away from Morrison. Moreover, the defining feature of the period was the renewed ascendancy of Attlee over his party, taking control of its course more effectively than at any point since 1940. Even more threatening to Morrison's ambitions was the new damage he suffered to his internal position in late 1943 as a result of his decisions as Home Secretary. His popularity among the PLP again collapsed amid the biggest internal crisis since Beveridge, and, in consequence, Attlee seemed destined to retain his position atop the Labour pyramid. While the leadership group continued to co-operate – at least for now – in managing their party and adhering to Attlee's wartime doctrine, nevertheless they began to move into two separate camps. This division, primarily over the question of who would lead Labour once the war was won, was to play a decisive role in the final stages of the war and signified a polarisation of politics at the top of the party around that issue. The period described in the current chapter saw major developments elsewhere. After finally relenting to alter the

composition of the Administrative Committee, the authority of Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence in fact quickly became severely tested. Comprised of political lightweights and with the influence of the Labour ministers largely removed from the core governing team, those charged with leading the PLP became unable to impose discipline on their followers – much to the benefit of those who would seek to exploit this. The positions of Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence thus entered a decline which continued until the end of the war, as the PLP began a slow slide into chaos. Eventually, institutional splits were to open up between the trade union and political wings over the crisis that followed. In contrast, Bevan reached the highpoint of his wartime career, continuing to shimmy up the ‘greasy pole’ at an astonishing pace. By the end of the period examined in the present chapter, the ambitious Welshman had established himself as the most important non-leadership figure within the entire Labour party, defeating the best efforts of his enemies to expel him, and staking a claim to be admitted into Labour’s inner circle after the war.

I

The Labour ministers took immediate advantage of their Conference victory and used it to quickly strike at their enemies while they were still off-balance.¹ Within days, the leadership reasserted themselves and sought to regain control over the party. Moreover, the hand of Attlee can be detected quite clearly in the subsequent endeavours. These efforts were targeted chiefly at Laski. For years, he had been able to drive the NEC virtually single-handed in much of its work, and posed a repeated threat to the maintenance of the leaders’ line. Reinvigorated by the Conference, they now moved to challenge Laski’s influence, and in two bold moves reminiscent of their highly efficient control of the party during the first stages of the war, the leaders took steps to again bring control of the levers of internal power within their own hands. They were assisted in this by the fact that most of the NEC – which the leaders had experienced so many problems in controlling – now seemed to recognise the necessity of combating the revolts.² Without prior warning, two days after the Conference, the NEC agreed that no member of the Executive would henceforth serve on more than three sub-committees (with the exception of Attlee, Greenwood, and the chairman George Ridley as ex-officio members).³ This was a move obviously aimed at Laski. Given the disregard shown by the rebel professor for his censure the previous autumn, it is hardly surprising that his enemies took the opportunity to strike against him. The blow deprived Laski of his wide-ranging brief, fatally weakening his scope to contest

¹ NEC minutes, 23 June 1943; NEC Policy sub-committee minutes, 21 July 1943; Dalton Diary, 21 July 1943 (p.619).

² In the subsequent period, the minutes reveal the NEC to be rather more loyalist. The Labour ministers had less difficulty winning the backing of comfortable majorities.

³ NEC minutes, 23 June 1943.

the direction of the party. But this coup d'état was just the start of the Labour ministers' reassertion of themselves. At a meeting of the Policy sub-committee in July, the leadership group set about exploiting the emotive nature of the reconstruction issue – which had proven so dangerous to them in the past – as a means to actually strengthen their position.⁴ This question had offered a platform for the opponents of the Labour ministers to repeatedly challenge their authority. Now they cynically turned it to their own advantage, by suddenly accepting the criticism and declaring that, as reconstruction was so critical, responsibility for it should be left to them personally.⁵

After pressure from the senior figures, the NEC thus resolved that the Central Committee on Reconstruction – chaired by Shinwell, and dominated by its creator, Laski – should be 'liquidated' and its work brought within the main Policy sub-committee instead – presided over by Dalton.⁶ This was an adroit exploitation of the party's demand for action, and Laski's influence was seriously reduced for the second time. Recognising the power that the issue, and language, of reconstruction had for a party bound by the restraints of coalition, Attlee skilfully changed position and used it to reinforce his control. The focal point of tensions in a party bound by a myriad of restraints had become continuous discussion and theorising over 'the future', and what those within Labour wanted to do with the party and the country. Like any astute politician, Attlee and the others said whatever they thought it sensible to say.⁷ Without prior indication of what they were intending, they had struck at Laski's powerbase twice and retaken the initiative on the NEC. Fresh off their unexpected Conference success, Attlee and the rest of the leaders had manufactured opportunities to inflict crippling blows to their opponents on the NEC. Few of Attlee's manoeuvres since 1939 were so brazen. Two weeks later, in another fit of rage, Shinwell resigned from the Policy committee altogether.⁸ With Laski the sole significant rebel actor remaining, Dalton recorded that it was now 'not a bad bunch of chaps'.⁹

Exploiting the favourable circumstances in which the leadership found themselves had been an astute move by Attlee. As had been the case since 1939, he displayed a decisiveness which was very different from his public persona. From serious vulnerability just months earlier, the position of the Labour ministers had been transformed. The once-powerful Laski, in comparison, deprived of his old influence, was reduced to the status of being little more than a nuisance. In August,

⁴ NEC Policy sub-committee minutes, 21 July 1943.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ NEC Policy sub-committee minutes, 21 July 1943; Dalton Diary, 21 July 1943 (p.619).

⁷ This phrase is Cowling's – *The Impact of Labour*, p.4.

⁸ NEC Policy sub-committee minutes, 5 August 1943; Dalton Diary, 5 August 1943 (p.624).

⁹ Ibid.

only the fact that he was suffering a nervous breakdown saved him from a possible attempt at expulsion after he again attacked Attlee in the press.¹⁰

This renewed degree of control over the crucial points of Labour's organisational machinery again afforded the leadership free rein in deciding party policy. From mid 1943, serious policy development was undertaken for the first time since 1939, replacing the 'gesture' policies which had prevailed since. Though purely rhetorical efforts to appease a Labour audience continued, more substantive policy was now formulated as well, signifying a discernible shift in the priorities of Attlee and his colleagues. As described above, the dual factors of the need to avoid the crises which had beset the ministers since 1941, and that victory in the war with Germany was now assured, meant that the issue of 'the future' exerted an ever-increasing influence. Dalton was the most significant figure in developing the new policies, thus taking on an important role in the party for the first time since entering office. Important in the expansion of his influence was that Morrison was off the NEC, and hence the only other member who was also a departmental minister was Attlee. The Policy sub-committee had been Dalton's personal instrument before, and in 1943 became so again.¹¹ Moreover, while not a formal member of the Cabinet committee on Reconstruction, Dalton attended its meetings regularly as President of the Board of Trade, and was also chairman of the NEC Post-War Finance sub-committee formulating new economic proposals, affording him access to a wide range of information.¹² Most of the key figures – i.e. bright young men – behind Labour's 1930s intellectual regeneration were involved in assisting him, many of them simultaneously working within the government and civil service. The most important were Gaitskell, Jay and Durbin.¹³ Others who played a role included Pethick-Lawrence and the Cambridge economist Joan Robinson.¹⁴ Bringing control of the reconstruction programme into his own hands, Dalton set his 'post-warrior' team to work developing policy.¹⁵ He thus became, in some respects, a more significant figure than he had been even in the 1930s, his access to office allowing him to fulfil his role as a self-styled 'expert', and his reach on policy-making expanding exponentially. He later observed that 'no-one at present...seems capable of drafting

¹⁰ Laski wrote an article in the *Washington Post* criticizing Attlee. He declared that the Labour party was fully aware that if it allowed the 'uninspiring' Attlee to lead it into an election it would be smashed – implying the necessity of removing him as soon as possible. Laski also denounced the control of the party facilitated by the union bloc vote as a 'brake' on Labour's progress – reproduced in the *Daily Telegraph*, 3 August 1945. He was censured yet again.

¹¹ NEC Policy sub-committee minutes, 21 July 1943. Dalton resumed his chairmanship at this meeting.

¹² See the minutes of the NEC Post-War Finance sub-committee, and Dalton's own unpublished diary for accounts of some of its many unofficial gatherings at restaurants and the like; CAB 87/10; see also CAB 124/276; CAB 124/748.

¹³ Dalton Diary, 11 January 1944 (p.698), & 'Saturday 4th to Sunday 5th' March 1944 (p.718).

¹⁴ NEC Post-War Finance sub-committee minutes.

¹⁵ Pimlott, *Dalton*, p.395; Pimlott attributes the phrase to Dalton, but no source is cited.

anything except me'.¹⁶ In the autumn, Dalton published a pamphlet entitled *Full Employment and Financial Policy*, Labour's most important policy document since the *Immediate Programme*.¹⁷ It announced an intention to retain wartime controls, as well as to stimulate purchasing power in order to maintain full employment.¹⁸ At the same time, Dalton kept one eye on the wider electorate by emphasising that this would not be doctrinaire; the priority would be economic management.¹⁹ Thus, for the first time since 1939, Labour's policy making became more than mere rhetoric.

This reinvigoration of Labour's machinery is not to suggest that the leadership abandoned the tactic of vague measures which were chiefly useful for reassuring their own followers. This continued in parallel with their more substantive efforts. Just a week later, Attlee began to establish the Organisation sub-committee as a fiefdom of his own, submitting to the NEC a memorandum outlining proposals for an intensive scheme of 'Party activity' intended to bring the leaders and the wider party back into alignment.²⁰ This would primarily take the form of public rallies to espouse Labour policy.²¹ The Organisation committee was relatively simple to use as an instrument of this sort; besides Attlee, Greenwood, and Ridley, its members included Dobbs – the former NEC chairman, and staunchly-loyalist figure – as well as Griffiths, and Wilkinson, who would both be amenable to such activities.²² Moreover, under Attlee's plan, speakers were to be 'assisted' by 'notes prepared in the office' – an obvious attempt to keep debate running along predetermined lines.²³ It was also decided that this flourish should be matched by releasing a new range of literature: 'The Labour Party and the Future' was to be published as a pamphlet, while ten additional pieces were planned.²⁴ Not only had Attlee overseen a successful strike at the enemies of the Labour ministers, then, but the new efforts to revitalise the party underline the leaders' improved internal position.

Foreign policy offers an ideal view of the Labour party's wartime development and its evolution into a real party of government. It can be pointed to here to reiterate the renewed ascendancy of the ministers. Further, foreign affairs was one of the few areas in which their assertions were not largely symbolic. Because – and particularly under the circumstances of war – foreign policy was

¹⁶ Dalton Diary, 5 April 1944 (p.734).

¹⁷ Hugh Dalton, *Full Employment and Financial Policy* (Labour Party, 1943).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ NEC papers, 'Policy Campaign' memorandum, 28 July 1943.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² NEC papers, 'Report on sub-committees', 23 June 1943.

²³ NEC papers, 'Policy Campaign' memorandum, 28 July 1943.

²⁴ NEC Campaign sub-committee minutes, 20 July 1943. These were to include health, housing, the minimum wage, worker's control, *The New World Order* and *The Story of the Labour Party*.

such a serious matter, the leaders' natural concerns with governance and guiding the machinery of the state shone through much more readily. Domestic policy was something that they had proven themselves willing to play 'party politics' with, utilising it as a tool; but their position on foreign affairs was, usually, quite different – although the exceptions of brazenly utilising the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1939, and the collapse of France in 1940 to lambast the Conservatives, should not be forgotten. Almost immediately after the Conference a new question arose over foreign policy, specifically Labour's posture on German war guilt. The question of whether it was just the Nazis, or the Germans as a whole, that were responsible for the war had been a nascent issue for some years, but always relegated in significance to more practical concerns.²⁵ In mid 1943, however, the problem became increasingly potent. In *Tribune*, Bevan made a passionate critique of the Allies' policy of seeking unconditional surrender from Berlin as well as the strategic bombing of Germany, as did the pro-fascist Labour backbencher Richard Stokes, whose position Dalton scornfully described as being that 'Germans are all good chaps'.²⁶ Meanwhile Dalton, anxious as ever about the perpetual threat of the Hun, distributed a memorandum arguing that Germany would still pose the major problem after the war.²⁷ He was so concerned by the possibility of a resurgent threat that he advocated Britain should be prepared to do a bilateral deal with Moscow if the US commitment wavered, asserting that Russia could be given a free hand in the east in return for helping to keep down the Germans.²⁸ The NEC had wanted to avoid a debate on such a combustible issue at the Conference, particularly given the flames of the other rebellions that the Labour ministers were busy struggling to extinguish, and decided to not discuss the matter.²⁹ Yet, in the Conference hall, the chairman, Dobbs –who favoured a tough policy– set off an argument regardless, with talk of indefinite occupation, 're-education of the Nazified youth', and expressing the hope that the militaristic Germans would not be treated as leniently as they had in 1918.³⁰ Despite the Executive's reticence, a hardline resolution was put forward and passed by 1,800,000 votes to 700,000.³¹ This would indicate that the bulk of the party now viewed all Germans in less than conciliatory terms.

²⁵ The best account of these debates can be found in Burrige, *British Labour and Hitler's War*, chapters five, nine, ten and eleven.

²⁶ *Hansard*, vol. 386, 11 February 1943, col. 1512; Dalton Diary, 13 June 1943 (p.603); *Tribune*, 21 May 1943. For more on Stokes, see the current author's forthcoming entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

²⁷ Dalton papers, subject files 15-27, 'Post-War Aims of the Labour Party'.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ NEC minutes, 13 June 1943.

³⁰ *1943 LPACR*, pp. 116-7.

³¹ *1943 LPACR*, pp. 176-8 & 184-6.

In late July, Attlee – who took a similarly firm position – was appointed chairman of a new Cabinet committee to consider the structure of post-war Europe.³² Morrison and Bevin were also members.³³ The deputy prime minister was determined that Germany should be permanently weakened, and supported Bevin's proposal that the country be broken up into its constituent states.³⁴ The Labour ministers were more anti-Germanic (and indeed anti-Soviet) than most leading Conservatives, as well as being politically weightier than the Conservative members of the committee – Anderson, Lyttelton and Lord Woolton. Attlee's attitude to post-war Europe is best demonstrated by a memorandum he submitted in July 1943.³⁵ He cut through the endless debating about how to administer Germany by arguing that details were insignificant compared to the overriding necessity of effective military and societal occupation and extirpating the most aggressive elements within Germany, the Junkers.³⁶ He advocated dividing the country into zones of occupation as a precursor to total dismemberment.³⁷ The Labour ministers took a tough position on Germany, and one on which they enjoyed the backing of the mass of their party. Thus, despite the continued protests of men like Stokes and Bevan, the issue provoked little controversy. By early 1944, Dalton's *The International Post-War Settlement* explicitly committed Labour to a harsh peace alongside an alliance with the US, Russia, and France to keep down Germany in the future.³⁸ As Burrige has observed, Dalton gave the leadership a virtual free hand in foreign affairs, jettisoning the meaningless platitudes of the pre-war era and shifting towards traditional *realpolitik*.³⁹ This series of victories indicates something of a sea-change in Labour politics from mid-1943, and once again points to the strengthened internal position that Attlee and the other senior figures were able to construct that summer. Faced with the prospect of being overthrown by the party just months earlier, Attlee had manoeuvred the leadership group into a commanding position once again.

II

Simultaneously, however, changes began to occur in the dynamic of the core leadership group. This was to have a major impact on the struggle between Attlee and Morrison, and precipitated a

³² These records can be found in CAB 87. See also PREM 4/30/1.

³³ CAB 87.

³⁴ CAB 87/65, 22 July 1943.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid; see also CAB 66/39, 21 July 1943.

³⁷ CAB 87/65, 22 July 1943.

³⁸ *The International Post-War Settlement* (Labour Party, 1944).

³⁹ Burrige, *British Labour and Hitler's War*, p.119. Bevan protested in *Tribune* that a new Quadruple Alliance would repeat the mistakes of Versailles, the *New Statesman* called it 'an obvious cover for Tory power-politics', and Stokes published a pamphlet condemning the policy – *Tribune*, 28 April 1944; *New Statesman*, 29 April & 6 May 1944; The Parliamentary Peace Aims Group, *Labour and the Post-War Settlement* (London, 1944).

fundamental realignment in relations between the Big Four, eventually entrenching a division of Labour's senior politicians into two opposing camps. Attlee and Bevin had always been allied together, while, hitherto, Dalton was close to Morrison. Yet from 1943 this changed. Though Dalton had resurrected his alliance with Morrison in trying to secure him the treasurership, he now began to move away from the Home Secretary, and gravitated instead towards the orbit of Attlee and Bevin. Occasioned by the need to co-operate with Bevin by his work at the Board of Trade, Dalton became deferential to him in the view of Pimlott, no doubt hoping to enlist the full support of the Minister of Labour for his policies on post-war industry.⁴⁰ By September 1943, Dalton held the view that Morrison was 'not very good' when it came to offering support within the government, while Bevin had a much superior grasp.⁴¹ Within a year he was describing Bevin as 'by far my best ally'.⁴² Dalton also improved his relations with Attlee as well.⁴³ With Morrison hostile to the leader, and Bevin uninterested in PLP and rank-and-file politics, Dalton became Attlee's closest intriguer in managing the party and planning for the future.⁴⁴ Yet his new proximity to the Attlee-Bevin axis also produced a concurrent, and this time permanent, deterioration in his relations with Morrison. This division of the leadership into two camps would dominate their relations until the end of the war. Behind the façade of new policy initiatives and a restored sense of calm, a power fight had broken out at the upper echelons of the party, instigated firstly by Morrison's campaign to lay claim to the leadership in the wake of the Beveridge affair, and then Bevin's counter assault to prevent him winning the treasurership. On one side were Attlee, Bevin, and Dalton, while, on the other Morrison stood alone – with the Minister of Labour evidently more than happy to fight the leader's battle for him.

Morrison, meanwhile, came out fighting in response to the manoeuvres directed against him over the treasurership. Immediately after his Conference defeat, the Home Secretary was as good as his word in continuing to push his reconstruction agenda and proclaimed desire to 'stir things up' through a vigorous personal campaign, arguing publicly and more aggressively than ever in favour of extensive planning for the future, and attempting to build on the efforts he had launched in the approach to the event.⁴⁵ The tone of Morrison's public addresses in the six months after the Conference was so partisan that Churchill feared for the stability of the government.⁴⁶ Ede observed that Churchill and Morrison were very alike, both possessing 'no real grounding

⁴⁰ Pimlott, *Dalton*, p.373.

⁴¹ Dalton Diary, 9 September 1943 (p.637).

⁴² Dalton Diary, 6 July 1944 (p.764).

⁴³ Dalton became much less disparaging towards Attlee, as can be gleaned from his diary.

⁴⁴ The two met alone quite regularly and held discussions about planning for the future.

⁴⁵ See, for example, *The Times*, 28 June 1943; *London News*, August 1943; Morrison interview with Crozier, 22 October 1943, cited Taylor, *Off the Record*, p.383.

⁴⁶ Morrison, *Autobiography*, pp. 232-3; CAB 65/36, WM 144 (43), 21 October 1943; Dalton Diary, 2 November 1943 (p.663).

principles' besides ambition.⁴⁷ Moreover, Bevin's removal of the Home Secretary from the NEC amazingly did not inflict the damage to his position that had been intended. Though Bevin frustrated Morrison's assiduously-cultivated plans, the result was simply to make the feuding at the top of the party more overt. The Minister of Labour's attack on his position therefore led the heir apparent to *increase* his efforts to encircle Attlee and await an opportunity to dislodge him – testimony to Morrison's powers of survival and refusal to be beaten, powers he would badly need over the coming year. As Home Secretary, he retained a high profile, while his controversial speeches and status as the most partisan and 'party-political' of the nation's leading politicians further elevated him in the public eye.⁴⁸ He continued to act as the government's parliamentary trouble-shooter in set-piece Commons debates.⁴⁹ Moreover, he still possessed important anchors via his positions in the government, the LLP, and the PLP, from which he could resist the Minister of Labour. The *Daily Express* declared Morrison's rise to be 'the outstanding political event of the last three years'.⁵⁰ Perhaps Bevin had not 'cooked his goose' yet after all.

But his rival Attlee continued to assert his own authority within both the Labour movement and the Coalition. The degree of renewed control enjoyed by him and the rest of the ministers is illustrated by the fact that a fresh dispute over the perpetual problem of the Trade Disputes Act – which would certainly have resulted in another schism earlier in the year – inflicted little, if any, damage to the position of the Labour ministers.⁵¹ Citrine, though readily acknowledging the difficulties in trying to repeal the Act, was coming under pressure from the TUC to renew his efforts, and in the summer entered into consultations with the political wing to see whether anything could be done.⁵² At an NEC meeting with the General Council, Griffiths, Laski, and Shinwell argued in favour of trying to compel Churchill to accept repeal, but Attlee deftly outmanoeuvred them by reiterating that the Labour ministers had 'entered the government on the basis of fighting the war, with the approval of the whole movement; they never expected to be able to carry through [Labour's] party programme'.⁵³ He argued that changes in trade union law would have to be made according to the needs of the war, and bluntly stated that it was difficult to

⁴⁷ Ede Diary, 15 June 1943 (p.137).

⁴⁸ Morrison was a regular feature in the press via his position at the Home Office. Beaverbrook's newspapers gave him perhaps as much coverage as Labour publications. The most effective means of getting an impression of his public stature is to look in the Morrison press cuttings file at the Labour party archive.

⁴⁹ An example of this was that, on one occasion, Morrison bested more than a dozen dissidents single-handed, without assistance from the government benches, in a *tour de force* and powerful advertisement of his prowess, on the annual renewal of the Coalition's emergency powers – *Hansard*, vol. 391, 15 July 1943, cols. 452-6, 489-508.

⁵⁰ *Daily Express*, 15 October 1943.

⁵¹ NEC papers, joint meeting of the NEC, TUC General Council and PLP Administrative Committee, 8 June 1943.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

connect the Trade Disputes Act with the struggle against Hitler.⁵⁴ Attlee declared that the real question was whether to pull out of the Coalition or get on with the job, a line which held sway with the majority.⁵⁵

The thesis has demonstrated that since 1941 Attlee had moved, incrementally, towards strengthening the Coalition and retaining the option of continuing it into the post-war period. Considering the lifetime of the Coalition as a whole, we can identify clear lines of continuity in Attlee's posture on this issue, the sheer consistency of which strongly implies that this was his preference. He had continued to keep all the balls in the air and retain all options but, as past events would suggest and subsequent events would confirm, Attlee's behaviour from 1941 to 1945 is suggestive of his preferences and raises doubts about his commitment to post-war independence. In September, when discussing post-war politics, Dalton suggested to Attlee that the best strategy would be to delay a general election for as long as possible, as well as to ask Churchill to address the PLP personally on the need for continued unity.⁵⁶ Dalton was concerned that Labour would be routed in a Khaki election, but feared it would be difficult to persuade their followers to acquiesce to such a course, holding the view that Labour 'are great experts...at suicide'.⁵⁷ Dalton also gleaned from Halifax that it was well-known within the government that both Morrison and Bevin were similarly thinking along the lines of maintaining the Coalition – Morrison with his 'coupon'-like scheme for an agreed electoral platform, and Bevin feeling that he could persuade the TUC to back continuation if Churchill agreed to repeal the Trade Disputes Act.⁵⁸ Each of Labour's Big Four was thus, in one form or another, seemingly set upon continuing the Coalition into the post-war period and avoiding an election for as long as possible. Whether Attlee and Bevin sought to entrench the Coalition as a permanency of British political life as it seems that both Morrison and Dalton wanted to do, or whether they simply hoped to prolong the ministry long enough to avoid facing Churchill at the height of his powers, is unclear. The lack of unambiguous evidence on Attlee's views until the end of the war should not obscure the fact that his behaviour between 1941 and 1945 consistently pointed in that direction, suggestive of the attractiveness of all-party government over independence and possible

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid. Attlee managed to hold this line and the matter was allowed to drop, despite the efforts of some to re-ignite the controversy – NEC minutes, 23 June 1943; NEC papers, joint meeting of NEC and the PLP Administrative Committee, 19 August 1943; NEC papers, joint meeting of NEC, PLP Administrative Committee and TUC General Council, 19 August 1943.

⁵⁶ Dalton Diary, 14 September 1943 (p.638).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Dalton Diary, 16 September 1943 (p.640); CAB 65/40 WM (43) 140, confidential annexe to War Cabinet minutes of a meeting of ministers (Churchill, Attlee, and Bevin, 13 October 1943). Bevin was fiercely loyal to Churchill, and the latter later put Bevin's willingness to continue the Coalition down to their shared, romantic, conception of the ideal course – Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, volume VI: Triumph and Tragedy* (London, 1954), p.514.

Opposition. Dalton told journalists that he wanted to win the next election, and 'this could not be done if the Labour Party arranged for a duel between itself and the present Prime Minister while he stood at or near the highest pinnacle of his fame'.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, the problems inherent in a bid to persuade Labour to remain in the Coalition are clear, particularly in light of the impact of *Common Wealth* and the national mood for social reform. The continued hostility of the party on this question, as well as its sheer restlessness, stacked the odds against the leadership group. That the discussions on the future were so cautious and secretive itself indicates scepticism about the attitude of their followers towards maintaining the cross-party alliance. Labour, even more than the Conservatives, would be loath to accept a further curtailment of independence. As a result, Attlee was to try to avoid making clear his position through obfuscation until the very end of the war. In October, Bevan exploited the fact that military victory was assured to again argue that the Coalition had done its job and should disband immediately.⁶⁰ While Labour had backed away from the chasm it had peered into over Beveridge, it seemed likely that any attempt to remain in office would precipitate a mass revolt. After all, whatever sense of restraint was now to be found within Labour was predicated largely upon an expectation that the current state of affairs would not last forever – something Attlee had implicitly encouraged in recent months. An attempt to perpetuate that status quo would be by far the most difficult attempt to corral the Labour party that he and the other senior figures had yet contemplated.

On the other hand, however, Attlee was undoubtedly in the ascendant in 1943. Running parallel to the reassertion of his authority was his succeeding Anderson as Lord President in September, another extension of Labour's power in the government.⁶¹ Having informally been the leading figure on the domestic front for the previous three years, Attlee now became so officially.⁶² The ability of the Labour ministers to straddle the bridge between office and party was thus improved as their influence over the key arena of reconstruction planning grew. Attlee was backed on the Lord President's Committee by Bevin and Morrison, all three redoubling their efforts to contest Conservative control, and argued forcefully that the government should make plans for post-war reconstruction based on a reasonable judgment of the country's finances at the termination of

⁵⁹ Dalton Diary, 27 September 1943 (p.645).

⁶⁰ *Tribune*, 22 October 1943.

⁶¹ CAB 65/40, WM (43) 140, 14 October 1943.

⁶² The Lord President's Committee, as emphasised in earlier chapters, was the key committee in the running of the home front. It was worth reiterating that, at this point, Attlee now held the other roles of deputy prime minister, member of the War Cabinet, and a member of virtually every Whitehall committee (on both domestic affairs and the war itself) that mattered.

hostilities – a somewhat different stance to that which had prevailed hitherto.⁶³ Slowly but surely, they began to win incremental concessions from the Conservatives, Attlee's wide-ranging Whitehall influence combining with the domineering personalities of the other two to great effect. The advantage in this long-running intra-government battle therefore began to swing towards Labour. In October, the efforts of Attlee, Bevin, and Morrison forced Churchill to give ground, the prime minister asking Attlee for a list of major projects on which he felt action was urgently required.⁶⁴ The leader pointed to exports, unemployment, and the transitioning of industry and the armed forces from a war-footing once peace was secured.⁶⁵ Churchill, outflanked, circulated to the Cabinet on 14 October a memorandum which underlines how far momentum within the government had shifted: the prime minister explicitly acknowledged that these issues necessitated that action 'must be taken now, whether they involved legislation and whether they are controversial or not'.⁶⁶ It was another victory for Labour, and affirmation of the success that could accrue from Attlee's quiet working of the mechanisms and committees of Whitehall.

Now more than ever, the Labour leader, via his positions as deputy prime minister, Lord President, and with membership of so many committees, was able to set the domestic agenda. Just weeks later, Churchill was compelled to agree that a Minister of Reconstruction should be appointed, with a seat in the Cabinet, and the work of the Reconstruction committee given priority.⁶⁷ Moreover, Attlee, Bevin, Dalton, and Morrison were all members of this increasingly powerful body, and as a result the Labour ministers dominated this too. In many respects, the latter stage of the war was the period of Labour's greatest influence. With Churchill consumed by diplomacy and the Conservatives atrophied, Attlee, backed by the other representatives of his party, was able to impose a distinctive Labour agenda.⁶⁸ Earlier in the conflict, the Labour ministers had won concessions, yet still been repeatedly frustrated; but, from 1943, it was they who set the agenda, and it was all Churchill and the Conservatives could do to act as a brake. In a

⁶³ Attlee flatly told Churchill that he would make his case on issues when he pleased and was not concerned with the reaction of the Conservative party – CAB 65/40, WM (43) 140, confidential annexe to War Cabinet minutes, 14 October 1943.

⁶⁴ CAB 65/40, confidential annex to War Cabinet minutes, memorandum from the Prime Minister to the Cabinet, 14 October 1943.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Churchill wanted Beaverbrook to do the job as his 'hatchet man' in the words of Attlee (Lord Attlee, 'The Churchill I Knew', in *Churchill by his Contemporaries: An 'Observer' Appreciation* (London, 1965), pp. 19-20) but the Labour leader refused and threatened the Prime Minister that Bevin would be furious if the appointment was made. Bevin had already warned 'The Old Man' that he 'wouldn't stand' Beaverbrook getting in his way, prompting Churchill to promise 'He won't interfere with *you*'. Churchill eventually agreed to appoint the Conservative, Lord Woolton, instead – Dalton Diary, 29 October 1943 (p.660), 1 November 1943 (p.663), 2 November 1943 (p.662), 3 November 1943 (p.663) and 10 November 1943 (p.667). See also CAB 87.

⁶⁸ The minutes and papers of the Reconstruction committee convey a distinct sense of Labour dominance and intense activity.

note to Attlee which he never sent, Churchill complained that there was ‘a solid mass of four socialist politicians of the highest quality and authority’ dominating by their ‘force and power’ – a statement which confirms the extent to which Attlee had manoeuvred the prime minister into a corner.⁶⁹ All the Coalition’s initiatives on post-war planning, large and small, were directed through the Reconstruction committee.⁷⁰ The political pendulum also swung in Labour’s favour over the German question – Attlee secured the establishment of a new committee on Armistice Terms and Civil Administration, with himself as its chairman.⁷¹ Believing that the Germans ‘brought the war on themselves’, Attlee used it to drive the government even further down the path toward a punitive peace, and his blueprint for the occupation of Germany became the basis for the policy of all three Allied nations.⁷² This shift in the balance of power within the Coalition, and its ramifications for government priorities, was another asset for Attlee in managing the relations between the ministers and the Labour party itself, and an unmistakeable sign that they had recovered from the nadir of their fortunes reached earlier in the year.

In contrast to the leaders – who had conciliated the party without any real shift in the correlation of forces within Labour – the changes to the Administrative Committee quickly provoked a weakening, and eventual collapse, of central authority in the PLP. When the new elections were held in November 1943, and the number of ministerial members reduced to three, there was no mass breakthrough by rebel forces, but simply a replacement of senior figures with loyalist backbenchers.⁷³ The alteration thus initially seemed a success – Shinwell’s position was now so weak that he lost his seat altogether, Bevan still could not get elected, and Griffiths and Morrison topped the poll.⁷⁴ The PLP’s governing body therefore remained dominated by figures unlikely to stray too far from the line adopted by the Labour ministers. Dalton felt that the election had gone ‘astonishingly well’.⁷⁵ Yet Ede displayed a surer grasp of the consequences when he noted that the candidates were a ‘poor lot’.⁷⁶ Far from maintaining the status quo, these changes to mollify internal anger about ‘government control’ in fact badly affected the stability of the party. The cream of the Labour party’s talent were virtually all ministers, and hence the Committee was now stacked with loyalist but mediocre figures. As a result, Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence’s task of controlling the party was to become markedly more difficult, and their influence almost

⁶⁹ PREM 4/88/1, unsent note to Attlee, 20 November 1944.

⁷⁰ The minutes of the Cabinet and War Cabinet confirm that all such initiatives were passed on for final approval from the Reconstruction committee.

⁷¹ CAB 78/28, General Series 49.

⁷² The plans developed by Attlee were presented by Churchill to Roosevelt and Stalin, and adopted, in early 1945. The quote is from Harris, *Attlee*, p.211, but no source is cited.

⁷³ PLP papers, ‘Ballot for Administrative Committee’, 10 November 1943.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* The result confirms Morrison’s still immensely strong position among MPs, despite his defeat at the hands of Bevin and the improved strength of Attlee.

⁷⁵ Dalton Diary, 10 November 1943 (p.667).

⁷⁶ Ede Diary, 10 November 1943 (p.152).

immediately entered into a steep decline. Lacking the membership of all senior Labour parliamentarians, the Administrative Committee appeared a less authoritative entity, and MPs lacked incentives to take it seriously. The diminution in ministerial representation, moreover, constituted yet another degree of institutional separation of the leadership group from their followers. Now more than ever, the two existed in separate boxes.

III

This thesis has analysed the response of Labour's leading actors to events amid very narrow political circumstances. While some of these responses were necessitated by the efforts of others to enhance their own strength via engineering confrontation in an environment in which the language of 'crisis' was an acceptable, constantly-used, and quite conventional political tool, others were crises that simply broke over them as events occurred. The events of November 1943 were of the latter variety, as the worst split since the Beveridge report developed just days after the Administrative Committee election, culminating in further – and this time severe – damage to Morrison's position. The crisis was provoked by the decision to release the fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley from prison, and the focal point of the turbulence was the man who authorised the release – the Home Secretary. Once again, Morrison's role as the government's trouble-shooter came at the cost of publicly bearing the weight of unpopular policies and, animated by his unwillingness to tolerate dissent, willingly accepting damage to the popularity he had expended so much effort in cultivating. The inherent tension between the way in which Morrison conducted himself, and the realisation of his career long-term ambitions, is self-evident.

Mosley's ill-health led doctors to believe that he might develop complications and die; though initially reluctant, in mid November, Morrison decided to free him from prison and place him under house arrest.⁷⁷ In his memoirs, he put the pressure to release Mosley down to the latter's 'class friends', a barb at Churchill, who had raised the case the previous month.⁷⁸ Regardless, the decision to release Britain's most notorious fascist was ill-judged, provoking a huge amount of hostility within the party and across the country. Bevin was absolutely incredulous, making his opposition known publicly.⁷⁹ His biographer has even argued that it was this incident, more than any other, which crystallised his hatred for Morrison.⁸⁰ But this was merely the beginning of what

⁷⁷ PRO, CAB 65/35, WM 156 (43), 17 November 1943; Annexe CAB 65/36, WM 163 (43), 29 November 1943.

⁷⁸ Morrison, *Autobiography*, p.221.

⁷⁹ Bevin papers, Brendan Bracken to Bevin, 30 November 1943. Bevin briefly considered resigning from the government in protest. Bracken managed to talk him around by appealing to Bevin's strong personal loyalty to the prime minister.

⁸⁰ Bullock, *Bevin*, vol. 2, p.287.

Donoughue and Jones termed the ‘biggest storm of Morrison’s wartime career’.⁸¹ The crisis rapidly accelerated out of control: Bevan denounced ‘collaborationist Labour leaders’, mass protests were held across the country, sacks of letters attacking Morrison were received at the Home Office, and there were violent clashes outside Parliament between police and two thousand protesters while he was making a speech explaining the decision.⁸² Though the Commons gave Morrison an ovation, and sections of the press labelled his performance ‘a great political triumph’, nevertheless an even more serious problem than the fury of the British people was the lasting odium of the Labour movement towards the decision.⁸³ Bevin’s union, the TGWU, immediately passed a resolution deriding it as ‘an insult to the people in the fighting services’, while other unions – the railwaymen, engineers, miners and the General and Municipal – joined the public attack on the heir apparent.⁸⁴ It is not difficult to again detect the hand of Bevin and Morrison’s other enemies in the union world here.

Before his speech in the Commons, Morrison had argued his case at the Administrative Committee, where Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence kept a lid on the crisis, and ‘the general feeling’ was that the matter must not be pursued ‘too far’, i.e. to encourage the PLP to mount an assault on the Coalition.⁸⁵ But then the NCL actually issued a statement explicitly disassociating itself from Morrison, and ordering that its constituent bodies – the NEC, TUC, and Administrative Committee – re-examine the issue.⁸⁶ Morrison came under sustained attack at the NEC, but, no longer being a member, could not go to defend himself, and was forced to rely on the ineffectual Wilkinson to make his case.⁸⁷ She made an impassioned plea, but Dalton wrote that was ‘too publicly emotional about her Chief’.⁸⁸ Dobbs – who had played the key role in scotching Morrison’s bid for a second ballot in the treasurership election – introduced a resolution denouncing the Home Secretary’s decision, which was passed by an overwhelming margin of thirteen votes to one.⁸⁹ That same day, the TUC backed the denunciation of Morrison’s actions, with almost every member of the General Council launching personal attacks on the Home

⁸¹ Donoughue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.304.

⁸² *Daily Express*, 19 November 1943; *Hansard*, vol. 393, 23 November 1943, cols. 1428-33; Foot, *Bevan*, p.461.

⁸³ *Daily Express*, 24 November 1943; *The Times*, 24 November 1943; *Evening Standard*, 23 November 1943.

⁸⁴ *Daily Express*, 19 November 1943 & 24 November 1943; *The Times*, 20 November 1943; *Manchester Guardian*, 22 & 26 November 1943, *Daily Telegraph*, 23 November 1943, *Daily Mail*, 25 November 1943.

⁸⁵ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 23 November 1943.

⁸⁶ NCL minutes, 24 November 1943.

⁸⁷ NEC minutes, 24 November 1943; Dalton Diary, 24 November 1943 (pp. 674-5). Dalton described it as ‘a bloody awful day’.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*; NEC minutes, 24 November 1943.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*.

Secretary.⁹⁰ Morrison had been censured by two of the three central bodies of the Labour movement. Moreover, Attlee cleverly stood back and refrained entirely from any public involvement whatsoever in the crisis.⁹¹ With Bevin and the union world uniformly hostile, and Dalton similarly opposed to the release, Morrison found himself severely damaged and completely isolated.

In the space of less than a week, Morrison had gone from a demonstration of strength in the Administrative Committee elections to being faced with the collapse of his internal position. The only arena which had not yet censured him was the PLP. Fighting for his political life, on 25 November Morrison went to the Administrative Committee before facing the wrath of the full party meeting, but, even on the former body – which Greenwood had controlled effectively prior to the NCL's declaration of war against the Home Secretary – his ability to bridge the divide was limited, and a motion to censure him was defeated by just one vote.⁹² Moreover, it was decided to push for a full Commons debate into the matter.⁹³ This sudden change in the attitude of the Committee confirms the new inability of Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence to wield suzerainty over it. At what had become a make-or-break PLP meeting, Bevan – in an example of the first form of 'crisis' described above – tried to hijack the row and fold it into a wider indictment of all Labour ministers by arguing that, because the bouts of conflict between the party and the Coalition were now so embarrassing, the only solution was to call a special Conference to suggest that Labour withdraw from the government.⁹⁴ The proposal, perhaps unsurprisingly, was not even considered.⁹⁵ Greenwood again tried to avoid a split with a compromise resolution which expressed 'concern' at Mosley's release but stopped short of criticising it, and supported Morrison's freedom to take hard decisions.⁹⁶ But yet another amendment which called for censure and a motion of no-confidence in the Home Secretary to be put down in the Commons was also introduced, while Attlee still avoided involvement.⁹⁷ Moreover, by now the TUC, NEC, and the MFGB were all calling for Mosley to be re-interned, providing further ammunition to the attempt to censure the heir apparent.⁹⁸ In an increasingly desperate fight with the bulk of his own party, the Home Secretary found that the union MPs, particularly, were against him.⁹⁹

⁹⁰ TUC General Council minutes, 24 November 1943.

⁹¹ Attlee avoided any involvement in party or NEC meetings, and in the Commons.

⁹² PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 25 November 1943.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Ede Diary, 25 November 1943 (pp. 154-6).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*; PLP minutes, 25 November 1943.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Ede Diary, 25 November 1943 (pp. 154-6).

⁹⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, 25 November 1943.

Characteristically, however, Morrison did not retreat but mounted a vigorous defence, arguing that the Mosley affair was a judicial decision and brazenly declared that no amount of trade union pressure would change his mind.¹⁰⁰ In the critical PLP vote, he managed to escape formal censure, but only by eight votes.¹⁰¹ Morrison had stared into the abyss. It is doubtful that there would have been any way back for him from a censure by MPs. Greenwood's non-committal resolution was then passed by sixty-one to fifteen.¹⁰² Yet, though the PLP had resolved that it would not disavow him – leading Dalton to believe that the Home Secretary might 'get away with it after all' – nonetheless the two censures he had received, and the large number of MPs who voted against him, was shattering to the leadership credentials and prestige of Labour's second man.¹⁰³ Moreover, a group of recalcitrant MPs, including three members of the Administrative Committee, responded by defying the decision and put down the motion of no-confidence in the Commons regardless, indicting Morrison's actions as being deliberately 'calculated to retard the war effort'.¹⁰⁴ The heir apparent had spent a year vigorously intriguing to replace Attlee, only to suffer the humiliation of almost being censured by the MPs he would have to convince to back him. The episode was a dramatic reversal of his fortunes. His unwillingness to let the treasurership defeat deflect him, and decision to adhere to his strategy of being even more aggressive in his pursuit of Attlee's job, had placed him in a strong position. Yet the Mosley crisis pushed Morrison's standing to rock-bottom. More damaging than either the treasurership episode or the *Daily Mirror* controversy, Morrison's attention to his long-term interests was again undermined by his concern with duty and quite unapologetic authoritarianism.

As the Commons confrontation between the Home Secretary and his critics approached, the atmosphere became even worse. The *Daily Express* wrote that it would be a mistake if Morrison's career were to derailed by the issue, as

The Labour Party cannot in fact do without him. He stands head and shoulders above all other Labour leaders, and when in due course the Party secedes from the Coalition to fight its own political battles it will need his leadership and personality if it is to make any real impression on the mind of the electorate...if the Labour Party were to demote him and put him on the shelf...it would be making a disastrous mistake.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Ede Diary, 25 November 1943 (pp. 154-6).

¹⁰¹ PLP minutes, 25 November 1943.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Dalton Diary, 25 November 1943 (pp. 675-6).

¹⁰⁴ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 30 November 1943. The three were J. Parker, George Dagger, and G. Woods. See the debate in *Hansard*, vol. 395, 1 December 1945.

¹⁰⁵ *Daily Express*, 26 November 1943.

While the Beaverbrook newspaper took great delight in backing Morrison to the hilt against the press baron's nemesis Bevin – asserting the 'need' for Morrison's 'leadership' of the party, for example – nevertheless this support did nothing to alter the mood in the Labour party itself.¹⁰⁶

Dalton thought it 'quite on the cards' that Morrison would have to resign if more Labour MPs voted for the rebel amendment than against it.¹⁰⁷ The growing political divorce between the two, and Dalton's parallel move towards Attlee and Bevin, is evident from a lengthy rant in his diary, in which Dalton declared himself to be 'wholly in sympathy' with the opposition to Morrison's decision.¹⁰⁸

However, with the crisis now threatening Labour's hard-won stability, the vote of no-confidence compelled Attlee – who, to judge by all the available documentary evidence, had hitherto stood entirely aloof while his rival suffered blow after blow – to finally enter the fray.¹⁰⁹ He warned the PLP that the rebel amendment, if passed, would have wider ramifications beyond the Mosley issue.¹¹⁰ Attlee was faced with the situation that, if restless MPs concluded that they could get rid of Morrison in a pique of disaffection, they might well try to do the same again. The leader therefore deployed calls for 'responsibility' to bring the party to heel, moving not so much to protect Morrison as to preserve the position of the Labour ministers as a whole.¹¹¹ Further, it was obvious that the damage to Morrison's succession prospects had already been done. The PLP was almost unanimously hostile to his rival, while Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence had difficulty even getting the Administrative Committee to order the party to oppose the rebel amendment.¹¹² But Attlee's timely intervention did the trick, and a majority of the PLP at last consented not to support the no-confidence motion, albeit narrowly.¹¹³

Morrison compounded the crisis by his manner in a long and vitriolic debate in the Commons.¹¹⁴ In a bellicose display, he even got into a row with Greenwood – who was supporting him – and publicly targeted his own party, in what was rapidly descending into an open conflict between the Home Secretary and the entire Labour movement.¹¹⁵ Morrison denounced the individual sections

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Dalton Diary, 30 November 1943 (p.677).

¹⁰⁸ Dalton Diary, 25 November 1943 (pp. 675-6).

¹⁰⁹ PLP minutes, 1 December 1943.

¹¹⁰ Ede Diary, 1 December 1943 (p.157); PLP minutes, 1 December 1943.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 30 November 1943.

¹¹³ Ibid; Dalton Diary, 1 December 1943 (p.677).

¹¹⁴ See the debate in *Hansard*, vol. 395, 1 December 1943.

¹¹⁵ *Hansard*, vol. 395, 1 December 1943, cols. 456-76. Greenwood formally brought the PLP out in support of the government, but he could not avoid engaging in a spat with the prickly Morrison after saying that Mosley had been released because of his social position; if he had been 'John Jones', according to Greenwood, he would still be under detention. Morrison was incredulous, leaping to his feet, threatening

of the movement which had attacked him – the NCL, TUC, PLP, and NEC – and suggested that they were following the agenda of the CPGB.¹¹⁶ That Morrison, the calculating political manoeuvrer, would respond in this fashion underlines how bitter the confrontation had become. Naturally combative, Morrison refused to yield and simply went onto the attack. He turned the accusation about toadying to Mosley because of his social class back on his detractors by arguing that the Labour party only opposed the release because Mosley was an aristocrat, eagerly reminding Labour MPs that Mosley had once been a member of the PLP, the ILP, and the Conservatives: ‘The only people who come out of it clean are the Liberals’.¹¹⁷ It was another commanding performance, Morrison giving as good as he got, and, in the division, the vote of no-confidence was defeated by 327 to sixty-two.¹¹⁸ One newspaper compared Morrison’s oratorical mastery of the Commons to that of Churchill.¹¹⁹ Yet little more than half the PLP followed the government into the lobbies, while six of the fourteen members of the Administrative Committee rebelled as well.¹²⁰ It seems reasonable to conjecture that this weakened disciplinary situation was a direct result of the undermining of the authority of the Administrative Committee. Ede sardonically recorded that things were now so bad that those who actually obeyed official decisions would soon have to apologise for doing so.¹²¹ Both he and Morrison also suspected that Bevin was behind the mass rebellion by union MPs, in addition to the union denunciations, as he could surely have brought his authority to bear in order to mitigate the revolt.¹²² The crisis thus ended with a public, yet empty, victory for the Home Secretary. His refusal to be challenged had gravely damaged his position and, by late 1943, the leadership looked beyond his reach.

Intriguingly, Attlee’s private views were in fact *supportive* of Morrison; he had written to his brother that

We are fighting for the British idea of the supremacy of law and against the conception that an Executive can keep anyone in quod they don’t like. How often have not you and I heard old Blimps talk about damned Labour agitators causing strikes and how they would like to imprison or shoot the swine... The real test of one’s belief in the doctrine of Habeas Corpus is not when one demands its application on behalf of one’s friends but of one’s enemies.¹²³

his critics, and challenging them to ‘put themselves in the chair of the Home Secretary...and face themselves with the file on his table’.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ *Hansard*, vol. 395, 1 December 1943, cols. 475-8.

¹¹⁹ *Evening Standard*, 2 December 1943.

¹²⁰ *Hansard*, vol. 395, 1 December 1943, cols. 475-8.

¹²¹ Ede Diary, 9 December 1943 (p.159).

¹²² Ede Diary, 31 December 1943 (p.160).

¹²³ Attlee-Tom Attlee letters, Attlee to Tom Attlee, December 1943, n.d.

That the party leader so strongly backed Morrison's release of Mosley in private, but did not enter the fray publicly until the very end, emphasises the overriding importance of self-interest in the minds of our characters, and the fact that at core of Labour's war was a series of personal conflicts and strategies.¹²⁴ It also reinforces Attlee's adept grasp of risks and rewards; remaining uninvolved, he was able to watch Morrison's standing plummet as he faced a hostile Labour party alone and bore the brunt of the crisis himself. Attlee had no incentive to intervene until the crisis threatened the stability of the entire party. One of the insuperable problems for Morrison was that he frequently carried the can for the government – sustaining severe blows to his own position – in a way that his great rival, buried away within the warrens of Whitehall, simply never had to.

Morrison's damaged standing was exacerbated several weeks later when his attempts to fix things for his protégé Maurice Webb – a correspondent for the *Daily Herald* – to become the new party general secretary, when Middleton retired, ran aground.¹²⁵ The Home Secretary had, of course, sought the post for himself in the thirties, only to be frustrated by union bloc votes and lose out to Middleton. He now tried once again to bring this powerful internal lever under his control, but Bevin was, as usual, hostile to the way in which Morrison continually sought to strengthen his power across Labour's institutional structure, and victory went instead to the unions' candidate, Morgan Phillips.¹²⁶

IV

Following the Mosley fiasco, anxiety within the party grew still further during the first half of 1944, as the government suffered defeat at high profile by-elections.¹²⁷ There was a sense that Common Wealth was racing ahead and Labour was not adequately exploiting the mood for social change. But, probably even more important, was the persistent decline in the cohesion of the PLP. In January, Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence began trying to repair the damage done to their authority. The acting leader wrote to Middleton and requested that, where MPs voted in the

¹²⁴ According to Churchill, Attlee had backed the release during the Cabinet discussions – Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume V: Closing the Ring* (London, 1952), p.636.

¹²⁵ *Evening Standard*, 27 November 1943; interviews with Sir William Lawther, Mrs L. Middleton, Lady Phillips and Mrs D. Robinson, cited Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.331.

¹²⁶ NEC minutes, 22 March 1944; Dalton Diary, 22 March 1944 (pp. 725-6).

¹²⁷ Most damaging were the Conservative defeats at Skipton and West Derbyshire in January and February 1944 respectively. At Skipton, Common Wealth sent an election team and hundreds of agitators to press the case of their candidate, who won handsomely – See Angus Calder, 'The Common Wealth Party 1942-1945' (unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Sussex, 1968) (two volumes), volume II, pp. 223-71, for the best account of the contests. At West Derbyshire, Common Wealth again played a role in getting an Independent Socialist elected in a Conservative constituency described as a 'remarkable feudal survival' – Calder, *The People's War*, p.552.

Commons contrary to the official decision of the PLP, they be dealt with by the NEC itself.¹²⁸ This was a clear admission of weakness.¹²⁹ It effectively acknowledged that he and Pethick-Lawrence now lacked the means to keep MPs under control. It also weakens the credibility of the traditional notion that, during the war, power within Labour swung away from the NEC – where it had resided during the thirties – and back towards the PLP. In fact, the latter body remained chronically weak. As noted earlier in the thesis, the real centre of gravity was therefore not institutional, but the leadership group themselves: they were the only ones able to simultaneously occupy the key arenas of the NEC, the PLP, and high office. Free to operate in all three environments, the party's senior figures wielded options open to nobody else. But Greenwood ran into trouble when Wilkinson became the new NEC chairman after the death of George Ridley, with Laski as vice-chair. Ede recorded his view that 'if the Labour party can survive these two appointments it must be indestructible'.¹³⁰ Laski responded to Greenwood's request by moving that it be refused.¹³¹ He also advocated that ministers be barred altogether from voting at the PLP and Administrative Committee.¹³² This was frustrated, however, by agreement that the matter should be considered at a joint meeting of the Executive and the parliamentary party's governing body.¹³³

Greenwood pressed on, and tried to present a *fait accompli* on discipline, by adding a new clause to the Standing Orders which proposed that any member of the Administrative Committee who voted contrary to the PLP decision in the Commons would be ejected from the Committee.¹³⁴ Yet his MPs failed to reach agreement on it; several meetings precipitated only rows, and Bevan declared that he considered himself free to ignore the Standing Orders.¹³⁵ In the repeated inability of Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence to win backing, the botched manoeuvre only offered a public advertisement of their weakness.¹³⁶ At the joint NEC-Administrative Committee meeting, Greenwood finally saw some success when Wilkinson, after an intervention from Morrison – the main victim of the recent indiscipline – accepted the argument that 'ultimate responsibility for discipline rests...not on the [PLP] but on the [NEC]'.¹³⁷ Whether this amounted to anything substantive remained unclear, but that a dissident figure such as Wilkinson was keen to re-establish discipline was doubtless due to the damage suffered by her patron. Her proximity to the

¹²⁸ PLP Administrative Committee papers, Greenwood to Middleton, 20 January 1944.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ Ede Diary, 27 January 194 (p.166).

¹³¹ NEC minutes, 26 January 1944.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*; PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 27 January 1944.

¹³⁴ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 2 February 1944; PLP minutes, 2 February 1944; Ede Diary, 9 February 1944 (p.169).

¹³⁵ PLP minutes, 9 February 1944; Ede Diary, 9 February 1944 (p.169).

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*; PLP minutes, 16 February 1944.

¹³⁷ NEC papers, joint meeting of the NEC and PLP Administrative Committee, 25 February 1944.

Home Secretary pushed Wilkinson increasingly away from her inclinations towards rebellion during the war: she had resigned from the *Tribune* editorial board, defended Morrison's ban on the *Daily Worker*, and backed the release of Mosley.¹³⁸ Further, as will be seen, from 1944 Wilkinson became a prominent figure in the evolving internal fray, using her new position to plot unremittingly on Morrison's behalf.

Despite the continuing breakdown of discipline in the PLP, in February Attlee enjoyed more success when he began to push publicly his plans for the future of the Coalition. As we have seen, the leader had been determined to retain the option of continued alliance and, whilst too sensible to instigate a civil war by trying force a commitment at this early stage, Attlee obviously felt it prudent to begin preparing the ground with the end of the war now conceivable. To this end, Attlee issued a typically crafty personal flyer to the entire Labour movement, which at first sight gave strong intimations of post-war independence, but, in reality, mentioned nothing explicit, calling merely for the recruitment of new members, while implying Attlee's real intentions in stating that 'the Labour party is playing a great part in winning the war. It must be no less active in building a peaceful world...*to establish it demands the same self-sacrifice, self-discipline and devotion* [already shown]'.¹³⁹

Arranging a two-day session between the NEC and the Labour members of the War Cabinet, Attlee now tried to take the important step of having the possibility of remaining in harness with the Conservatives formally open.¹⁴⁰ The leader was still moving incrementally, almost imperceptibly, trying to reach his destination over many steps rather than just two or three. The previous year he had fought for the party not to *rule out* the option of post-war coalition; now he wanted agreement that the possibility was actually open. The difference may seem slight but, in reality, constituted a significant shift in position. He was hindered somewhat in that Bevin refused to attend, not trusting the duplicitous political wing not to leak the secret consultations to the press, and, the day before the meeting, Shinwell – presumably guessing what Attlee was planning – tried to undercut him at the NEC, and frame the shape of the discussion, by criticising the electoral truce and proposing that 'the [NEC] consider the possibility of a general election taking place within the next eighteen months and take appropriate measures to determine the party

¹³⁸ Betty D. Vernon, *Ellen Wilkinson, 1891-1947* (London, 1982), pp. 191-3. In contrast, Morrison thought so little of his most fervent supporter that he did not even mention her in his memoirs! – Morrison, *Autobiography*, p.336.

¹³⁹ NEC papers, copy of Attlee flyer, February 1944 (my emphasis). The flyer bore a photograph of the leader and began to employ a certain rhetoric – the need to play a central role in building a new world – which would be used to attempt to persuade Labour to remain in the Coalition when the moment arose. The flyer bore the title 'Mr. Attlee's call – "I WANT THE PARTY TO BE READY!"'. Of course, precisely what Attlee wanted Labour to be ready *for* was the crux.

¹⁴⁰ NEC papers, minutes of NEC meeting together with Herbert Morrison, 26 & 27 February 1944.

position'.¹⁴¹ This was the polar opposite of Attlee's position, an attempt to begin an internal debate in which Labour's hostility to continued restrictions on its independence would come to the fore. Yet, while the electoral truce was considered at length at the subsequent special meeting, Shinwell's bid to stir the pot did not work, and the general feeling remained that it was impossible to disturb the arrangement while the conflict continued.¹⁴² Moreover, Attlee and Morrison solidified this position for at least the rest of the war by securing agreement that any decision to amend the truce would have to be backed by the Conservatives – which Churchill was hardly likely to do.¹⁴³ The leaders had again succeeded in tying their followers in knots with a policy that cancelled itself out, and committed Labour to the status quo until the end of the war.

Yet, with this small but important victory achieved, Attlee and Morrison began manoeuvring against each other once again, as the concomitant issues of the future and the leadership began to provide the public basis of their feud. This tendency was to sharpen in the final year of the war, as these issues came to represent the battleground in which their conflict – really about nothing more complex than who was to be leader and who was not – was decided. Morrison, still smarting after his humiliation three months before, consequently renewed his efforts to position himself as being closer to the mood of Labour than Attlee, by advocating an immediate return to open conflict at *constituency* level, suggesting that the parties could all run 'Government' candidates at by-elections, with ministers avoiding speaking at the hustings.¹⁴⁴ Putting himself in touch with Labour's 'soul' in this way offered another vehicle for Morrison to try and cleave the party away from its leader. Yet, duplicitously, and indicative of the illusory and purely rhetorical nature of his concern for the feelings of the Labour party, removing ministers from electoral conflict in this fashion simultaneously offered a further means to entrench the long-term Coalition that, as we have seen, Morrison favoured. It would permit party conflict to occur and discord to be unleashed, while permitting senior leaders to remain 'above' it all and continue in alliance. It is possible that through this the Coalition could have been consolidated as a feature of British political life for the foreseeable future, the sealed world of wartime 'high politics' remaining a closed one. Morrison's strategy, as so often before, enabled him to play both sides, depicting himself as Labour's champion and a partisan figure in order to dislodge Attlee by pursuing a course which, at the same time, facilitated attempts to try and keep the Coalition in being and prevent a return to political independence. Morrison won agreement that the proposition would at

¹⁴¹ NEC minutes, 25 February 1944; Dalton Diary, 'Saturday 26th to Sunday 27th' February 1944 (pp. 712-5).

¹⁴² NEC papers, minutes of NEC meeting together with Herbert Morrison, 26 & 27 February 1944.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* Attlee papers, Morrison to Attlee, 9 March 1944.

least be discussed with Churchill.¹⁴⁵ However, just days later, Attlee responded to his rival's move by submitting a counter memorandum dismissing the idea, in which he argued that free elections would give succour to those who wanted Labour out of office and precipitate the collapse of the government, calling for the maintenance of the status quo.¹⁴⁶

On the matter of continuing the Coalition after the war, Attlee and Morrison co-operated in winning unanimous agreement that, while Labour should fight an election as an independent party – which we must doubt whether either of them really favoured – it would be better to refrain from making any formal commitments or public declarations of this decision, on the grounds of avoiding the 'suicide' of confronting a victorious Churchill too early, and presenting the Conservatives with the opportunity to win a huge majority off the prime minister's back.¹⁴⁷ This qualification was telling, and a better illustration of their true concerns than support for independence. Dalton hoped to wait at least several months before withdrawing from the Coalition, while Morrison wanted to continue the government for a full year into peacetime with no election.¹⁴⁸ Combined with his existing preference for an election with a common manifesto, the façade of all his attempts to position himself as a more faithful representative of the party is apparent.¹⁴⁹ Dalton suggested that a period of delay before an election, and attempt to continue the Coalition, could be publicly justified on the grounds that the 1940 Conference had endorsed the entry into office not merely to pursue victory but to ensure a 'just peace', arguing that they could assert the need to stay in harness with the Conservatives to carry this out.¹⁵⁰ These positions are also consistent with the arguments advanced earlier in the thesis, of preference for the amiable co-operation of coalition compared to the difficulties of party politics. Though it is unclear how widely supported this proposal was, it is worth pointing out that, for all the different options posited, the entire episode was essentially a debate between the leaders over what would provide the most effective kind of posture to keep the Labour party in its place and hostage to their wishes.¹⁵¹ The agreement that Labour should fight an election as an independent party was probably used simply to avoid provoking early opposition. Independence does not seem to have been taken seriously, and all the positions were routes towards a common goal: the maintenance of the status quo. The range of possible tactical arrangements should not obscure this. Further, there is no reference in the minutes as to the timing of an election – indicating that the leadership

¹⁴⁵ Dalton Diary, 'Saturday 26th to Sunday 27th' February 1944 (pp. 712-5); Attlee papers, Morrison to Attlee, 9 March 1944.

¹⁴⁶ NEC papers, Attlee memorandum, 1 March 1944; Attlee papers, Attlee to Bevin, 1 March 1944.

¹⁴⁷ NEC papers, minutes of NEC meeting together with Herbert Morrison, 26 & 27 February 1944; Dalton Diary, 'Saturday 26th to Sunday 27th' February 1944 (pp. 712-5).

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Dalton Diary, 'Saturday 26th to Sunday 27th' February 1944 (pp.712-5).

¹⁵¹ Neither the minutes nor Dalton's own account record the vote.

group had got their way in avoiding commitments.¹⁵² The option of continued coalition, and possibly delaying an election, was therefore still open to Attlee; the leaders had overcome the first hurdle in what would be the most difficult party management task they had yet attempted. But at this stage, more important than a commitment *for* coalition was preventing a commitment *against* it.

But the meeting was more of a success for Attlee than Morrison. The Home Secretary suffered a blow to his plans for a future of seemingly permanent coalition, when the NEC also ruled that there should be ‘no question’ of a ‘coupon’ election.¹⁵³ His idea of a common manifesto amounted to a ‘coupon’. This was an overt rejection of his strategy, and one which, in the period discussed in the next chapter, would precipitate a fundamental realignment in Morrison’s entire political position in consequence. With his ‘coupon’ idea formally rejected, Morrison would soon begin to cast around for a new posture which would prove more popular. The position that he would adopt afforded the two emerging camps within the leadership group an issue of decisive significance to orient themselves around. Within months the question of election policy was the key issue, or pawn, in the struggle with Attlee for the leadership. For the moment, though, it was only a derailment of Morrison’s strategy, not that of the other leaders. While Attlee had engineered a ‘coupon’ for by-elections, there is no firm evidence to suggest that anyone besides Morrison definitely favoured a ‘coupon’ general election.¹⁵⁴ It likely would have been impossible to win support for such a course anyway. If the leaders had gone down that route, the effect could have been to fatally split Labour, and leave them isolated in whatever political arrangement was the outcome – as in 1931 – by costing them their power base, the Labour party itself. On the crucial question – the continuation of the Coalition after the war, regardless of the circumstances or timing of an election – the leadership group, and particularly Attlee himself, remained firmly in the driving seat. Moreover, and critically, cross-party alliance was not ruled out as an option, the minutes recording that ‘the question of any future Coalition, its nature and terms, should be left over for further discussion’.¹⁵⁵ This left open both the possibility of immediate coalition after the cessation of hostilities, and reforming the alliance after an election. In what can only be read an ingenious attempt to put a suspicious party off the scent, the meeting agreed to put out a press communiqué stating that they had been considering the winning of the war with Hitler and post-

¹⁵² NEC papers, minutes of NEC meeting together with Herbert Morrison, 26 & 27 February 1944.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* It is not clear as to whether there was a vote on this specific decision, or how widely supported or disputed it was.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* The conclusions also stated that the question of ‘future alignments’ were to be considered in conjunction with a joint meeting of the NEC, Administrative Committee and TUC.

war ‘problems’, with no mention made of political arrangements.¹⁵⁶ The intent is clear – and significant in itself.

It seems obvious that the leadership group all planned to remain in office, but were too cautious to declare this openly in the knowledge that the reaction from Labour would be one of fury. Further, to play their hand when the moment of decision was still months, or possibly years, away would only enable internal opposition to ferment. It was a more sensible strategy to await the end of the war and then try to persuade their followers of the merits of the case, using appeals for national unity and political pragmatism, than to set off a Labour party civil war in the interim. But there were differences between Morrison’s idea of a common government manifesto with each of the parties simply varying their emphasis on a common theme and then reforming into a new Coalition, and those of the others. Attlee clearly had the support of Dalton and, presumably, Bevin as well. Perhaps Attlee, Bevin, and Dalton intended to stand on Labour’s own platform and then re-join the Conservatives; perhaps they wanted to wait long enough to nullify the prospect of a Khaki election and then return to independence; perhaps they were unsure about their precise course. Regardless, Attlee had secured an important success in having the Coalition option still open. For the moment, then, these manoeuvrings for advantage among the leadership were still an off-stage, private, battle invisible to the party. It was about whose strategy would be implemented and who would get credit. Only later would they converge with broader party politics and become the key component of the decisive *public* battle between Attlee and Morrison.

V

Soon afterwards, the leadership found themselves dealing with a succession of crises that again threatened Labour’s stability. A sequence of upheavals culminated in a major new internal conflict, as Bevan challenged both the political and union leadership and an outright institutional schism formed for the first time since the 1930s. Bevan had continued to bolster his position since the previous summer, making open and direct attacks on the leadership via *Tribune*.¹⁵⁷ He always believed that the party sold itself too cheaply in May 1940 and, emboldened by his growing stature, was now confident enough to constantly and aggressively pursue the Labour ministers. He supported the CPGB bid for affiliation, and advocated the broadening of Labour into a ‘Federation’ of progressive forces, persisting in arguing for a new political alliance with such

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ See, for example, *Tribune*, 11 June 1943.

entities as a means to force the party in a new direction.¹⁵⁸ In February 1944, Bevan launched a brazen critique of the Labour front bench during a speech in the Commons, declaring that

We can no longer rely –and this has been true for a few years – upon the representatives of this bench to defend either Parliament or the principles of the party to which they belong, and the sooner this is stated the better. It is a disgraceful exhibition of incompetence on the part of the Parliamentary Labour Party.¹⁵⁹

The denunciation provoked a furious response, and a resolution was moved at the PLP that the party ‘emphatically resents and repudiates the criticism of its elected leaders’.¹⁶⁰ Next, Shinwell tried to reverse the strategy agreed upon about the truce by advocating that Labour end it unilaterally, regardless of what Churchill thought.¹⁶¹ In late March, largely as a result of a Conservative rebellion, the government was defeated in the Commons over a clause in the Education Bill – the first time it had lost a vote in the House since its formation. Churchill was characteristically combative, meeting his critics head on and demanding a vote of confidence to overwhelm them.¹⁶² Attlee threatened MPs with resignation in order to force Labour to support the government by flatly telling the PLP that, unless they were given backing, the Labour ministers ‘would not go on’, but still ran up against heavy opposition.¹⁶³ However, the crisis prompted Bevin to attend a PLP gathering for the first time in more than a year, the Minister of Labour wading in with one of his authoritarian interventions by the end of which the party’s hostility to following Attlee’s instructions was replaced by ‘overwhelming’ support for such a course.¹⁶⁴ Attlee then found himself in another of his spats with Laski, when the latter submitted to the NEC a draft statement for the annual Conference.¹⁶⁵ The contents of this – attacking government policy on reconstruction – were so explosive that the effect would have been to present to the Conference delegates an overt denunciation of the Coalition’s policy as ‘a disaster of the first magnitude’.¹⁶⁶ Unsurprisingly, Attlee was apoplectic and had Middleton tone down the offending statement, the leader stressing that ‘No one who acclaimed ‘The Old World and the New Society’ [Labour’s 1942 policy document] expected that in two years...a completely socialist Britain would be established’.¹⁶⁷ The cumulative effect of these crises was to exacerbate dissension – already increasing after the weakening of authority in the PLP – and permit those

¹⁵⁸ *Tribune*, 18 June 1943.

¹⁵⁹ Cited in PLP minutes, 23 February 1944.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.* Bevan was forced to give assurances about his future conduct – PLP minutes, 8 March 1944.

¹⁶¹ NEC minutes, 22 March 1944.

¹⁶² *Ede Diary*, 29 March 1944 (pp. 178-9).

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*; PLP minutes, 29 and 30 March 1944; *Ede Diary*, 30 March 1944 (p.179).

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*; PLP minutes, 30 March 1944.

¹⁶⁵ NEC papers, Laski draft paragraph for Conference statement ‘Government Policy and Party Policy’, 27 April 1944.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ NEC papers, Attlee to Middleton, 1 May 1944.

who wished to do so to challenge the ascendancy of the leadership group for the first time since their resurgence the previous summer.

Bevan did this in decisive fashion, following a series of strikes in the coalfields in early 1944 over the deadlock in negotiating a minimum wage for the miners. In response, Bevan assumed new powers – Defence Regulation IAA – to impose heavy penalties on those seeking to engineer strikes in essential services. These were hugely controversial and widely seen as reactionary. In late April, Bevan put down a Prayer in the Commons for the powers to be annulled, criticising the fact that IAA allowed Bevan to imprison strikers for five years.¹⁶⁸ Bevan was unapologetic at the PLP on 28 April and vigorously attacked Bevan in response, winning the support of Labour MPs for IAA by a ‘large’ majority.¹⁶⁹ Greenwood sought to reinforce the decision by warning that, given this overwhelming backing, any attempt to recant once in the Commons and support Bevan would raise ‘a major issue of discipline’.¹⁷⁰

Yet, in fact, this was precisely what happened. Bevan, as expected, went for Bevan in the House the next day, launching a vitriolic assault on the Minister of Labour, as well as denouncing union leaders for their connivance in IAA.¹⁷¹ He accused Bevan of undermining the sovereignty of Parliament by avoiding revealing his plans for IAA until the last moment but conspiring with the TUC in designing them, charging the Labour movement’s most powerful figure with orchestrating a ‘carefully-prepared campaign’ of ‘calumny’ against British trade unionists.¹⁷² Stokes drew parallels between Bevan’s powers and those of the Gestapo.¹⁷³ The Minister of Labour took the bait. As someone who regularly asserted that he had done more for the working-classes than any other man, he reacted with characteristic ferocity.¹⁷⁴ Greenwood also condemned Bevan, but, in the division, the Welshman led twenty-three MPs into the lobby against the government, fifteen of them Labour Members.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, seventy-three Labour MPs abstained, while only fifty-six obeyed the official decision – half of whom were members of the Coalition anyway.¹⁷⁶ Attlee’s biographer puts much of the revolt down to the personal motivation of the PLP seeking retribution for Bevan’s perennially patronising attitude towards them.¹⁷⁷ But

¹⁶⁸ *Hansard*, vol. 399, 28 April 1944, cols. 1061-1126.

¹⁶⁹ PLP minutes, 27 April 1944.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *Hansard*, vol. 399, 28 April 1944, cols. 1061-1126.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* Bevan declared that he had not forced a reluctant TUC into accepting IAA: the union bosses had done so unanimously, and defended his prior consultation with the General Council by stating that ‘Try to imagine...the Minister of Health coming to this House and saying ‘I have refused to meet the doctors’’.

¹⁷⁵ *Hansard*, vol. 399, 28 April 1944, cols. 1061-1126. .

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Harris, *Attlee*, p.230.

regardless, Bevan had instigated a large rebellion by no less than one hundred-and-nine Labour MPs, and led them in defying a decision reached ‘overwhelming[ly]’ only the previous day. It was a powerful demonstration of his new stature as someone who, through his oratorical prowess, was able to motivate and capture the sympathies of his party. Even during the fifties, Bevan’s ability to move the PLP was always significant, but constrained by an enduring personal dislike of him.¹⁷⁸ But during the war he was able to win the backing of a disunited party, unhappy in its restraints, with symbolic protestations much easier. He had inflicted a major humiliation on the leadership, a decision strongly supported one day being rebelled against en masse the next. That the minutes of the PLP meeting strangely recorded Greenwood’s warning that MPs had better adhere to the decision implies that he, at least, suspected that it had all been too easy.¹⁷⁹

The leadership group determined almost immediately upon expelling Bevan.¹⁸⁰ Labour’s rising star was thus faced with being forced out of the party for the second time in five years. Personally challenging the country’s most powerful union figure was a bold move, but that few would have been so foolhardy underlines the capacity for misjudgement which would always hinder him. On 2 May 1944, the Administrative Committee recommended to the PLP the withdrawal of the whip, while Bevan was subjected to an intense barracking by Labour ministers and their proxies at a party meeting, being charged with having ‘ceased entirely to co-operate’.¹⁸¹ Attlee made clear that he favoured expulsion, while Greenwood argued that, if Bevan was not forced out for orchestrating the rebellion, official decisions would be meaningless.¹⁸² Greenwood, Pethick-Lawrence, and the rest of the PLP’s ruling body thus publicly staked their authority on expulsion, declaring the rebellion to be a test of strength and demanding that the party back them.¹⁸³ In a venomous atmosphere, Bevan defended himself, and a counter-resolution, opposing the withdrawal of the whip on the grounds that it would be ‘injurious to the unity of the [PLP]’, was put down.¹⁸⁴ The assembled MPs were unable to reach a decision, and the discussion was adjourned.¹⁸⁵ Ede recognised that Bevan’s real objective throughout was self-advertisement, recording in his diary that ‘the only cure for Bevan’s frame of mind [is] office’.¹⁸⁶ He had filled the void left by Laski and Shinwell, establishing himself as Labour’s most important rebel figure and someone who would be a major player in the future. Nonetheless, the ambitious Welshman

¹⁷⁸ Even at the height of his powers during the early fifties he barely scraped onto the PLP Executive.

¹⁷⁹ PLP minutes, 27 April 1944.

¹⁸⁰ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 2 May 1944; PLP minutes, 3 May 1944; Ede Diary 3 May 1944 (p.182).

¹⁸¹ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 2 May 1944; PLP minutes, 3 May 1944; Ede Diary 3 May 1944 (p.182).

¹⁸² PLP minutes, 3 May 1944; Harris, *Attlee*, p.231.

¹⁸³ PLP minutes, 3 May 1941.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ Ede Diary, 3 May 1944 (p.182).

was in grave danger. The leadership group and the Administrative Committee were unanimously against him, and set upon throwing him out of the party. Bevan's only advantage was that so many MPs were sympathetic and willing to disobey Bevin.

At Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence's behest, the Administrative Committee opted to reinforce its position by deciding to collectively resign if expulsion was not carried out.¹⁸⁷ But Bevan poured yet more fuel on the fire by asserting in *Tribune* that the Labour ministers were secretly planning to stay in the Coalition after the termination of hostilities as part of 'a grand post-war surrender'.¹⁸⁸ Shinwell began the next PLP meeting by introducing a resolution that the whip not be withdrawn, and the matter referred to a joint meeting with the NEC instead.¹⁸⁹ Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence immediately made clear that they opposed this, and insisted on outright expulsion.¹⁹⁰ Attlee made a strong speech supporting them, but the PLP's governing body suffered yet another humiliation when the MPs voted in favour of Shinwell's proposal by seventy-one votes to sixty.¹⁹¹ Greenwood was 'taken aback'; no matter how vigorously he tried, he simply could not force his followers to do as he ordered.¹⁹² Party discipline seemed on the point of collapse, and the positions of Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence in ruins. The limits to the power of the Administrative Committee were now plain for all to see. Mass resignation was ultimately not carried out or even threatened, for in light of the mood of MPs it would have been an enormous gamble.¹⁹³ For five years, the Labour ministers and their proxies had been fighting to keep control of the PLP, and prevent it from becoming gripped by indiscipline; but in early 1944 this scenario at last came to pass. Discipline was not to be restored until Labour left office the following May, and the PLP was consequently left rudderless. Bevan, meanwhile, had very publicly got the better of his enemies and, in doing so, smashed the structures of authority which the Labour ministers had constructed in 1940.

At the session with the NEC, the difficulties of expelling Bevan became still more evident.¹⁹⁴ Despite Attlee and Morrison both making the case for forcing Bevan out, a fractious meeting eventually agreed to a motion from Sam Watson that, while Labour 'profoundly deplored' Bevan's actions, and called for him to give written assurances about his behaviour, he would not

¹⁸⁷ Ede Diary, 4 May 1944 (p.182).

¹⁸⁸ *Tribune*, 5 May 1944.

¹⁸⁹ PLP minutes, 10 May 1944.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² Ede Diary, 10 May 1944 (p.182).

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*; PLP minutes, 10 May 1944.

¹⁹⁴ Prior to the meeting Carol Johnson, the Secretary of the PLP, wrote to Middleton making clear that the Welshman was a recurrent trouble-causer and the Administrative Committee wanted him expelled – NEC papers, 'Appendix 1', Johnson to Middleton, 11 May 1944.

be expelled.¹⁹⁵ Griffiths again needled his leaders by arguing that the PLP's refusal to back them on IAA was 'final', and proposed that no disciplinary action whatsoever should be taken.¹⁹⁶ Watson's motion – which Bevan was hardly likely to refuse – was passed by twenty votes to eight.¹⁹⁷ While this may have offered a pragmatic route out of what was by now a full-scale crisis, nevertheless the NEC had publicly refused to back the Administrative Committee, leaving Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence humiliated and their authority in tatters. Bevan had precipitated a major revolt and escaped meaningful sanction; a man who still could not secure election to the PLP's governing body had humbled it and defied the best efforts of the rest of the leadership to force him out. They had gone to the brink against Bevan and lost. In defeating the leadership in so spectacular a fashion, Bevan had won another major victory and delivered an unambiguous warning of his rise.¹⁹⁸

Moreover, the MP for Ebbw Vale had largely achieved this through his prowess as an orator. That his new position was constructed – and subsequently maintained – by his oratorical abilities underlines how far Bevan, the iconic left-wing ideologue, in fact represents the best demonstration conceivable of the powerful utility of rhetoric conjectured by the 'high politics' approach. His actions, and character, support the notion that Bevan used rhetoric to mask his behaviour, project his ambitions, and achieve goals really animated by self-interest. Proficiency as a public speaker enabled him to motivate MPs and propel himself into Labour's upper echelons by orienting himself towards the Labour party itself and understanding 'power' in that context. In reality, then, Bevan is a quintessential demonstration of the validity of the 'high politics' methodology. Through his rhetoric he has hoodwinked generations of historians. Even more so than for the party management strategy espoused by Attlee and his senior colleagues, the best example of the power and use of rhetoric between 1939 and 1945 was Bevan.¹⁹⁹

At the PLP less than twenty-four hours later, he amazingly went onto the offensive yet again, arguing against even the limited sanction he had been subjected to.²⁰⁰ Bevan was 'almost hysterical'.²⁰¹ Yet though he had beaten Bevan once, it was this that finally forced Bevan into line as, unable to rely on the plainly ineffective political wing, Bevan called on the trade unions instead, bringing them to bear against not only Bevan but the PLP as a whole.²⁰² Bevan's actions

¹⁹⁵ NEC papers, joint meeting of NEC and PLP Administrative Committee, 16 May 1944.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*; Dalton Diary, 10 May 1944 (p.475) & 16 May 1944 (p.746).

¹⁹⁹ For more on this – and Bevan's behaviour in the early fifties – see the author's MA thesis.

²⁰⁰ PLP minutes, 17 May 1944; Ede Diary, 17 May 1944 (p.183).

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² TUC General Council minutes, 24 May 1944.

thus precipitated an institutional schism, in addition to humiliating the political leadership. At the TUC, one union boss threatened that his union would pay no more affiliation fees to Labour until proper discipline was implemented.²⁰³ After a series of threats from the unions and yet more meetings, Bevan eventually gave the required assurances, and an amendment was made to the Standing Orders declaring that no MP could put down a motion in the Commons in defiance of the party meeting.²⁰⁴ Yet this did not disguise the fact that Bevan had forced his adversaries into an embarrassing climb down. He justified signing the declaration by stating that if he was expelled it would leave the leadership group ‘with a clear field to accomplish the ruin of the Labour movement’, but the real reason was surely that Bevan knew he had already scored a stunning victory, and Bevan was now mobilising the unions against him.²⁰⁵ Likely of equal significance – and typical of Bevan – was that, as Campbell has pointed out, he was for the first time to be a candidate in the NEC elections at the next annual Conference.²⁰⁶ His position immensely enhanced, a satiated Bevan cleverly withdrew from the frontline of Labour politics for the remainder of the war and awaited the future.

Shortly afterwards, Allied forces began Operation Overlord and the invasion of France. This was the beginning of the end of the struggle with Hitler but, for all the rapture that accompanied the success of the landings, Labour politics quickly resumed their fractious course. Further, even with the Bevan controversy over, the institutional row only got worse. At a joint NEC-TUC-Administrative Committee meeting in late June under the title ‘Attacks on the Trade Union Movement’, Bevan came in for far stiffer criticism from the unions than he had ever been subjected to by politicians.²⁰⁷ In a long speech, Citrine announced that the MFGB, Bevan’s own union, had passed a resolution ‘deploring’ his actions, and suggested that the political and industrial sections were in danger of becoming ‘opposing factions’.²⁰⁸ Citrine also made clear that he expected support and not ‘vituperations and invectives’ from Labour MPs, threatening that the TUC would publicly defend itself if the PLP was unable to control its members.²⁰⁹ Greenwood and Dalton were vocal in backing the unions, the latter wanting union leaders to go to the constituencies of rebellious MPs and ‘work on’ their local parties, presumably a reference to de-selection.²¹⁰ The implication of Citrine’s threat – that the TUC was prepared to have a showdown

²⁰³ Ibid; NCL minutes, 23 May 1944; NEC papers, joint meeting between NEC and PLP Administrative Committee, 25 May 1944.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Foot, *Bevan*, p.460.

²⁰⁶ Campbell, *Bevan*, p.135.

²⁰⁷ NEC papers, joint meeting of TUC, NEC and PLP Administrative Committee, 28 June 1944.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Dalton Diary, 28 June 1944 (p.761).

with the PLP – was quite clear, provoking Laski's likening the unions to the 'Gestapo'.²¹¹ The eventual outcome, though, was stalemate. It was decided that with Bevan having given assurances, and new Standing Orders in place, the movement should wait and see how events developed.²¹² The situation drifted and, ultimately, no more was done. Bevan had established himself as a genuine political heavyweight. But in permitting the bullying Celt to stare down the Administrative Committee, the leadership allowed Bevan to think that he could take on established authority and win. This perception was to wreak havoc in the succeeding decade. As subsequent events would show, it is possible, with the benefit of hindsight, to see that in failing to expel Bevan in 1944 the leadership committed a major error. This episode also shows up the limits to the authority of Attlee. For all his ability to manipulate and direct Labour, he still operated under very restrictive conditions and could not always win through.

VI

During the period from mid 1943, important political shifts had occurred within the Labour movement. The rapid decline in discipline which followed the changes in the Administrative Committee adversely affected the stability of the parliamentary party, and virtually destroyed the positions of 'acting leadership' which had been built up so successfully by Pethick-Lawrence, Greenwood and, earlier, Lees-Smith. Though still formally in charge of the PLP, the authority of Attlee's proxy figures had been shattered.²¹³ They were never to recover this, and spent the remainder of the war virtually pleading with their MPs to do as they ordered. Initiative in the PLP now resided elsewhere.

Yet, while it would not be an exaggeration to state that central authority in the parliamentary party had been no less than devastated, in other respects the situation had much improved. At the root of this was Attlee himself. The Labour leader oversaw a reassertion of his, and senior colleagues', authority in the summer and autumn of 1943, moving decisively and suddenly against opposition on the NEC, bringing control of the dangerous 'reconstruction' issue into the hands of the leadership group themselves, and working to both conciliate the party and begin preparing for the future by re-starting policy development. After two years of serious threats to his authority, Attlee was able to recover his position with the same boldness he had displayed

²¹¹ NEC papers, joint meeting of TUC, NEC and PLP Administrative Committee, 28 June 1944. .

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ At least some of this must be ascribed to the falling respect felt for Greenwood over his alcohol problems; on one occasion, Ede recorded him as reeking 'intolerably of whiskey' – Ede Diary, 28 March 1944 (p.177).

earlier in the war. Coupled with the latest major extensions of his powers in the Coalition, 1943-4 saw a return to his successful leadership of old.

Moreover, Attlee also began to move the party towards a future of continued alliance with the Conservatives. Though still much too early to reveal his hand publicly, nonetheless the leader ensured that the option of remaining in the Coalition was open to him as the war entered its final stages. This issue was also developing into a core component of the contest between him and Morrison for the leadership, as both men sought to implement a particular agenda. The Home Secretary, in his idea for a return to open rank-and-file conflict but with 'Government' platforms, adopted a *rhetorical* position directly between Attlee and the Labour party, while adopting a *substantive* position the implementation of which would have resulted in a far lengthier restriction of political independence (or, in Labour parlance, 'betrayal') than anything Attlee seemed to be contemplating. Though his idea of a common manifesto was rejected in February 1944, this does not alter the significance of the point. This increasing alignment between the subject of Labour's future, and the feud over the party's top job, was to accelerate in the subsequent period, eventually coming to represent the public manifestation of that competition and the major tactic employed by Morrison in trying to destroy his rival's control of the party and replace it with his own.

During the period in question, the Home Secretary had, however, suffered serious damage. For five years, he had been awaiting the right opportunity to strike at Attlee and transform himself from heir apparent to leader. While his preparations to do so continued during the period – refusing to accept defeat after the treasurership misadventure and pressing on with his aggressive partisanship, his career ascendancy being labelled 'the outstanding event' of the early 1940s, and even being compared to Churchill – nonetheless the Mosley fiasco, and the resultant censures upon him, inflicted grave damage to Morrison's standing. The leader, meanwhile, cynically stood above it all, and only intervened to force his followers away from the brink when Morrison had already been attacked and wounded by the entire Labour movement. Moreover, one of the most significant of all the shifts within the party was that Labour's Big Four were increasingly divided into two camps. This new alignment was, at root, a manifestation of the Attlee-Morrison power struggle. There is little doubt that Attlee got the better of the shadow-boxing between Labour's two leading politicians here, as well as with regards to their wider engagement with the political front lines. Having come through the crisis years of 1941-3 with his course battered but intact, the popularity of his rival corroded, and retaining freedom of action for the future, Attlee appeared in too strong a position for Morrison to challenge.

The most startling success of the period, however, belonged to Bevan. His decision to pick a fight first with Bevin, and then both the party and union leadership, was the culmination, and pay-off, to his wartime rise to prominence. At the end of the confrontation he was publicly undefeated – with the credibility which that brought – and occupied a now unassailable platform as Labour’s leading non-ministerial figure. In a restless party, Bevan had positioned himself as a skilled orator and polemicist. Campbell has rightly criticised Bevan’s refusal to acknowledge that Labour, by being in office and gaining experience, but still not entirely identified with the government, enjoyed a double-dividend.²¹⁴ Nevertheless, Bevan’s struggle against the most powerful politicians of the period signified how he now orbited increasingly close to the centre of the political solar system. In using the prominence provided by *Tribune* and the Commons chamber, he was making the most of an opportunity to become the articulator of disillusionment across a whole range of issues. Hence, despite continued absence from the NEC and the Administrative Committee, Bevan showed sound judgment in exploiting platforms *outside* the structure of the Labour movement to establish himself as a major figure within it, and someone whose stature necessitated that he be admitted to the party’s inner circle once the war ended. By 1944, Bevan was well on the way to depicting himself as a man with unique access to the party’s soul – the same perception that was to serve him so effectively until his death. The platform that would anchor the rest of his career, and sustain an eventual campaign for the leadership, had thus been constructed. From this perspective, it could be argued that it was, in reality, the years 1943-4, not his post-war creation of the NHS, which represented the crucial formative period for the ambitious Welshman.

The events described in the current chapter had seen something of a sea-change in Labour party politics, as had occurred in 1941. While that of 1941 witnessed a major decline in the ability of the leadership to guide the party, and a consequent series of challenges to their authority, during 1943-4 the pendulum had, to a limited but important extent, swung the other way – certainly to the advantage of Attlee himself. The Labour ministers had successfully ridden out the troubles of the preceding two years and, despite the obvious problems confronting them in an attempt to persuade their followers to remain in the Coalition, also retained complete freedom of action in that regard. It was thus with a degree of optimism that they could head into what turned out to be the final year of Labour’s war.

²¹⁴ Campbell, *Bevan*, p.129.

Chapter seven – Triumph

Over the final period of the war, the various crises which had gripped Labour since 1939 reached a climax, as the struggle with Hitler came to an end, the Coalition government dissolved, and Labour won the subsequent general election with a landslide victory. This penultimate chapter of the thesis describes how these events came about, and how the struggles which had impacted upon the party were resolved. Most significantly, the two separate but central stories we have traced in the thesis – the Labour ministers' collective struggle against their followers over the direction of the party, and the contest for the leadership between Attlee and Morrison – now *converged*. The Labour ministers' balancing-act thus came together with the struggle for the top post in the party and, in July 1945, the biggest political stakes of all. The party remained unhappy and the Labour ministers had to continue their efforts to control it. But with the end of the war in sight, decisions which had previously been uncertain over the future of the Coalition and Labour's independence now had to be made, bringing the divergence between internal restlessness and the ambitions of many of the Labour ministers into sharp focus. Given the imminent removal of the basis for the cross-party alliance in the first place – the war – the status quo, proceeding as politics had for five years, was no longer sustainable. The loan that the leaders had taken out with the Labour party in 1940 now had to be repaid.

At the same time, the Attlee-Morrison power struggle entered its final stages. The contest at last became overt, culminating in Morrison's launching a challenge to his rival after Labour's election victory. In this last phase of the war, with everything still to play for, the pursuit of ambition and personal power became more unrestrained than ever. Repairing his damaged internal standing after the upheavals of the Mosley episode, Morrison managed to construct a position of such strength that he seized all the initiative in his feud with Attlee and established himself as the effective leader of the party for six months, as his ambition was finally unmasked. The period described in the chapter represented the highpoint of Morrison's political career. Moreover, the question of who would lead Labour now moved into alignment with the broader struggle between the ministers and their party. As will be seen, other than a new rupture over Greece, virtually all of Labour's internal conflicts from 1944-5 were about decisions for 'the future'. Further, these conflicts became pawns in the struggle between Attlee and Morrison. Morrison was undoubtedly the more aggressive for, having long played both sides in adopting a rhetorical posture intended to drive a wedge between Attlee and the party, while taking a full part in the Labour ministers' immersion in office, after the NEC's rejection of his 'coupon' idea, he now effectively defected from the rest of the leadership group and fundamentally altered his position. He abandoned the strategy, and doctrine, employed by the senior figures since 1939, and sought instead to base his

claim to the leadership on becoming the most vigorous advocate of withdrawal from the Coalition. Morrison's new stance captured the imagination of a disillusioned party, and Attlee, favouring a continuation of the Coalition for several months at least, was forced onto the back foot as Morrison launched an all-out effort to seize the leadership.

I

From the summer of 1944, there was a discernible movement back towards party politics. It was generally accepted that, sooner or later, politics would return to 'normality'. In the country at large, this recognition that things would change in the near future also meant that Common Wealth, the progress of which had been deeply alarming to some, quickly lost ground. It was reduced to an unsuccessful application for affiliation to the Labour movement.¹ The question of how to respond to the uncertain future of post-war thus immediately pressed upon Attlee in the summer of 1944, and, with the conflict with Germany expected to be over by the end of the year, a series of contentious internal debates began. Continuing his previous, incremental, efforts, Attlee took the lead in trying to map out a new course and, once again, haul Labour in his chosen direction, but, despite initial success, was forced to swim against the tide of powerful internal currents. There were now visible limits to how far Attlee could afford to go. One immediate difficulty was when to schedule the Conference. In mid July, Attlee and Dalton decided to avoid holding it in the near future following the upheavals of the Bevan-Bevin clash.² The leader's instinctive ability to read the mood of his followers had not been diluted by four years of separation, Attlee being 'all for' using the German flying bomb threat as a suitable pretext for delay.³ During this behind-the-scenes intriguing with Dalton, it also became clear that Attlee had reached a decision about which of the post-war options open to them Labour should pursue. Those options were immediate withdrawal from office at the end of the war, and a general election; continuing the Coalition for approximately six months and then holding an election; or staying in harness until the defeat of Japan, expected to take a year after the defeat of Germany. The option of indefinite or permanent coalition which, as the thesis has suggested, was toyed with

¹ NEC Organisation sub-committee minutes, 22 November 1944; NEC minutes, 8 December 1944; NEC Election sub-committee minutes, 7 January 1945.

² Dalton Diary, 18 July 1944 (p.770). In mid May, the NEC had agreed to postpone the annual Conference until December, in light of the preparations for D-Day and the transport strain the invasion would place on the country – NEC minutes, 16 May 1944. It is interesting that there is little real evidence of preparations for a Conference in June in the months beforehand. The usual intense surge of policy statements and declarations was largely absent. Although there is no documentary evidence to support such a claim, it does not seem implausible that the leadership – who, via their positions in government, were aware of the imminence of the attack – had no real intention of holding a Conference in the summer all along. It is difficult to believe they would have been disappointed at having to postpone the annual confrontation with their followers.

³ Dalton Diary, 18 July 1944 (p.770).

earlier in the war perhaps no longer seemed a realistic option – possibly as a result of the instability of the Bevan episode. The interesting aspect of this, of course, was that all of these options remained *time*, not *policy* options; as such it reinforces the perception of calculating, self-interested politics.

Both Attlee and Dalton, while definitely in favour of continuing the Coalition for a suitable period in order to allow Churchill's victory aura to dissipate, now seemingly ruled out any idea of a longer-term alliance with the Conservatives.⁴ Whether such a strategy would ever have been practicable is debatable, but Attlee had certainly hitherto shown little inclination to restrict his options. His position throughout the war had remained consistent, seeking to retain flexibility and then wait and see. Yet he had now apparently come down in favour of one particular course. This was an important shift, and represented the beginnings of the alignment between the Attlee-Morrison struggle and the issue of the party's future. To this end, Attlee also sent a signal to Labour that he did intend to leave the Coalition at the end of the war, announcing to his followers that he would enter into negotiations with the prime minister over the timing of an election.⁵ His Organisation sub-committee also recommended to the NEC that Labour should seek an independent majority at the next election.⁶ Given how little overt political controversy occurred over the next few months, these decisions must be judged a success. Attlee privately agreed with Dalton that the ideal scenario would be 'if we had no election for...six months after the German surrender, and if then we could separate from the Tories without too fierce a quarrel'.⁷ Underlying this, of course, was the fact that the question was no longer a hypothetical one; a decision now had to be made. Even though he had thus far managed to outmanoeuvre all internal opposition on the issue, it seemed that Attlee had at last been forced to acknowledge the limits of what his party would stand. Yet, as will become clear below, whether this shift encapsulated his *true* position remained unclear.

Around this period, a second major shift occurred which was to prove similarly critical in the events described in this last part of the thesis. This was that Labour's Big Four were now firmly divided into two camps. In one were Attlee, Bevin, and Dalton, while, in the other, Morrison stood alone. Dalton was in agreement with Attlee's election strategy and had drifted into Bevin's orbit within the government.⁸ With Attlee enjoying rather weightier support than Morrison, this new state of affairs constituted an important change in the power relationships and signified that

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Minutes of the special PLP meetings, 8 & 12 July 1944.

⁶ NEC minutes, 26 July 1944.

⁷ Ibid; Dalton Diary, 19 July 1944 (p.770).

⁸ Dalton Diary, 1, 4, and 6 September 1944 (pp. 782-7).

the agreement between the leadership group – which had held since 1939 – was breaking down. This agreement was to be finally broken by Morrison just months later. The divides were not, moreover, ideological, but a reflection of the mounting personal tension between the leader and the heir apparent.

In late July, the NEC agreed – despite opposition from Laski, Shinwell, and Wilkinson – that it would be better to delay the Conference.⁹ Attlee had got his way. His other proposal, that Labour should fight the general election as an independent entity, was also approved, and he, along with Dalton, Greenwood, Laski, and Wilkinson, were tasked with drafting a public announcement of this.¹⁰ Yet, cleverly, Attlee and Dalton sought to drag this process out, on the grounds that the precise wording would be difficult.¹¹ Given that the war was expected to end soon, this was another way to simply put off action and avoid committing themselves. Their proposal had said nothing about the timing of an election, or whether Labour should remain in the Coalition until then.¹² As had been the case earlier, there was also no mention of a commitment against forming a new coalition after the election – which, given the likelihood of defeat, must have seemed an attractive prospect. Attlee now revealed his position on timing by winning ‘general’ acceptance – which presumably means from Dalton and Greenwood, but not Laski and Wilkinson – for his view that the ideal strategy would be to stay in office for six months after the defeat of Germany.¹³ Reaffirming the assertions made above that Attlee was signalling to his followers that he was in favour of independence after all, he made, as in February, a statement in which he strongly affirmed that the party would fight an election as an independent entity.¹⁴ However – and, again as in February, suggesting that his recent shift towards independence had been a feint – it seems that Attlee also still wanted to retain the option of long-term coalition, objecting to any public declaration of his own proposal!¹⁵ Moreover, as far as we can see, there was no mention made of long-term arrangements. The difference in the possible courses suggested at different times by Attlee and other Labour leaders may seem slight, but in fact had quite different implications. Quite apart from any preference for long-term independence or alliance – which is not clear from the documentary evidence – Attlee certainly believed that Churchill would not lose an election.¹⁶ The ambiguity in Attlee’s positioning, and the fact that he is not recorded as having

⁹ NEC minutes, 27 July 1944.

¹⁰ *Ibid*; Dalton Diary, 26 July 1944 (pp. 772-3).

¹¹ Dalton Diary, 22 August 1944 (p.779).

¹² NEC minutes, 27 July 1944.

¹³ Dalton Diary, 22 August 1944 (pp. 780). This drafting sub-committee was not minuted.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ Dalton Diary, 22 August 1944 (pp. 779).

¹⁶ Bevin almost certainly already favoured long-term coalition over traditional party politics. When Attlee informed him of the plan he was putting to the drafting team of a six month postponement, Bevin was furious – but only because Attlee had the temerity to try and get this through the Labour party first before

expressed a *definite* view, one way or the other, on the issue until towards the end of the war should not prevent recognition of the fact that his activities had all been pointed in that direction since 1941. As we have seen, he had sometimes fought determinedly against his followers to preserve that route. Attlee had not dissented from the pro-coalition posture adopted by the other leaders. The sheer consistency in his behaviour offers compelling evidence about his preferences. Nevertheless, while Attlee had begun to steer Labour on a new course, having secured provisional agreement for his idea, and now enjoyed a division of the leadership group which was firmly in his favour, his attempt to retain this last option was eventually to provide Morrison with the means to challenge his leadership.

In the meantime, however, Attlee sought to exploit the question of the future of the Coalition as a new weapon against the weakened Morrison. At his instigation, the NEC again explicitly rejected any possibility of a ‘coupon’ election.¹⁷ It was a shot clearly directed at Morrison, and, in early October, Attlee turned this into a public broadside, when the draft that he had been working on for three months was finally released to the press.¹⁸ Employing vitriolic language and making a great show of rejecting Morrison’s idea, it declared that ‘We do not believe that any *responsible* statement would advocate following that *evil* precedent [of the 1918 election]. Despite *malicious* whisperings to the contrary no *responsible* leader of Labour has ever toyed with the idea of a coupon election’.¹⁹

This language was, to say the least, strong. Attlee was discrediting his opponent while entrenching his own control of Labour’s election posture. The target was obvious, for Morrison’s ‘coupon’ proposal was no secret. Attlee had successfully turned Morrison’s ‘champion of socialism’ posture back on him, and exploited his lack of membership of the Executive – and inability to challenge it before it was published – to publicly humiliate his rival. Underlining how ruthless Attlee could really be was the fact that Morrison had, for several months, in fact recognised that the Coalition could not be an indefinite arrangement.²⁰ As will be demonstrated below, the NEC’s rebuff over his proposal for a common manifesto had pushed Morrison into a dramatic about-turn. Nonetheless, the leader struck another blow to the Home Secretary’s fragile standing, and instigated the beginning of the final clash between them. Given the circumstances

informing ‘your Government colleagues’! Terming it an ‘amazing procedure’, Bevin told Attlee that this was ‘a strange method to invite loyalty’. Bevin’s attitude makes clear that his preference would have been for Attlee to ignore the party and push this through the government first – which is itself indicative of his views on the subject. Attlee papers, Bevin to Attlee, 13 September 1944.

¹⁷ NEC minutes, 13 September 1944; NEC papers, Attlee memorandum. The leader submitted a memorandum to the Executive urging a clear rejection of the possibility.

¹⁸ NEC papers, press release, 5 October 1944.

¹⁹ Ibid (my emphasis).

²⁰ *The Times*, 23 May 1944.

of the autumn of 1944, with Morrison's fortunes at their nadir, Attlee's victory in the long-running struggle with his old rival seemed all but certain.

But Morrison quickly retaliated and, in choosing to fight on the same ground, precipitated a further convergence between the two primary conflicts within the party. The damage inflicted to his popularity by the Mosley fiasco had been severe, he had been off the NEC since 1943, and the war was widely expected to be over by the end of 1944. In this climate, Morrison had to rebuild his position, and quickly. He did so by taking Attlee's tactic of using the emotive issue of 'the future' as a pawn even further, for co-operation within the government had become increasingly difficult to sustain throughout 1944.²¹ With the end of the war approaching, both Labour and the Conservatives simply had less inclination to compromise. Partisan feeling increased in vigour, and there was a sense of general drift back to party politics – which Attlee had been forced to recognise in his declared election policy. The *Daily Herald* became increasingly anti-Conservative, while even Bevin was publicly combative.²² Morrison seized on this as an opportunity to return to his familiar tactic of advertising his own socialist credentials in comparison with the unexciting Attlee. With Attlee, Bevin, and Dalton unwilling to disrupt Coalition harmony, the Home Secretary adopted a position on socialist legislation which would clearly prove more popular with the party, and used it to spark a major internal conflict. In mid October, Morrison therefore suddenly jumped ship – abandoning the leadership line that he had been so integral in defending – by pressing for a public confrontation with the Conservatives and demanding new 'socialist' measures from the government.²³ This was a fundamental change in his position, and the most significant shift by any leading politician since 1939. It entrenched the division of the senior figures into two camps and signalled the beginning of a desperate nine month race for the leadership. In undertaking this shift, Morrison abandoned the doctrine that he had readily propagated for five years and attached himself instead to the mood of hostility and disaffection within the party.

Declaring himself opposed to the attempts of the others to avoid a break over policy with the Conservatives, Morrison responded to Attlee's 'malicious' statement with a new memorandum explicitly calling for Labour to put forward far-reaching demands for a 'great national plan', and pushing for the Labour ministers to force concessions from Churchill – always a popular cry within Labour circles.²⁴ Bevin saw straight through it, and was furious at the latest attempt by

²¹ The best account of the increasing difficulties is Addison, *The Road to 1945*, pp. 234-47, 252-58.

²² Bullock, *Bevin*, vol. 2, pp. 311-7, 329-9; Dalton Diary, 1 September 1944 (pp. 783-4); *Daily Herald*, September-December 1944.

²³ Morrison papers, Morrison to Bevin, 17 October 1944.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Morrison to bolster his internal standing, refusing to be involved.²⁵ Attlee and Dalton were negative as well.²⁶ But this only played into Morrison's hands. Invited to a special NEC meeting, and backed by Wilkinson, who shaped the discussion in his favour from the chair, Morrison forced his opponents into a corner.²⁷ His proposals were populist and hardly something Attlee could publicly disavow. Greenwood, constantly searching for a means to appease the PLP, backed the Home Secretary.²⁸ The next day, the deputy leader made clear in the Commons that the party hoped that the new Prolongation of Parliament Bill would be the last.²⁹ Morrison had thus set a trap, choosing an appealing posture to start his comeback. The majority of the NEC backed his plan, and ruled that the ministers should pressurise the Conservatives to get as much legislation onto the statute book as possible.³⁰ Rather than defying this and giving Morrison what he sought – a confrontation they could not win – Attlee and the others signalled acquiescence but in practice ignored it.³¹

Morrison, as Bevin recognised, had clearly made this departure from his previous stance as a political tool, developing a new position while Attlee held steadfast to the old doctrine. The convergence between disillusionment over the question of the ministerial line – which had always been formulated primarily by Attlee – and the rivalry over the post of leader had therefore now occurred. Morrison had delivered an unambiguous reminder of how dangerous an opponent he was, having retaken the initiative and exploited the problems within the government as a means to undermine Attlee's authority. Soon Attlee, Bevin, and Dalton were refusing to back his 'great national plan', resulting in Morrison's announcement that he would continue the campaign single-handed.³² Attlee tried to blunt his attack by adopting chameleon-like qualities and suddenly producing a memorandum not dissimilar to Morrison's, apparently having arranged beforehand that Bevin and Dalton would reject it – enabling the leader to suggest that he had been 'overruled'.³³ Within months, the situation between the Labour ministers had degenerated to the point that Dalton's Distribution of Industry Act was the last major struggle with the Conservatives.³⁴ Fearing electoral rout, Attlee, Bevin, and Dalton could see little point in permitting Churchill to depict himself as a reformer by passing more legislation.³⁵ Morrison, in

²⁵ Ibid. See also another letter imploring the Minister of Labour to join him – Morrison papers, Morrison to Bevin, 25 October 1944. Bevin papers, Bevin to Morrison, 24 October 1944.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ NEC minutes, 29 October 1944.

²⁸ NEC minutes, 30 October 1944.

²⁹ *Hansard*, vol. 404, 31 October 1944, cols. 668-72.

³⁰ NEC minutes, 29 October 1944.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Morrison papers, Morrison memorandum to Attlee, Bevin and Dalton, 22 November 1944.

³³ Dalton papers, copy of Attlee letter to Morrison, 22 November 1944.

³⁴ Dalton papers, Dalton to Attlee, 6 February 1945; Brooke, *Labour's War*, pp. 228-9.

³⁵ Harris, *Attlee*, pp. 236-7.

contrast, wanted to achieve as much reform as possible – *or at least to be seen to be attempting to do so* – in order to emphasise Labour’s distinctive line.³⁶ The irony of all this, of course, was that the naturally authoritarian Morrison would never have been one to damage the government; but, safe in the knowledge that his opponents would hold the line, he was free to depict himself as the sole authentic representative of his party’s wishes. The episode constituted an important reassertion of himself by Morrison, and marked the beginning of his efforts over the next six months to make his momentum overwhelming. He had outmanoeuvred Attlee and successfully portrayed himself as Labour’s most vigorous advocate. It is clear that the leadership rivalry and the broader questions of the future of the Coalition could now no longer be separated. With the end of the war in sight, both of Labour’s primary protagonists had seized upon the latter issue as a means to damage their opponent.

II

While the leader and heir apparent continued their power struggle, Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence tried in vain to rebuild the authority which had been shattered by Bevan. For five years, the spectre of a loss of control over the PLP and resultant anarchy had been narrowly avoided; but, with Bevan’s public victory, that had now come to pass. Until the end of the war there was to be a sense of chaos and that the parliamentary party was rudderless. Greenwood and his deputy did manage to block attempts by Shinwell to engineer a combustible free vote on the Town and Country Planning Bill, but the continued fragility of their position was made clear as soon as a real challenge was made.³⁷ When Bevan again defied the official line in October and voted against the government’s Unemployment Insurance Bill, the Committee opted not to even try and take any action against him.³⁸ This is suggestive of Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence’s lack of confidence that they could defeat Bevan in a test of strength after their humiliation at his hands four months earlier. Unwilling to challenge the emboldened Welshman, the apparent truce of the summer had, in fact, amounted to a concession of defeat. The situation soon got worse, for the PLP only agreed to back the government’s Employment White Paper on the proviso that it was not committed to supporting any of its specifics, after Bevan denounced it as likely to create ‘A Nation of Fully Employed Tramps’.³⁹ The state of central authority in the PLP was now tenuous

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 18 & 20 July 1944; PLP minutes, 12 July 1944; see also PLP papers, minutes of special meeting, 12 July 1944; PLP minutes, 2 August 1944 & 4 October 1944.

³⁸ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 17 October 1944. See also the minutes for 5 December 1944.

³⁹ *Tribune*, 2 June 1944 and PLP minutes, 14 June 1944.

at best, and, despite a tightening-up of the Standing Orders, the position of both Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence had been fatally undermined.⁴⁰

Moreover, this soon evolved into a fresh test of the Labour ministers' authority. In September, Dalton began re-writing *Full Employment and Financial Policy* for inclusion in a manifesto, supporting nationalisation of major industries but refraining from slipping into socialist dogma.⁴¹ However, when presented to the annual Conference – which was at last held in December – the revulsions towards the party's economic policy became apparent.⁴² At a disruptive event, a young Ian Mikardo made his mark for the first time as a constituency delegate when, strongly supported by the rank-and-file, he put down a resolution denouncing Dalton's work as an 'abandonment of all socialist policies and objectives', and demanded a policy of more extensive public ownership.⁴³ Shinwell was put up to represent the Executive and defend its ambiguous statement on nationalisation, but, despite his fiery speech, the parallels between the official position and that of the government were unappetising to a party eager to be free from the restraints of coalition.⁴⁴ The Mikardo resolution was consequently carried, and the NEC compelled to amend its statement.⁴⁵ Defeated on such a symbolic issue of policy-making, the episode was a serious humiliation for the leadership. Even amid more contentious periods earlier in the war, the Labour ministers had still been able to win on the big symbolic questions; but now, at a time of relative calm, their position had been rejected. Bevan took the opportunity to mark his own election to the NEC by revelling in the defeat in *Tribune*.⁴⁶ As noted above, political intrigue at the highest echelons of the Labour party continued largely as normal; but, at the lower levels, the leadership group and their proxies had lost control of their followers.

The mood of hostility at Conference which contributed to the Mikardo revolt was shaped largely by the issue of the Greek civil war. In early December, Labour had been provoked into a rage worse than anything seen since the Beveridge crisis, over Churchill's decision to use British troops against the Communist EAM in the country.⁴⁷ Aligning Britain with the Greek monarchy against the guerrillas who had borne the brunt of the fighting against the Nazis was hugely

⁴⁰ NEC papers, 'Memorandum on Discipline and Standing Orders', 22 November 1944. This memorandum was submitted to all MPs, and threatened that persistent rebels would be reported to the NEC, and gave Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence formal powers to themselves decide the PLP position without a vote if a sudden situation arose in the Commons.

⁴¹ See 1944 LPACR, pp. 50-2.

⁴² 1944 LPACR, pp. 161-8.

⁴³ 1944 LPACR, p. 163.

⁴⁴ 1944 LPACR, pp. 160-1.

⁴⁵ 1944 LPACR, p.168.

⁴⁶ *Tribune*, 29 December 1944.

⁴⁷ The best account of this split is Andrew Thorpe, '“In a rather emotional state”? The Labour party and British intervention in Greece, 1944-5', *English Historical Review*, 121 (2006), pp. 1075-1105.

controversial, and the revolt which followed gave free rein to the disaffection within the party. There was general hostility to the operation in the country as well, interpreting it as a transparent attempt to prop up the forces of reaction against freedom fighters. In reality, the government saw the crisis as a first test in deciding the European balance of power in the emerging geopolitical rivalry with the Soviet Union. Yet, even though Labour's representatives in office grasped the Russian threat as keenly as any Conservative, this did nothing to mollify the hostility which their support for the operation engendered.

Although Greenwood and Pethick Lawrence managed to avoid a large revolt in the Commons after a motion of censure was put down, colluding with the government and winning a conciliatory statement, the affair still poisoned the atmosphere at Conference just days later.⁴⁸ Greenwood, in his capacity as someone independent of the government, was put up to introduce an emergency resolution to the delegates, but it was a fudge, declaring that Labour called for the government to 'facilitate an armistice...with a view to the establishment of a provisional national government' – which was, of course, precisely what British forces were in the process of accomplishing.⁴⁹ It was hardly the denunciation of the Coalition that many desired. As Bullock has observed, Attlee was much too shrewd in the context of his ongoing struggle with Morrison to involve himself in a headlong collision with the delegates.⁵⁰ Instead, the leader left that task to the Minister of Labour.⁵¹ Bevin's intervention was the defining moment of the Conference, facing the passionate hostility of the audience unmoved, and seeming to take pleasure in weighing in with an authoritarian speech in which he declared that the Labour ministers had concurred with the decision to use force and would not be swayed.⁵² He did not bother to be conciliatory nor seemed concerned with the anger of the delegates, having already mobilised the union bloc vote to ensure victory.⁵³ In a speech eerily reminiscent of his 1936 demolition of Lansbury, he told the Conference that 'We cannot govern this world by emotionalism, it [calls] for hard thinking', attacked EAM and declared that 'I cannot bring it into my conscience that any one of the decisions was wrong'.⁵⁴ Bevan received loud cheers when he suggested that Bevin was a 'fascist'

⁴⁸ *Hansard*, vol. 406, 8 December 1944, cols. 992-1014; PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 5, 6 & 7 December 1944. There were two meetings held on the 6th; PLP minutes, 7 December 1944. Pethick-Lawrence had taken the lead in winning agreement that if the government gave a statement making clear its commitment to democracy in Greece, the PLP would abstain on the censure motion. This was successful, Eden making a conciliatory speech in the House, and the party abstained.

⁴⁹ NEC minutes, 12 December 1944; *1944 LPACR*, p.143.

⁵⁰ Bullock, *Bevin*, vol. 2, p.345.

⁵¹ Dalton Diary, 13 December 1944 (p.186). Attlee asked Bevin to do so at the last moment; Laski was present when he made the request to 'come in'. Laski told Dalton that 'it was a fantastic conversation, it was like trying to persuade Tetrizzini to sing'.

⁵² *1944 LPACR*, pp. 145-7.

⁵³ *Ibid*; Addison, *The Road to 1945*, p.254.

⁵⁴ *1944 LPACR*, pp. 145-47.

in a scathing speech, and called for the Labour ministers to exercise 'socialist' influence or get out of office.⁵⁵ Griffiths, too, joined in the attack, and denied that what the Labour ministers proposed as government policy represented the repressive activities British forces were engaged in.⁵⁶ But the resentment that washed over Bevin on the platform did nothing to alter the result. Backed by the unions, Attlee's enforcer saw to it that the official resolution was passed by an overwhelming majority of 2,455,000 to 137,000 votes.⁵⁷

Beyond the Greek question, the Conference was something of a mixed bag for the leadership. They had been defeated by Mikardo and faced a major revolt over Greece. Bevan's rise, meanwhile, was confirmed when he won election to the constituencies section of the NEC for the first time.⁵⁸ This was the pay-off for his defeat of established authority earlier in the year. He had enjoyed a rather more successful war than his hero Fox. His rise to power during 1944 had been remarkable. A polemical tract entitled *Why Not Trust the Tories?* had sold 80,000 copies, reinforcing his status as Labour's coming man.⁵⁹ He remained unable to win election to the Administrative Committee in November, with even Shinwell managing to scrape back on.⁶⁰ But the extra-parliamentary environment now offered real fruits for Bevan. Within weeks of his election, *Tribune* editorials were openly arguing for him to be given a senior post in the party hierarchy.⁶¹ Bevan had employed the circumstances of the period to propel himself into the higher levels of the British political world. The man who would one day instigate a sequence of events which would tear Labour apart for three decades was within sight of possessing genuine power.

On the other hand, Attlee's October statement on fighting a general election as an independent entity was accepted virtually unanimously.⁶² Moreover, there was still no mention of a pledge against forming a new coalition after the election – which strengthens the notion that the leader was not entirely committed to reclaiming independence.⁶³ His provisional approval for a six month continuation from the NEC drafting team also remained a valuable asset. The Labour ministers registered another success, when their statement on *The International Post-War Settlement*, moved in a powerful speech by Attlee himself, and which, though clothed in the language of internationalism, underlined the move towards the cold *realpolitik* that would

⁵⁵ 1944 LPACR, pp. 148-49; Bullock, *Bevin*, vol. 2, p.346.

⁵⁶ 1944 LPACR, pp. 149-50.

⁵⁷ 1944 LPACR, p.150.

⁵⁸ 1944 LPACR, p.131. Bevan came fifth out of the seven elected.

⁵⁹ A. Bevan, *Why Not Trust the Tories?* (London, 1944).

⁶⁰ PLP papers, Administrative Committee election results, 15 November 1944. Griffiths topped the poll with 115 votes. Shinwell, at the bottom, attracted sixty-three, while Bevan polled fifty-three.

⁶¹ *Tribune*, 9 & 23 January 1945.

⁶² 1944 LPACR, pp. 112-16; Dalton Diary, 11 December 1944 (pp. 814-5).

⁶³ Dalton Diary, 11 December 1944 (p.815); *Hansard*, vol. 406, 5 December 1944, col. 411.

henceforth define Labour's foreign policy, was passed by a large majority.⁶⁴ While rebuffed over the emphasis to be put on nationalisation, then, the leadership had otherwise secured backing for the rest of their key policy choices. Though Greece revealed how unhappy the party remained, nonetheless, as 1944 came to an end, it was clear that this level of dissidence was ultimately tolerable.

In the NEC elections, Morrison secured his own return to the NEC.⁶⁵ Moreover, he now at last threw off the restraints he had worked under for six years, and, more openly than ever, waged his challenge to Attlee. His long-standing ambition to dominate the Executive – seen earlier by his pursuit of the positions of general secretary and the treasurership, and then trying to acquire the former post for his protégé Webb – at last became a reality. Over the subsequent six months, the Home Secretary was to cluster into his hands an unprecedented degree of influence and authority, stamping his personal seal upon virtually all of the Labour party's policy and employing the NEC as a vehicle for his own power. After a year of setbacks in which his prospects of replacing Attlee had declined inexorably, Morrison bounced back with a ferocious energy, conducting a series of rapid manoeuvres which, in several bold strokes, turned the tables on Attlee and swung the advantage in their struggle for the leadership firmly in the other direction.

Key to this was the change in his favoured election policy. Morrison now moved towards support for immediate independence, in contrast to Attlee's apparent desire to perpetuate the Coalition. Immediately after the Conference, Morrison became the chairman of both the NEC Policy sub-committee and the new Campaign committee set up to draft Labour's manifesto, plan election preparations, and direct overall strategy.⁶⁶ The Home Secretary used the latter body as a high-powered vehicle to map out Labour's future, and, largely on his own authority, established himself as the architect of Labour's entire general election effort.⁶⁷ Exploiting his renewed access to the levers of Labour's institutional machinery, Morrison placed himself at the forefront of decision-making and constructed a formidable internal platform which enabled him to drive the party's planning for the future virtually single-handed. Though Attlee and Dalton both sat on the Campaign committee as well, it was Morrison who really directed it – by the time it held its first meeting, he had already written the first draft of the manifesto, *Let Us Face the Future*, and then

⁶⁴ 1944 LPACR, pp. 131-33, 139-40.

⁶⁵ 1944 LPACR, p.131. Morrison came fourth in the ballot.

⁶⁶ NEC minutes, 10 January 1945.

⁶⁷ A glance at the sheer number of issues considered by the Campaign committee at all its meetings gives a sense of the range and extent of Morrison's influence, as well as his personal centrality. See NEC Campaign sub-committee minutes, 19 March 1945. For example, one meeting (19th March) dealt with twenty-four separate issues.

oversaw its refinement over the next two months.⁶⁸ Moreover, he produced what was clearly a manifesto for an *immediate* election – a position rather at odds with Attlee’s favoured six month postponement. Having had his ‘coupon’ proposal rejected, Morrison thus shifted completely the other way and advocated a diametrically opposed strategy. The document stoked up fears about ‘another 1918’ by stressing the need for immediate action on reform as soon as the war ended. At the same time, despite wishing to strengthen his base, Morrison – determined as ever to appeal to the wider electorate – produced a relatively moderate document, containing pledges of extensive reform while simply ignoring the Mikardo resolution and avoiding socialist dogma.⁶⁹ It was he who determined the primary components of the Labour campaign – moderate policies, emphasis on their own war record, and stress on Conservative culpability in the crises of the previous fourteen years – and thus was, far more than Attlee, the planner of the shape of Labour’s future.⁷⁰ Morrison completely by-passed the trade unions and refused to afford them a role in the process, much to the chagrin of Citrine.⁷¹ In his element, plotting a campaign and expertly working a bureaucratic machine, in the first months of 1945 Morrison circumvented Attlee and exploited the new positions he had acquired to do all the important work – and hence determine the fundamentals of Labour’s stance – personally.⁷²

Morrison expertly walked the fine line between his self-styled role as the socialistic champion of the party and the pursuit of a distinctly pragmatic, rather than doctrinaire, stance. This bid to play all sides simultaneously – expanding his own position, undermining that of Attlee, and trying to win an election with moderate policies while avoiding angering the party – was a remarkable success. *Let Us Face the Future* was, in many respects, the greatest achievement of Morrison’s career. Establishing himself as the overseer of the move into the post-war world, there was little better conceivable advertisement of his abilities. He crafted a manifesto which enabled him to simultaneously stamp his own seal on the party’s new beginning and afford it its best chance of winning an election. Moreover, in their clashing electoral strategies and views on the Coalition, his rivalry with Attlee now had public substance other than simple ambition. After years of restraint, he had thus been able to fully exert his abilities. All this was the ideal preparation for him to launch his coup.

⁶⁸ NEC Campaign sub-committee minutes, 19 February 1945; NEC minutes 28 February 1945; NEC Policy sub-committee minutes, 23 January 1945; Donoughue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.331.

⁶⁹ NEC Policy sub-committee minutes, 27 March 1945; NEC minutes, 28 March 1945.

⁷⁰ NEC Campaign sub-committee minutes, 19 February 1945.

⁷¹ Warwick University, TUC papers, minutes of special General Council meeting, 23 May 1945.

⁷² Attlee played little discernible role in either formulating policies for the election or the details of the campaign.

The Home Secretary also worked to significantly increase his visibility in the PLP, the arena where any challenge to Attlee would have to be decided.⁷³ Moreover, the PLP was now anticipating a showdown between the two, and many were actively choosing sides. A pro-Morrison group of backbench MPs was already pushing the Home Secretary's case in agitating for a leadership ballot once Labour left office.⁷⁴ These were joined by his closest ally, Wilkinson, Webb and, on the NEC, Laski, as well as some trade union leaders.⁷⁵ By the second half of 1944, there existed a clear desire in the party for the issue to be finally resolved. Further, the contrast between the energy of Morrison, a natural campaigner, bold leader, and public figure, and the flatness of Attlee could hardly have been more apparent. More than ever, the heir apparent now looked like a genuine political giant. The internal pendulum was clearly swinging towards Morrison and away from the delaying tactics of Attlee, Bevin, and Dalton. Morrison had simply adopted the more internally popular posture. The period from late 1944 until July 1945 was thus the high watermark of Morrison's internal power. To all intents and purposes he, not Attlee, was the leader of the Labour party in the first half of 1945. He had chosen a position on Labour's future by virtue of it being the opposite of that of Attlee – immediate withdrawal versus a six months continuation – and entrenched both the growing divide between the positions of the two and the convergence between broader conflicts within the party and the rivalry at the top. Following up his initiative on aggressive legislation by plotting and leading a bold new course intimately associated with him personally, Morrison secured a second, and this time more significant, victory. For the next six months, Attlee – who, months earlier, seemed to have already consigned Morrison to defeat – was to be constantly outmanoeuvred.

III

The shocks at the turn of the year over Greece, like the Bevan clash the previous spring, precipitated another shift in the position of the leaders. The NEC announced that the recent Conference would be the last before the decisions on a general election were taken.⁷⁶ This declaration was much more in line with Morrison's strategy of forcing a break with the Conservatives than the cautious approach of the other leaders. Yet the announcement also reflected the Home Secretary's anxiety lest his moderate, middle-ground campaign be wrecked by ideological purity. The Executive resolved to ask all sections of the movement to 'refrain' from

⁷³ Morrison attended approximately three-quarters of PLP meetings from early 1945 (while Attlee attended only one-third).

⁷⁴ Dalton Diary, 18 October 1944 (p.795).

⁷⁵ Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, pp. 340-1.

⁷⁶ NEC minutes, 10 January 1945.

submitting resolutions to the next Conference.⁷⁷ Chastened by the Mikardo resolution, it was an attempt to ensure that only Morrison's official manifesto was discussed. Shortly thereafter, they set out to rig the agenda even further by deciding to simply 'eliminate' all problematic resolutions from debate.⁷⁸

In early 1945, however, internal dissension largely subsided. United in anticipation of leaving the Coalition, for the next five months Labour was more quiescent than at any point since 1940. Precipitated by the fact that the war proceeded so quickly that domestic controversy briefly receded into the background, attention was focused elsewhere as Nazi Germany collapsed, and little else of note occurred.⁷⁹ By early February, the Red Army were at the Oder, within fifty miles of Berlin; around the same time, British and American forces began assaults on the Rhine, and, in March, the Rhine was crossed. Political tensions between the parties consequently again increased in intensity over March and April, as the government suffered fresh by-election defeats.⁸⁰ Labour was itching for independence, and the Conservative party wanted an immediate election to ensure victory off Churchill's back – itself in conflict with the prime minister's romanticism, which was not so party focused. Despite his own backing for Attlee's cautious strategy, Bevin's temper again got the better of him when, angered by Churchill's oration to the Conservative conference in April, he responded in a damning indictment of the Conservatives' record in a speech at Leeds. The Minister of Labour called the party a 'one-man show', and attacked the prime minister as being untrustworthy as a peacetime leader.⁸¹ The speeches garnered considerable attention and increased the pressures within the political nation for separation still further.⁸² The response to the latter oration, especially, was electric.⁸³ The

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ NEC minutes, 28 March 1945.

⁷⁹ Some efforts were made to harass the government over Greece, but a Labour delegation to Churchill in January – as well as the success of the British forces – brought the controversy to a quick end – PLP Administrative Committee special meeting minutes, 15 January 1945. Griffiths tried to pursue the Labour ministers over reconstruction, but Greenwood and Pethick-Lawrence procrastinated endlessly – PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 15 & 27 February 1945. Stokes was threatened with expulsion for his repeated rebellions against the official line, prompting him to pledge 'a real effort to march in step' – PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 6 & 20 March 1945.

⁸⁰ Labour lost a seat in Motherwell to the Scottish Nationalists, while the Conservatives lost the seat for the Scottish Universities to an Independent, and Chelmsford to Common Wealth – Butler, *Twentieth Century British Political Facts*, p.255.

⁸¹ *The Times*, 9 April 1945.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Harris has credited Bevin's speech with so up-lifting the mood of the Labour party that many of the internal tensions were, for the moment, healed – Harris, *Attlee*, p.249.

hermetically-sealed world that party politics had been since 1939 looked increasingly in danger of rupture.⁸⁴

With Morrison having seized so much initiative in the first months of 1945, Attlee attempted to head off his rival's rapid build-up of power. Increasingly taken up with foreign rather than domestic policy, the leader accompanied Eden to the San Francisco conference throughout March and April on the future of international relations. With the two opponents having staked out divergent positions on the future of the Coalition, Attlee countered Morrison by appointing Bevin, rather than the Home Secretary, as the Labour liaison with Churchill while he was away.⁸⁵ As the leader and Bevin were in agreement on seeking to prolong the life of the government beyond the end of the German war for at least six months, it was an attempt to ensure that the Home Secretary did nothing to circumvent Attlee and sabotage the Coalition.⁸⁶ He advised Bevin to keep in close touch with Morrison – which translated as keeping an eye on what his rival was up to.⁸⁷ But Attlee's gambit to contain Morrison did not work; in fact, the reverse occurred.

It became impossible to head off the agitation for a return to party politics any longer when, on 8 May, VE Day was declared with the German surrender. After almost six years of war, Britain was victorious. But the nation's political leaders could spend little time celebrating; rather, they had to turn their attention back to what to most of them – desirous as they were of continuing the Coalition – must have seemed to be the *problem* of party politics. With the end of the *raison d'être* for the Coalition imminent, the parallel power struggles examined in the thesis therefore built towards a conclusion. Decisions had to be taken, and Attlee was out of the country. On 10 May, Bevin and Morrison met with numerous Labour ministers, and agreed that an October election would be preferred to one in the summer of 1945.⁸⁸ For all the fervour of the party at large, its upper echelons were still sensible enough to try and remain in office until the contest came. Attempting to turn this momentum for delay until October into a bid to remain in the Coalition for longer still, Attlee, from San Francisco, broached with Churchill the possibility of the government

⁸⁴ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 11 April 1945. The Committee called a special meeting to emphasise that despite 'recent speeches...nothing ought to be done...which would...precipitate a political crisis'.

⁸⁵ *The Daily Herald* reported that Attlee had appointed Bevin 'Acting Leader', much to the displeasure of Greenwood (and, one imagines, most Labour MPs) – PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 18 April 1945.

⁸⁶ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 18 April 1945.

⁸⁷ Bevin papers, Attlee to Bevin, n.d.. Carrying out this job, Bevin and Morrison, according to Dalton, briefly got along 'surprisingly well' – Dalton, *Memoirs*, p.458.

⁸⁸ Dalton Diary, 10 May 1945 (p.858). The day before, a joint meeting of the NEC, TUC and Administrative Committee to agree a formal statement on the victory avoided explicit statements and said only that they reaffirmed their 'pledge of full and effective co-operation' in seeking the defeat of Japan and a just peace in Britain – NEC papers, minutes of a joint meeting of the NEC, TUC and PLP Administrative Committee, 9 May 1945.

continuing until the end of the Pacific war – whenever that occurred.⁸⁹ Given that this was widely expected to take approximately a year, the leader's real agenda was thus clear at last. But when Morrison and Bevin conveyed the proposal to the prime minister, the Home Secretary leapt on Churchill's statement that the Conservative party was putting him under pressure to fight an immediate election to effectively jettison Attlee's proposal, and make clear that he was opposed to going on until the defeat of Japan – implicitly encouraging the prime minister to force the issue.⁹⁰ Morrison, not Bevin, had taken the lead here, stealing a march on Attlee and trying to engineer the end of the Coalition. This chicanery in undermining the leader's course and entrenching a perception of continuation as impossible was seemingly a success, and, the next day, following Churchill's threat, even Attlee communicated his support for an October election rather than at the defeat of Japan.⁹¹ Yet all expected the prime minister to force a contest in the summer instead.⁹²

But Attlee's switch was just a ruse, probably necessitated by him being out of the country. When he returned, the struggle with Morrison for control of the party's course erupted into full-scale conflict, with the Home Secretary pursuing his own agenda and vigorously trying to bring the Coalition down, and Attlee trying to both stay in office and prevent his rival from augmenting his standing any further. This final stage of the wartime rivalry between the two was to remain at this intensity until July. It was, moreover, this issue that afforded their personal struggle a publicly-acceptable substance and gave the division of the leadership group into separate camps a rhetorical basis other than simple venom. That Morrison could manoeuvre much more freely than the leader was his great advantage, while Attlee was compelled to hold the line.

With the time for decision approaching, Churchill relented to pressure from Beaverbrook and Bracken, and formally wrote to Attlee on 18 May, immediately upon the latter's return to Britain and just three days before the 1945 annual Conference, offering Labour a choice between either remaining in the Coalition until the defeat of Japan or fighting an immediate election.⁹³ Before sending it, however, in full awareness that the Labour leader was to use it to try and persuade the NEC to stay in office, Churchill met with Attlee to decide on what the contents of the letter would be.⁹⁴ Attlee immediately backed away from his rejection of continuation the previous week, concurring with Churchill on the desirability of remaining in alliance.⁹⁵ Attlee also consulted with

⁸⁹ Bevin papers, copy of Morrison letter to Attlee, 11 May 1945.

⁹⁰ Dalton Diary, 11 May 1945 (pp. 858-9).

⁹¹ Bevin papers, copy of Attlee letter to Morrison, 12 May 1945.

⁹² Dalton Diary, 11 May 1945 (pp. 858-9).

⁹³ PREM 4/65/4, Churchill to Attlee, 18 May 1945.

⁹⁴ PREM 4/65/4, Churchill to the Chief Whip, 18 May 1945.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Bevin and Dalton on how to create the circumstances to remain in office.⁹⁶ Both of those two now also favoured going on until Japan was defeated.⁹⁷ The three were evidently determined to hang onto office for as long as possible, and displayed a not-insignificant amount of guile in trying to bring this about. It is not unfair to state that Foot's charge that Labour's most powerful figures had to be 'hauled out of [the Coalition] by the scruff of their necks', has a ring of truth.⁹⁸ Trying to come up with a formula to outfox their respective parties, Churchill agreed without demure to Attlee's suggestion to include a pledge that the Coalition would urgently implement the proposals for extensive reform already before Parliament, giving Attlee a valuable weapon at the decisive NEC meeting three days later.⁹⁹ The Labour leader had secured from Churchill what he desired, a suitable inducement for the party to carry on. For all his professed willingness since the previous summer to leave office, once the moment of decision actually arrived, the façade of Attlee's position was exposed. The leader, believing that Labour would be routed, had no intention of leaving office – certainly not until the party stood a chance at an election.

At Blackpool, the weekend before the Conference, Attlee's Machiavellian struggle to keep Labour in the government came to a head. His clear adoption of a position, after the obfuscation and vagueness of the previous nine months, had given Morrison forewarning of what he was planning, and the time to prepare to outmanoeuvre him. Further, the Home Secretary's base of support was significantly strengthened going into the event, with a pro-Morrison bloc beginning to take shape, underlining again how effectively he had seized all the initiative since December.¹⁰⁰ Shinwell and Bevan met privately and agreed that they were opposed to continuing the Coalition, conveying this to Morrison, and reinforcing his determination to lead the opposition to Attlee's bid to stay in office.¹⁰¹ Bevan also wanted to replace Attlee with Morrison.¹⁰² The Welshman had, throughout the war, concentrated his fire on the government or the Labour ministers as a group; he had made few attacks on Attlee personally. But, newly secure, this changed as he increasingly blamed Attlee directly for what he diagnosed as Labour's problems, attacking him for not disassociating Labour from policy on Greece, and calling his decision to go to San Francisco as Eden's deputy his 'Crowning Blunder'.¹⁰³ In a scathing indictment of Attlee's entire leadership

⁹⁶ Ibid; Dalton Diary, 18 May 1945 (p.861).

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Foot, *Bevan*, p.500.

⁹⁹ PREM 4/65/4, Churchill to the Chief Whip, 18 May 1945.

¹⁰⁰ Donoughue and Jones, *Morrison*, pp. 340-1.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² G. R. Strauss interview, cited Donoughue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.340; Vernon, *Wilkinson*, p.197. Bevan was staying with Strauss at this time, and apparently engaged in the intrigue on Morrison's behalf via telephone.

¹⁰³ *Tribune*, 30 March 1945.

since 1940, Bevan asserted that he had been a ‘humiliating’ representative, and accused him of ‘consistently underplaying his position and his opportunities’.¹⁰⁴

Morrison was now buttressed by the backing of a significant range of figures – in addition to Wilkinson and Laski, he was supported by Bevan, Cripps, and Shinwell, as well as the PLP backbenchers mentioned above.¹⁰⁵ All of them thought that a leadership contest must occur before any Labour government was formed.¹⁰⁶ They all began to canvass openly during the Conference, disparaging Attlee and pressing Morrison’s case.¹⁰⁷ Wilkinson asked Dalton to pressurise Attlee to step aside and allow Morrison victory.¹⁰⁸ A definite anti-Attlee bloc thus coalesced at precisely the same time as Morrison had the advantage over his opponent in most other respects as well. But Laski was energised more by sheer hatred of Attlee, than fervour for the heir apparent himself. He wanted rid of the leader before the general election even occurred, and, while he was agitating for Morrison, he also tried to get Deakin to persuade Bevin to challenge Attlee as well.¹⁰⁹ The Minister of Labour was apoplectic, and simply conveyed news of the intrigues straight to Attlee.¹¹⁰ The long-anticipated power struggle had thus broken out. It was the submergence of wider internal politics – disaffection with coalition and Attlee’s strategy since 1939 – into the rivalry over the leadership which allowed this struggle to at last be pursued without restraint.

At the decisive NEC meeting, Attlee, Dalton, and Bevin all argued in favour of Churchill’s proposal.¹¹¹ However, disregarding the promises of extensive social reform – the content of his own ‘great national plan’ – Morrison took the lead in opposing them, forcefully pushing for rejection of the offer.¹¹² Having known for weeks what his opponents were attempting to do, the Home Secretary had been able to set the ideal trap. His gamesmanship aside, though, he was surely correct on the substance of the issue. If the Labour ministers tried to stay in office and were rejected by the party – as they surely would be – it would be a disaster. After five years, the inevitable backlash had now occurred. While Attlee’s strategy had bought the time needed to make Labour electable, the only viable option that the party would now accept was withdrawal.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid; *Tribune*, 19 January 1945.

¹⁰⁵ G. R. Strauss interview, cited Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.340.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Dalton Diary, 20 May 1945 (unpublished). The main agitators were Cripps, Wilkinson, Laski, and Webb.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Dalton, *Memoirs*, pp. 46-7; Attlee interview, cited Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.341. Attlee was certainly of this view (Attlee, *As It Happened*, p.168).

¹¹⁰ Attlee, *As It Happened*, p.168.

¹¹¹ NEC minutes, 20 May 1945; Dalton Diary, ‘19 May-22 May 1945’ (pp. 861-2).

¹¹² NEC minutes, 20 May 1945; Morrison, *Autobiography*, p.235; Dalton Diary, 18 & 19 May 1945 (pp. 861-2).

There was little sense in fighting a battle that they could not win, even if Attlee, Bevin, and Dalton seemed determined to try. The Labour party was resolved to escape its political straitjacket, and Morrison had guessed that it would succeed in doing so. In his contest with the others for the hearts and minds of their followers, he therefore again presented himself as the advocate of independence, taking up a position directly between Attlee and the party, and marshalling the opposition to his rival. Morrison was vocally supported during the debate by Shinwell – who ‘let rip’ against Attlee – Laski, Wilkinson, Griffiths, and Bevan.¹¹³ This attempt to exploit the powerful internal sentiments for withdrawal was a success, and all except three members supported his opposition to Churchill’s offer as the NEC rejected outright the notion of remaining in office.¹¹⁴

These were the final schisms that forced Labour out of the Coalition. Morrison had personally engineered the failure of Attlee’s last throw of the dice. It was a major victory, and the biggest blow he had yet inflicted to his rival. It was now evident that Morrison was capable of besting the Attlee-Bevin axis after all. Further, he cemented the image of himself as Labour’s champion, in touch with its feelings on the most important political issue since 1940, and made Attlee appear its betrayer. Moreover, in contrast to any notion of a developing ideological struggle, the entire issue had been, from beginning to end, a pawn in the Attlee-Morrison power struggle. The postures and proclamations of politicians are doubtless very often internalised, i.e. they come to believe them. But there is a remarkable correlation between the thrust of rhetoric and self-interest. What was even more duplicitous was that, just the previous week, Morrison himself had actually got the NEC to agree to formally request the Conference not to ‘tie the hands’ of the Executive with any declarations against the possibility of forming a *new* coalition after the election!¹¹⁵ Morrison was determined to destroy Attlee’s course and bring down the Coalition as a means to seize the leadership; but he was perfectly amenable to forming another alliance with the Conservatives once he himself became leader. That the resolution stressed that no-one had ‘any desire or intention’ to do so does not obscure the utter façade of Morrison’s position.¹¹⁶ The posture he had adopted since abandoning his ‘coupon’ idea was, therefore, seemingly never a sincere one, for he had left open the option of moving back to coalition once he became leader. The case he had argued to win rejection of Churchill’s offer was a cover; despite his rhetoric, Morrison had, in fact, not performed the about-turn he seemed to have over 1944-5. He had instead got both of the two things he had wanted all along: destroy Attlee’s strategy *and* retain the

¹¹³ NEC minutes, 20 May 1945; Slowe, *Shinwell*, p.203.

¹¹⁴ NEC minutes, 20 May 1945.

¹¹⁵ NEC minutes, 18 May 1945. Attlee was not present at this meeting – presumably he was still returning from San Francisco.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* The resolution stated that ‘circumstances cannot be adequately foreseen’.

option of coalition.¹¹⁷ Given the stakes involved, it constituted surely one of the most brilliant and audacious series of manoeuvres in recent political history.

It was the biggest defeat suffered by Attlee in a decade as party leader. Gambling his authority on persuading the NEC to stay in office, he had been unceremoniously rebuffed. In abandoning his custom of detecting in advance, and leading, the currents of internal opinion in a desperate bid to continue the cross-party alliance, the leader gravely misjudged what his followers would tolerate.¹¹⁸ It was one trick too many. In doing so, Attlee handed Morrison, already stronger than ever before, a huge propaganda coup. For six years, Morrison had struggled to establish himself as a more faithful embodiment of his party than the incumbent; now, at the very end of the war, the leader had gifted his rival the best proof of this he could ever wish.

With Morrison's defeat of Attlee, the Coalition quickly collapsed. The other members of Labour's Big Four were too wise to detach themselves from their followers any further, accepting the NEC decision immediately.¹¹⁹ Though Attlee had given Morrison's attempts to discredit him an air of verisimilitude, the latter was thus denied the additional opportunity of portraying the leader as attempting to abandon Labour. But this could not alter the fact that Morrison had scored another stunning victory, this time by confronting and defeating Attlee openly on the NEC. Replying to Churchill, Attlee tried to argue for the election to be scheduled for October, a last-ditch attempt to stave off a Khaki election with a prime minister at the height of his powers.¹²⁰ Unsurprisingly, it did not work – Churchill was never likely to fall into the trap, and plumped for an immediate election.¹²¹ He saw the King and resigned, and the Coalition came to an abrupt end. Britain's wartime ministry had been formed at the behest of the NEC; now it was ended by the same means. Churchill was appointed the head of an interim 'caretaker' ministry of Conservatives and National Liberals, and polling day was scheduled for 5 July, with the results to be announced three weeks later, when the votes of the armed forces had been collected.

¹¹⁷ All Morrison would have to do would be to persuade the NEC to agree to rejoin the Coalition. The important thing to remember is that though this would have been impossible *at this point*, Morrison – expecting to lose the election – would have calculated that a dejected party and NEC would become more receptive to the offer of coalition once defeated. The trade unions would almost certainly have insisted on power over impotent Opposition. Essentially, he expected the calculus to change, and retained the proverbial golden ticket necessary to undo what he had done on the 20th.

¹¹⁸ Attlee, perhaps unsurprisingly, did not acknowledge his attempt to remain in office in his memoirs – Attlee, *As It Happened*, pp. 157-60.

¹¹⁹ NEC minutes, 20 May 1945.

¹²⁰ NEC papers, press cuttings of Churchill and Attlee letters (both were released to the press as formal explanations to the public for the break up of the government), 18 May & 25 May 1945.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

Attlee had been bested by Morrison, and the Home Secretary further consolidated his position and claim to the leadership. The linked questions of their feud and the Coalition aside, however, the Conference was a triumphant event for the leadership group. With the news that Labour was once again in Opposition, the mood of the party instantly improved. Despite a surprisingly narrow vote on reconsideration of Communist affiliation, the Conference witnessed strong endorsement of the Morrison-created electoral platform, and acquiescence to the leadership's continued political primacy over their followers.¹²² Though this lack of opposition was doubtless due largely to the acclaim that the Coalition was over, the leadership group turned this momentarily unquestioning support into a firm mandate. Of course, that they had avoided resolutions proposing alternatives to the manifesto, and presented delegates with a take-it-or-leave-it approach, was a powerful tool in achieving this, as by 'eliminating' alternate resolutions there was simply nothing to replace the manifesto with. But the leaders also used the event to push the theme that continued co-operation with the Conservatives was impossible – which, of course, only Morrison had professed to hold as an *idée fixe*. Nevertheless, this new combativeness yielded results, re-establishing the internal strength which had been battered by war and coalition. The leadership group, then, did have to repay the loan they had taken out in 1940; but they did so in such a way as to steal their enemies' thunder, silence alternative sentiment, and collectively reorient themselves from being the advocates of coalition to the advocates of independence. By the end of the Conference, even Attlee had altered his position in line with this.

Introducing *Let Us Face the Future*, Morrison delivered for the second time in two years one of the great Conference performances with a speech which served the dual purpose of signalling his candidacy for the leadership.¹²³ He placed little emphasis on his true concerns with moderation, and instead made an aggressive oration on the necessity for socialism and nationalisation in what he termed 'the most important general election of all time', rousing the audience in a way Attlee never could.¹²⁴ He received a thunderous standing ovation lasting several minutes, the *Daily Express* declaring him the 'undoubted leader' of the Labour party, and the manifesto was passed unanimously.¹²⁵ With Labour's entire programme so closely associated with him, a big boost in his vote in the NEC elections and, moreover, having personally forced Labour out of the Coalition, Morrison stood at the very pinnacle of his powers. Buoyed by success after success, it was the public triumph – and endorsement – he needed.¹²⁶

¹²² 1945 LPACR, pp. 81-2.

¹²³ 1945 LPACR, pp. 89-92.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ *Daily Express*, 23 May 1945; *The Times*, 23 May 1945; *News Chronicle*, 23 May 1945.

¹²⁶ Morrison's vote went up to 424,000 and he climbed to third in the poll, surpassing Griffiths. Only Laski and Shinwell polled more votes (430,000 each) – NEC papers, 'Results of Conference Ballot, Blackpool, 1945'.

While many of the struggles within the party had been subsumed in the period described in the current chapter, nonetheless the 1945 Conference made clear that the leadership group remained very much in control of the Labour party despite six years of political restraint. That this was so was testimony to the skill of those leaders in plotting and navigating their course, particularly Attlee. The unanimous support for the manifesto showed where real power still resided. Collectively, the leaders, through flat rejection of the idea that anyone else knew what was in Labour's best interests, ensured that the policies on which the party stood were theirs, and theirs alone. Doctrinaire proposals like Mikardo's had simply been disregarded.¹²⁷ Despite the Greek controversy, their new approach to foreign policy received a ringing endorsement after speeches by Attlee and Bevin, affording them a virtual free hand in international affairs when Labour entered office in July.¹²⁸ After imposing tight, and deeply resented, controls on their followers since 1939, upon loosening them the leadership found themselves not only still at the head of the party, but in command of it. With Labour relatively united and their standing publicly restored, senior figures – Morrison especially – could look to the future with renewed confidence. Abandoning Labour's independence in 1940, their ability to hold sway over their followers had been comprehensive; reclaiming that independence five years later, the leadership's successful imposition of their own policy choices was a final vindication of the wisdom of the high-wire balancing-act on which they had gambled their political futures.

IV

This affirmation of support for their strategy, however, did not alter the fact that, having forced Labour out of office, momentum in the party's central conflict had swung firmly in Morrison's direction. Laski took advantage of Attlee's defeat and immediately joined in the effort to bring him down. In late May, he wrote to Attlee directly and brazenly told him that he lacked the charisma to win an election, and called for him to be replaced *before* it occurred:

I have been acutely aware for many months...of the strong feeling that the continuance of your leadership is a grave handicap to our hopes of victory in the coming election. [This opinion] is felt by a majority of our own Executive. It is felt by the outstanding trade union leaders...and the rank-and-file...share this view profoundly. So...do many of your parliamentary colleagues.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ No mention of the commitments forced onto the NEC at the 1944 Conference appeared in the election platform.

¹²⁸ 1945 LPACR, pp. 107-9, 115-9.

¹²⁹ Hull, Laski papers, Laski to Attlee 29 May 1945.

Laski told Attlee that immediate resignation would be a 'great service' to the party.¹³⁰ The leader was dismissive in his reply – 'Dear Laski, thank you for your letter, contents of which have been noted' – and he otherwise ignored the attack.¹³¹ But this open challenge by the NEC chairman was a further indication of Attlee's perceived weakness. The campaign to replace him was now underway. Battle-lines had been drawn, and the resultant power struggle was, despite the general election, to consume Labour affairs for the next two months.

In the meantime, Labour returned to the hurly-burly of party politics with aplomb, throwing itself into the election campaign. When Attlee, Bevin, and Morrison entered the Commons for the first time since the break up of the government, they were cheered loudly.¹³² The leadership group immediately set about reasserting themselves, with the Administrative Committee ceasing to exist and formally reverting to the pre-war Executive Committee.¹³³ Attlee resumed his role as head of the PLP, and Greenwood reverted to the position of deputy. Pethick-Lawrence, having played such a critical role since 1939, was given the entirely titular position of being the party's 'third man'.¹³⁴

After formulating Labour's policy agenda, and wounding Attlee by forcing the break-up of the Coalition, Morrison now strengthened his position still further by masterminding the campaign as well. His rise over the first half of 1945 had been one of the most comprehensive in recent political history. Taking an office in Transport House, he thus enhanced his new dominance at the heart of the party. Labour published hundreds of thousands of copies of *Let Us Face the Future*, and Morrison was one of only two of the leaders to have a pamphlet specifically devoted to him, the other being Bevin.¹³⁵ When the government broke up, he also resumed his position in the London Labour party, involving him directly in the campaign in the capital.¹³⁶ All of this represented the ideal launching pad for his imminent challenge to the party leader. Morrison's desire to change constituencies – from blue-collar Hackney to white-collar East Lewisham – and to be seen to lead Labour's great advance was yet another aspect of his construction of an image as a genuinely national figure, and demonstration that he, not Attlee, was Labour's senior politician.¹³⁷ Combined with his recent dominance in all other respects, Attlee could do little to compete with all this; he simply lacked the dynamism of Morrison in full flow. The former Home

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Hull, Laski papers, Attlee to Laski, 30 May 1945; Ede Diary, 28 May 1945 (p.220).

¹³² Ede Diary, 29 May 1945 (p.221).

¹³³ PLP Administrative Committee minutes, 29 May 1945; PLP Executive Committee minutes, 31 May & 12 June 1945; PLP minutes, 29 May 1945.

¹³⁴ This was the phrase used in the minutes.

¹³⁵ NEC Campaign sub-committee minutes, 19 March 1945 & 11 April 1945.

¹³⁶ LLP papers, 9675, 31 May 1945, cited Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.335.

¹³⁷ *The Times*, 10 January 1945.

Secretary travelled around the country giving speeches and was chosen to deliver Labour's final election broadcast, Morrison's biographers noting that he 'strode through the campaign like the real leader of the Labour party and a future leader of the country'.¹³⁸ The tactical shift that he had made from October 1944 had been a resounding success. Before the election was even held, then, Morrison's accession to the leadership now looked all but inevitable.

But the challenger was not to have things entirely his own way. The campaign saw the emergence of Attlee from the warrens of Whitehall and onto the public stage for the first time, via a very public besting of Churchill. Attlee himself made around seventy appearances at rallies and meetings, while taking care to ensure strict adherence by all speakers to the official line. As the leader put it, one 'silly speech by Aneurin Bevan might easily be used to stampede the electors away'.¹³⁹ But it was Churchill himself who gave Attlee the chance to strengthen his limited public profile, and afforded Labour a huge propaganda boon. In his first election broadcast in early June, the prime minister began the first of two scandals that were to dominate much of the campaign. He famously asserted that a Labour government would have to rely on 'some form of Gestapo' in order to control the country and suppress dissent.¹⁴⁰ For Churchill to compare his former colleagues to the Gestapo – who were, in 1945, anything but clichéd villains of popular culture – was widely considered offensive. Consequently, the broadcast backfired: rather than depicting the schemes of Labour as leading to a curtailment of freedoms, it made the iconic war leader appear just another party politician. Attlee responded with a broadcast which made a similarly large public impact and was, in the words of a biographer of both men, 'quietly devastating'.¹⁴¹ The Labour leader stated that

When I listened to the prime minister's speech last night in which he gave such a travesty of the policy of the Labour party, I realised at once what was his object. He wanted the electors to understand how great the difference was between Winston Churchill, the great leader in war of a united nation, and Mr. Churchill, the party leader of the Conservatives. He feared that those who accepted his leadership in war might be tempted out of gratitude to follow him further. I thank him for having disillusioned them so thoroughly.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ NEC papers 'Broadcasting', n.d.; Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.337. It is worth pointing out, though, that, in Harris' view, Bevin received even more press attention than Morrison during the campaign – Harris, *Attlee*, p.258.

¹³⁹ Attlee, *As It Happened*, p.167; Attlee papers, 1/24, undated memorandum.

¹⁴⁰ David Cannadine (ed.) *Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat: Winston Churchill's Famous Speeches* (London, 1989), pp. 270-7.

¹⁴¹ Roy Jenkins, *Churchill* (London, 2001), p.793.

¹⁴² Roy Jenkins (ed.) *Purpose and Policy: Selected Speeches by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. C. R. Attlee* (London, 1947), p.3.

The broadcast ‘was the making of Attlee as a campaign leader’.¹⁴³ Though he was usually eclipsed as an orator by Morrison and Bevin, his calmer tone was better suited to the medium of these radio broadcasts – which approximately half of the population tuned into.¹⁴⁴ Attlee simply seemed the more mature, reflective statesman than the prime minister. The episode provided the leader what he so badly required within Labour itself – public stature and a means to be seen, like Morrison, as a loyal champion of socialism. Attlee had been outmanoeuvred in virtually all respects by Morrison throughout 1945, and powerless to prevent his seizures of authority. But the leader had consistently retreated in such a fashion as to deny his rival the opportunity to deliver a fatal blow – for example, by immediately accepting the decision to leave office in May – and he had very publicly got the better of Churchill. This underlined the fact that Morrison’s efforts to depict him as an inattentive leader were incorrect. Moreover, and crucially, Attlee remained the incumbent – with the inherent advantages that brought – and there was, thus far, no sign of a major PLP revolt against him. For all Morrison’s popularity, it was the union MPs who dominated the arena where a leadership contest would have to be fought, and they were Attlee’s base. Morrison still had to seize an entrenched position, while Attlee had merely to defend it.

The Labour campaign was, however, gravely damaged by the second of the scandals alluded to above, this time centred upon Laski. This episode also at last brought the conflict between Attlee and the NEC chairman to a head. Displaying political stupidity of the highest order, Laski offered the Conservatives an inflammatory controversy with which to dominate the press in the weeks preceding the election, when he created a Zenoviev letter-esque scare by asserting in the *Daily Herald* that, though Attlee was to accompany Churchill to Potsdam, he could do so only as an observer, and that Truman and Stalin should be aware that if Labour won the election they could not be bound by any agreements reached with Churchill.¹⁴⁵ Even worse, Laski declared that the NEC would have to approve the policies chosen at Potsdam before they could be implemented.¹⁴⁶ This raised the spectre of NEC control over the elected government. Attlee later commented that Laski’s political nous was ‘not very good’.¹⁴⁷ It was, to say the least, unlikely that a Labour Cabinet would have accepted subordination to the NEC; but Attlee felt Laski conceived of himself as being a ‘leading figure on the political stage’.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ Jenkins, *Churchill*, p.793.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid; R. B. McCallum and Alison Readman, *The British General Election of 1945* (Oxford, 1947), p.175.

¹⁴⁵ *Daily Herald*, 15 June 1945.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Attlee, *As It Happened*, p.168.

¹⁴⁸ Attlee, *As It Happened*, p.161. Attlee’s hatred for Laski is one of the few passions which shines through in what is otherwise an emollient memoir.

The demand was instantly leapt on by the Beaverbrook press as a challenge to the constitution. The press baron asserted that Attlee was a mere puppet, and that an extra-parliamentary ‘secret ruling caucus’, with Laski at its head, would pull the strings of a British government.¹⁴⁹ Beaverbrook produced previous statements by Laski on how Labour would abolish the monarchy and use force to implement its will, under the headline ‘Laski Unleashes Another General Election Broadside: Socialism Even If It Means Violence’.¹⁵⁰ He charged that Labour’s aim was the replacement of Parliament with a ‘dictatorship’ presided over by Laski.¹⁵¹ This was the ideal platform for the Conservatives to frighten voters, and the scare became the defining story of the whole campaign. Laski sued for libel and retracted his statement, but that did nothing to stem the flow of headlines.¹⁵² Churchill also manoeuvred himself into the crisis, exchanging a series of public letters with Attlee in which he tried to depict the Labour leader as the pawn of an unaccountable body, exploiting the party’s constitutional provisions that it was governed by the NEC and Conference.¹⁵³ Attlee flatly denied this, but the damage was done and the controversy persisted until polling day.¹⁵⁴ Public opinion swung sharply back towards the Conservatives in the three weeks preceding the election – the period dominated by the scandal – and it is difficult not to suspect that Laski inflicted a significant setback to the perception of Labour that its leaders had been so assiduous in cultivating.

Attlee was furious. While his immediate priority was to concentrate on rebutting the accusations of dictatorship, he soon seized on the fact that his old enemy Laski, the non-politician, was at last vulnerable. The episode thus enabled the leader to finally get the upper hand in their venomous feud. Some time later, after Labour had won the election, Attlee turned his attention to the man who, weeks before, had called for him to resign, and sent Laski a famous and stinging rebuke which, in no uncertain terms, finally silenced him. The leader warned that

You have no right whatever to speak on behalf of the government. Foreign affairs are in the capable hands of Ernest Bevin. His task is quite sufficiently difficult without the embarrassment of irresponsible statements of the kind which you are making. A period of silence on your part would be welcome.¹⁵⁵

It was Attlee’s most forceful response to Laski and, where previous exhortations had failed, this one did not. Laski had placed himself in a position where Attlee could finally exert his authority

¹⁴⁹ *Daily Express*, 16 June 1945. The headline warned that ‘Obscure Laski Caucus Will Give Orders’.

¹⁵⁰ *Daily Express*, 20 June 1945. See also 23 & 25 June.

¹⁵¹ *The Times*, 21 June.

¹⁵² For an account of subsequent events, see David Howell, ‘The Laski Libel Trial’, in Howell (ed.), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol. XI, pp. 117-29.

¹⁵³ See *The Times*, 21, 22, 23 & 24 June 1945.

¹⁵⁴ *Daily Express*, 4 July 1945. The headline was ‘Shall the Laski 25 Rule Great Britain?’

¹⁵⁵ Hull, Laski papers, Attlee to Laski, 20 August 1945.

and crush him, having wrecked his own credibility by harming Labour so publicly. Chastened by the attacks on him – and exhausted by his libel case – Laski posed none of the problems for the Labour ministers during the subsequent period that he had between 1939 and 1945.

While Attlee and Morrison continued to circle one another, and Laski threatened to derail the party's plans, the campaign itself wore on. A war-weary population was just as anxious as the Labour party over 'the future', and it was this, largely symbolic, topic which provided the substance of the election.¹⁵⁶ People desired compensation for the hardships of the preceding decades and expected politicians to meet that desire. Both the main parties campaigned intensively – their propaganda initiatives, hinted at above, were aggressive, while, at a local level, campaigning consisted of a mixture of self-glorification and scare-mongering. The state of the organisational machinery of the two parties is difficult to assess, and only tentative conclusions can be drawn. The Conservatives were certainly in poor condition, with the party having suffered stagnation and loss of activity at both a central and local level. Churchill felt this to be significant in his defeat, with many Conservative agents and workers going into the armed forces while many local Labour figures – usually trade unionists – remained at home.¹⁵⁷ On the other hand, in March, Labour had fifty-eight full time agents – most of whom had no experience – while the almost three hundred Conservative agents were being released from war service.¹⁵⁸ It would be safest to say that the local organisation of both parties is in need of sustained investigation, but varied from locality to locality and was often ramshackle; yet it seems difficult to believe that Labour did not have at least some advantages in this respect. At a central level, the picture is clearer. The machinery of Central Office rusted away under Churchill and, though Labour's organisation similarly collapsed in the first years of war, from 1942 Middleton and Shepherd spearheaded a concerted effort to reverse this, with extensive access to party funds. Labour's central machinery was therefore in fact in rather good condition by 1945.¹⁵⁹

When the election results eventually came through on 25 July, to the shock of most politicians, the Labour party, not the triumphant war leader Churchill, secured a landslide victory. Almost everyone had expected the prime minister to win this snap Khaki election. But Labour won 393 seats and attracted 47.8% of the vote, compared to the Conservative's 213 seats and 39.8%. The party had, moreover, reinforced its industrial heartlands with major inroads into more prosperous areas, as well as prized Conservative strongholds which, in normal circumstances, it could never

¹⁵⁶ The best account of the election itself can be found in McCallum and Readman, *The British General Election of 1945*.

¹⁵⁷ W. S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. six, p.509.

¹⁵⁸ Addison, *The Road to 1945*, p.258.

¹⁵⁹ See the current author's forthcoming article 'The organisation of the Labour party during the Second World War' (in preparation).

have hoped to win. Yet circumstances were anything but normal. Having lived under controls for six years, the population saw many features of Labour's manifesto that hardly appeared new. The political credibility of the party – having been rebuilt by its membership of the Coalition – was such that a Labour government was no longer unthinkable. But, likely of greater significance than local organisation, was the contrasting tone and vision offered by the two parties. As above, the people wanted change. This may have been a vague longing, but the definite commitments of *Let Us Face the Future* were simply more attractive to a country which had experienced years of deprivation and war than the cautious tone of the Conservative campaign, based around a policy of wait-and-see. Churchill had concentrated on his war record, but the idealistic longing for a new beginning which pervaded most sections of Britain did not find a reflection in the Conservatives. Labour had won a famous victory.

Its leaders having expected defeat, in the end, the Labour party was able to form a majority government for the first time in its history. As the thesis has demonstrated, it was the war years, not the internecine struggles of the 1930s, which in fact represented the crucial formative period for Labour, and permitted the evolution into the election-winning entity that the party became by 1945. Involvement in the Coalition at the behest of Attlee and the other leaders, for all the discontent it engendered, had facilitated this remarkable transformation. The changes were, moreover, reflected not only in the location of the parliamentary seats won, but in the composition of the new PLP as well. MPs were now a balanced mixture of different social classes; working-class MPs were no longer so predominant. Not only a majority government but a national party as well, in 1945 Labour could, for the first time, claim to be representative of the country over which it was to preside. Utopianism, rather than the two parties themselves, probably represented the key to the election. But as far as any one man was responsible, it would be Morrison. He had created both the platform that Labour stood on and the campaign itself. At the same time, it was Attlee's strategy, chosen in 1939 and adhered to since, which had made Labour electable again. A direct result of the course mapped out six years before, Labour's victory was Attlee's triumph; but it was Morrison's as well.

V

With Labour secure in office, the struggle between Attlee and Morrison finally reached its culmination. Moreover, despite the latter's series of public victories, this was to be fought on ground on which Attlee was well-prepared. Churchill's message to the leader on 26 July, conceding defeat, was the beginning of a dramatic series of intrigues over the course of a few hours which took place before the new government was formed. When the letter arrived, Attlee

and Morrison were meeting with Morgan Phillips, Laski, and Bevin in the latter's room at Transport House, holding talks on the new government.¹⁶⁰ Our understanding of events that day is hindered by the fact that this gathering was unfortunately not minuted, and consequently we must reconstruct it largely from memoirs and other recollections.¹⁶¹ Nonetheless, sufficient information is available for us to gain a clear picture of events. When Attlee conveyed the news of the prime minister's letter, Morrison immediately attempted to seize the leadership before his opponent could see the King and accept the commission to form a government, arguing that no such invitation should be accepted before the PLP had met and formally chosen a leader.¹⁶² His ostensible justification was that, under party rules, at the beginning of each parliamentary session, MPs should be able to confirm the man who they wanted to lead them.¹⁶³ In reality this was, of course, merely a transparent attempt to exploit his standing and popularity to dislodge his rival. Morrison would also have realised that it would be virtually impossible to dislodge a newly-appointed prime minister if Attlee actually accepted the commission. Therefore, the previous day, Morrison had informed Attlee that, whatever the election results, he intended to stand against him for the leadership.¹⁶⁴ When Attlee had communicated this to Bevin, the union boss characteristically exploded with rage: 'I won't have it. You leave him to me'.¹⁶⁵ Bevin then telephoned Morrison and warned him that 'If you go on mucking about like this, you won't be in the bloody government at all'.¹⁶⁶

Laski backed Morrison in demanding that Attlee inform the King that Labour needed two days to choose a leader.¹⁶⁷ Both argued that the rules of the PLP had to be observed.¹⁶⁸ Morrison later asserted that he would not have sought the position, but had been 'pressed' by his supporters.¹⁶⁹ As with the earlier struggles over election policy, this emphasis upon good practice represented a publicly-acceptable means for Morrison to try and snatch the leadership by putting before the new PLP – less union-dominated than before – a straight choice between himself and Attlee as the

¹⁶⁰ Dalton, *Memoirs*, p.468.

¹⁶¹ Tellingly Attlee did not mention the meeting, or Morrison's intrigues, at all in his autobiography – Attlee, *As It Happened*, p.171.

¹⁶² Donoughue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.340; Harris, *Attlee*, p.263.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Morrison papers, Morrison to Attlee, 25 July 1945. Morrison wrote 'that I am animated solely by considerations of the interests of the party, and regard for their democratic rights, and not by any personal unfriendliness towards yourself, I need hardly assure you'; Dalton, *Memoirs*, p.468.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ Granville Eastwood, *Harold Laski* (London, 1977), pp. 341-2; Morrison, *Autobiography*, p.245.

¹⁶⁸ Morrison, *Autobiography*, p.242.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.* In his memoirs, Morrison entitled the relevant section 'Rights of the Parliamentary Party' and wrote that 'I was disturbed to learn that moves had begun to propose me as leader of the party in place of Attlee. I promptly took steps to see these activities stopped' – Morrison, *Autobiography*, p.236. In reality, of course, just the day before, Morrison had formally proposed *himself* to Attlee.

new prime minister.¹⁷⁰ However, forewarned by Morrison's communiqué the previous day, Attlee and Bevin immediately moved to block him, and fiercely objected to the idea on the grounds that it was unconstitutional.¹⁷¹ They argued that the electorate had voted for Labour on the assumption that Attlee, the party leader, would be prime minister, and hence it would be improper to suddenly impose someone else.¹⁷² As the argument raged, and the conflict over the competing constitutional provisions of the party and country offered a convenient fig-leaf for a struggle over the top job in British politics, Morrison was called away by a telephone call from Cripps; when he returned, he announced that Cripps also supported his call for a ballot on the leadership.¹⁷³

However, Morrison's momentum was in fact never more than an illusion. While he was conferring with Cripps, Attlee and Bevin moved to derail his challenge without him even realising it. They decided that Attlee should simply pre-empt the contest by accepting the King's commission on his own authority that afternoon, and then present Morrison with a fait accompli.¹⁷⁴ For all the dynamism of the heir apparent and his role in overseeing a landslide victory, it was Attlee who held the position of leader and the freedom of action it afforded. Bevin told him 'Clem, you go to the Palace straight away', but Attlee probably needed little encouragement – he later recalled that he had already decided after Morrison's letter to simply ignore his rival's demands.¹⁷⁵ Attlee felt that he, not Morrison, had propriety on his side: 'If the King asks you to form a government, you say Yes or No, not "I'll let you know later"'.¹⁷⁶

The meeting broke up with Attlee and Bevin revealing none of this, and Morrison under the impression that, having confronted Attlee and forced his rival into a corner, the way lay clear for him to assume the premiership.¹⁷⁷ Yet whatever the impression that Attlee gave to his opponent, the Labour leader never had any intention of allowing him the opportunity to seize his position. The heir apparent remained in high spirits throughout the day, and, at the victory rally held that evening at Westminster Central Hall, an ecstatic Morrison and his supporters set to work pressing his case to MPs, asserting that 'We cannot have this man as our leader'.¹⁷⁸ As suddenly as he had

¹⁷⁰ Moreover, an 'unusually large' number of MPs, many of the Attlee's original supporters, had retired at the 1945 election, their places taken by new ones who would not have the same loyalty to Attlee stemming from his performance during the period 1931-35 – PLP papers, Carol Johnson letter to PLP, 14 June 1945.

¹⁷¹ Williams, *A Prime Minister Remembers*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁷² Ibid; Dalton, *Memoirs*, pp. 468, 473.

¹⁷³ Williams, *A Prime Minister Remembers*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid; Attlee interview, cited Harris, *Attlee*, p.263; Bullock, *Bevin*, vol. 2, pp. 392-3.

¹⁷⁵ Attlee interview, cited Harris, *Attlee*, p.263.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. Years later, Attlee was rather more venomous towards Laski than Morrison in recalling the affair – Williams, *A Prime Minister Remembers*, p.4.

¹⁷⁷ Attlee interview, cited Harris, *Attlee*, p.263.

¹⁷⁸ *The Star*, 27 July 1945; cited in David Howell, *Attlee* (London, 2006), p.134; R. Boon and J. Parker interviews, cited Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, pp. 341-2.

manufactured it, however, Morrison's victory turned to dust before his eyes. His understanding of the meeting was very different from what had actually taken place. While he was at the rally, Attlee was secretly at the Palace.¹⁷⁹ The first that Morrison knew of the fact that the issue had already been settled was when the leader arrived at the rally.¹⁸⁰ Attlee simply went up onto the platform and announced that he had been appointed prime minister, news greeted by wild applause.¹⁸¹ It does not require a fertile imagination to conceive of the shock Morrison must have felt.¹⁸² After overpowering Attlee for months on end, at the final hurdle he had been decisively outmanoeuvred by the leader. Events would suggest that Morrison's greater prominence counted for little against the powers and prerogatives enjoyed by the individual who held the position of leader, with the latitude it afforded. Morrison had, throughout 1945, done all the work in crafting an election platform, and more than any other figure to lead Labour to victory; but now Attlee got all the power.

The campaign upon which Morrison had surreptitiously been embarked for six years, and had been preparing for since 1935, thus collapsed on the brink of victory. Finally crossing his personal Rubicon, he had been swiftly defeated. This reversal, however, was due not to any real mistakes by Morrison himself, but to the astuteness of Attlee. Though of divergent personalities, as political operators he and Morrison were generally evenly matched – hence the fascinating nature of their twenty-year contest for ascendancy. But, while Morrison was the more dynamic of the two, and his success in driving the party was remarkable, it was still Attlee who held the stronger cards. As incumbent leader, backed by the ballast of the union MPs, and allied to the most powerful figure in the Labour movement, the uncharismatic but calculating Attlee possessed strengths Morrison could not. Despite Morrison's attempts to isolate him from the party, in the end the leader defeated his rival by simply accepting the premiership without his knowledge. Holding the position of leader, Attlee wielded what amounted to a veto. He had employed it to great effect.

Yet there was a postscript to this for, amazingly, Morrison *still* would not concede defeat. He made two last, desperate, attempts to restart his challenge to Attlee at meetings of the PLP Executive and the PLP itself on 27 and 28 July respectively.¹⁸³ This was a miscalculation, for he

¹⁷⁹ Harris, *Attlee*, pp. 263-4.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² Adding insult to injury, Morrison was then forced to pose alongside Attlee and Bevin and smile for photographers. In the photograph, Bevin and Morrison stared at one another, while Attlee stuck out his chest. The photograph appears on the inside cover of J.T. Murphy, *Labour's Big Three: A biographical study of Clement Attlee, Herbert Morrison and Ernest Bevin* (London, 1948).

¹⁸³ PLP Executive Committee minutes, 27 July 1945; PLP minutes, 28 July 1945.

made himself look nothing more than an ambitious adventurer, and the result was a further consolidation of Attlee's position. At the PLP Executive, Morrison again pressed that the Labour constitution required them to elect a leader, while Wilkinson had worked on some of the members prior to the meeting.¹⁸⁴ It was doubly duplicitous given that, beforehand, Morrison met with Attlee and asked to be Foreign Secretary.¹⁸⁵ Attlee had avoided giving commitments, but did acquiesce to Morrison's request to be the 'number two' man in the party and government, Attlee 'readily accepting' his being the unofficial deputy prime minister.¹⁸⁶ But the attempt backfired, and Morrison was rebuffed as the PLP Executive gave its unanimous backing to Attlee to form a ministry.¹⁸⁷ Before the PLP meeting on the 28th, Wilkinson, the last to give up, continued busily pressing Morrison's case – even though senior figures had already accepted the seals of office!¹⁸⁸ But Bevin opened the meeting and brought the intrigues to an emphatic end with a stirring speech about Attlee's 'unimpeachable personal integrity' – a barb clearly directed at Morrison – and moved a vote of confidence in him, passed with an ovation lasting several minutes.¹⁸⁹ Morrison did not speak in support of it, despite his later claims that it was he who proposed Attlee as leader.¹⁹⁰ That those present knew of Morrison's activities, and gave Attlee such a public endorsement regardless, was highly symbolic. As his biographers observed, Morrison emerged from this last bid to stop Attlee with little credit, for his own agenda in pushing for a contest was painfully apparent.¹⁹¹ Morrison's later protestation that 'the idea [of snatching the leadership] never entered my head' was a blatant fallacy.¹⁹²

VI

The combination of an election victory and the defeat of Morrison left Attlee in an unassailable position. From political weakness and limited influence during the 1930s, the war had transformed the Labour leader. No longer an uncertain or hesitating figure, once within sight of power in 1939 Attlee had displayed a remarkable ability to take Labour in the direction he wished and retain its backing at the crucial junctures. Traditional, and withering, criticism of Attlee for

¹⁸⁴ PLP Executive Committee minutes, 27 July 1945; Dalton Diary, 27 July 1945 (unpublished); Vernon, *Wilkinson*, p.197.

¹⁸⁵ Dalton, *Memoirs*, p.474.

¹⁸⁶ Churchill College, Cambridge, Attlee papers, 1/17, draft autobiography.

¹⁸⁷ Dalton Diary, 27 July 1945 (unpublished); PLP Executive Committee minutes, 27 July 1945.

¹⁸⁸ Wilkinson met new Labour MPs at a railway station and asked them to back a motion which would be moved at the PLP. She also harassed Summerskill in a ladies' toilet, and got into a row at the meeting itself with Leah Manning: 'He [Attlee]'s no good. We must have Herbert'. Vernon, *Wilkinson*, p.197; Summerskill, Manning and Roben interviews, cited in Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.346.

¹⁸⁹ PLP minutes, 28 July 1945; Ede Diary, 28 July 1945 (p.228).

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*; Morrison, *Autobiography*, p.246.

¹⁹¹ Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.343.

¹⁹² Morrison, *Autobiography*, p.245.

his poor leadership between 1935 and 1939 and again between 1951 and 1955 is not without merit; but this period, as well as the six years of his own ministry, was a rather different story. Neutering all internal opposition, navigating a political course of severe difficulty, and securing Labour greater power than it had ever possessed – all the while engineering himself a central role in running the country, and defeating a much more prominent rival in Morrison – the war years had been the making of Clement Attlee. Very few political actors would have had the skill to do what he did between 1939 and 1945. Always an unfathomable figure to historians, the thesis hopes to have proposed a new way of perceiving the prime minister and understanding his character and leadership.

Once in Downing Street, Attlee gave a final demonstration of his abilities in balancing, and reconciling, competing tensions and interests, this time in forming a government. He constructed what amounted to a web of influence, with himself at the centre, while the talents of others were put to full use. Attlee also captured all of his enemies and bound them to him, rendering them largely powerless to challenge him. It was almost the perfect way to form an administration. Attlee disregarded Morrison's request to go to the Foreign Office and made him Lord President of the Council instead, tasked with being an overlord on the domestic front and directing the implementation of Labour's programme. This offered a means to tie his adversary's fortunes irrevocably to those of the government. In such a prominent role, Morrison would have made a useful fall-guy if things went awry, as Attlee must surely have calculated (and he did with other trouble-causers). Attlee kept his rival even more closely associated with the ministry by appointing him Leader of the Commons as well – making Morrison effectively the government spokesman in the chamber. No longer would Morrison be able to place himself directly between Attlee and the Labour party; the prime minister had made him his right-hand man. While initially reluctant to be without a department, Morrison acquiesced.¹⁹³

Aware that Bevin and Morrison would be unable to work together, Attlee also denied Bevin's hope of the Treasury, and appointed him as Foreign Secretary, partly in the belief that Bevin, a 'tank' in the view of the prime minister, would prove better suited than anyone to dealing with the Russians. Likely of equal weight was that if Bevin was allowed to roam across the domestic arena he would surely only antagonise his Cabinet colleagues – most of whom, having suffered under him in the PLP since 1940, felt little affection for him. Entrusted with foreign affairs and removed from the jostling of domestic ministries, Bevin could still play his role as Attlee's enforcer, interfering where necessary. Therefore it was Dalton, who, like Morrison, had wanted the Foreign

¹⁹³ Churchill College, Cambridge, Attlee papers, 1/17, draft autobiography; Dalton, *Memoirs*, p.474.

Office, that went to the Exchequer.¹⁹⁴ The main intellectual force behind Labour's 1930s policy renaissance thus found himself presiding over the management of the government's resources for the implementation of policies he himself had played no small role in shaping. With these appointments, the distribution of senior Labour figures was complete. It was, moreover, an arrangement that best harnessed the individual capabilities of each of Attlee's colleagues: Morrison as administrator, Bevin as enforcer and tough negotiator, and Dalton as financial expert. Moreover, the framework represented a means to control the ministry, with the power bases of each – particularly Morrison – formidable, but limited.

Constructing the rest of the government, Attlee displayed all his other gifts for party management. He brought within it all the key figures in the party, including his enemies, tying them to collective responsibility, and minimising their ability to attack the government. One of Attlee's more astute decisions was sending both Shinwell and Bevan to ministries with tasks widely expected to prove difficult, if not impossible. Attlee hinted at his tactic in his memoirs: 'There were two positions which would be of great importance in view of our legislative programme and of the urgency in the problems to be faced by their occupants – Fuel and Power and Health'.¹⁹⁵ Shinwell went to the former with orders to nationalise the mines and electricity, Attlee telling him this 'as if ordering a drink from a waiter'.¹⁹⁶ Shinwell later admitted that 'if I'd know what it was going to be like, I'd have asked for something easier'.¹⁹⁷ He was a spent force, but it was better to control him with a 'reward' of this kind. Similarly, Bevan was sent to the Ministry of Health, with the equally thankless task of creating a National Health Service. A man of Bevan's personality could not seriously have been expected to stick at a job which required the avoidance of emotional spasm. Moreover both, having hoped to replace Attlee, immediately dropped the idea and shifted to supporting the leader instead once he dangled the carrot of office in front of them. But Attlee clearly also regarded both jobs as convenient political graveyards. Wilkinson, Morrison's most fervent supporter and who continued to press his case even when he himself had given up, was made Minister of Education, a job likely to prove similarly problematic in an atmosphere of post-war dislocation and shortages. Cripps, having returned to the party and immediately supported a challenge to the leader, was given the Board of Trade. The only person that there was nothing for was Attlee's most despised enemy. Laski immediately approached the prime minister about becoming ambassador in Washington; but Attlee never even acknowledged

¹⁹⁴ Williams, *A Prime Minister Remembers*, p.5.

¹⁹⁵ Attlee, *As It Happened*, p.178.

¹⁹⁶ Attlee, *As It Happened*, p.154; Shinwell's notes on 1945, in the possession of Alan Shinwell, cited Slowe, *Shinwell*, p.206 & p.203.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

the request.¹⁹⁸ Morrison later tried to get his old ally a peerage, but the prime minister steadfastly refused.¹⁹⁹

Attlee had little choice but to include Greenwood, who became Lord Privy Seal, and was tasked with assisting Morrison with general co-ordination. But he was as ineffective in office this time as he had been under Churchill. What was a happy culmination to a fluctuating war thus quickly turned into another downward spiral, and, in 1947, Attlee sacked him from the government. However, Attlee again harnessed Pethick-Lawrence successfully, as he climbed to high office by being appointed Secretary of State for India. To be given the role of Secretary of State for Britain's most prized imperial asset at such an obviously critical point underlines how he had distinguished himself in carrying out his wartime job. The solidly dependable Pethick-Lawrence had been an asset to his leaders, and his place in the party and government hierarchy was secure. He was given a peerage and moved to the Lords, and spent the next three years working closely with Attlee and Cripps on the sub-continent before retiring following Indian independence. Unlike Greenwood, Pethick-Lawrence's war had been a success.

Further down the pyramid, Alexander remained at the Admiralty, a ministry he had proven efficient in administering over five years. He later moved to Defence. Whiteley became government Chief Whip, having served dually with Margesson in that capacity since 1940, and been constantly attentive to keeping the PLP loyal. Ede, his administrative skills at Education having endeared him to Attlee, went to the Home Office for six years, the longest tenure of the century. Like a few others – Pethick-Lawrence and Alexander, most notably – Ede played an important role in keeping government business running, while Attlee and the senior figures concentrated on carrying out the central objectives of reconstruction and reform. They were all regarded as a safe pair of hands. Even the minor players in Labour's war, then – or at least those who had played the game in the right way – were rewarded. Griffiths, in contrast, was someone who had *not* played the game in the right way. Despite being popular in the PLP and a favourite of the local parties, his withering criticisms during the war had not endeared him to his leaders. Harassing them for six years, unlike other rebels, Griffiths would pay a price. His views and symbolic protests, emanating from a man naturally loyalist by temperament, were representative of the wartime views of much of the party, and hence something that the Labour ministers had always had to take account of. But his constituency was also the natural base of his leaders. Once they were out of the Coalition, the tension between them and the backbone of their support was

¹⁹⁸ Hull, Laski papers, Laski to Attlee, 2 August 1945; Kramnick and Sheerman, *Laski*, p.491.

¹⁹⁹ Morrison later wrote of this incident that 'Attlee could be a big man...but he could be a little man too' – Morrison, *Autobiography*, p.238.

gone, and they could draw on that constituency as readily as ever. Unlike other wartime dissidents, in 1945 the leadership group did not *need* to conciliate Griffiths, and no useful purpose would have been served in doing so. He was thus made Minister of National Insurance, a job without a seat in Cabinet. More so than the posts given to other rebels, given Griffiths' popularity, it is difficult not to see this as a punishment.

In creating his ministry, therefore, Attlee displayed a sound grasp of where the talents of particular individuals could be put to use. Sending Bevin to the Foreign Office and having Morrison as a domestic overseer, particularly, proved to be masterstrokes. But he also ensured that those who might be inclined to threaten the new equilibrium were tied to him. Collective responsibility and the lure of office – from which they could always be ejected – was the best guarantee of extracting good behaviour. Once in office, these individuals immediately ceased plotting against Attlee.²⁰⁰ Namier remarked of the eighteenth century that whoever held the 'attractive power' of office invariably received an accession of followers eager to receive favour.²⁰¹ The same could be said of the prime minister in his construction of a new order in 1945. With his alliance with Bevin firm, the party bound to him, and Morrison's power play defeated, the position of Attlee at the apex of the Labour pyramid was secure. He 'reigned without challenge', as Dalton put it.²⁰² After six years of walking a tightrope, the leader was now free to drive a government of his own.

It is perhaps Shinwell, of all people, who offers the most fitting conclusion to this story. After a similarly unsuccessful attempt to replace the prime minister two years later, he recalled that 'Not long afterwards a number of the plotters were given jobs in the government by Attlee. I mentioned this to him one day. Attlee laughed. He was perfectly aware of what had been going on. It is not bad tactics to make one's enemies one's servants'.²⁰³

Whether Shinwell grasped the irony of this seems unlikely.

VII

Even the collapse of the two key pillars of the internal order that Attlee had imposed in 1939-40 – the alliance between the leadership group into a bloc at the head of the party, and the structures of

²⁰⁰ Vernon, *Wilkinson*, p.197; Robens, Summerskill and Manning interviews, cited Donoghue and Jones, *Morrison*, p.346.

²⁰¹ Sir Lewis Namier, *England in the Age of the American Revolution* (second edition) (London, 1966), p.242.

²⁰² Hugh Dalton, *High Tide and After: Memoirs, 1945-1960* (London, 1962), p.237.

²⁰³ Shinwell, *Conflict Without Malice*, p.134.

authority that they built to control their followers – in the last fifteen months of the war did not preclude the eventual triumph of the line which he had held to since the beginning of the events examined here. The final year of the war demonstrates better than any other the totality of leadership control over the party, and the extent to which Labour was run in a ‘top-down’ manner. The events of 1944-5 underline the fact that the leadership group could seek to take the party in whichever direction they chose – and they did. Tactical options were there to be created, chosen, and employed. Critical in maintaining the ascendancy of their strategy was that, in a structural sense, at the end of the war, Attlee and the other leaders were still the sole powerful occupants of that bridge which connected the separate sections of the Labour movement, as well as high office, together. Though Shinwell had long straddled different parts of the party, as now did Bevan, only the leadership group had consistently shown the ability to actually drive events *across* the structure, or link to the government. As a result, their authority had held. The circumstances of coalition had led Attlee to construct Labour’s wartime balance of power in this way in 1940, and he and his colleagues remained in that position at the end of the war.

Controlling the structure in this fashion enabled them to largely contain internal opposition, and restrict its ability to stretch across the entire institutional apparatus and into the different sections of the movement, preventing any individuals from posing a challenge to their *overall* position, simply a localised one. Thus, for example, Laski’s antics on the NEC in the middle stages of the war did not threaten the leaders’ control of the PLP; Shinwell lacked the authority in either arena to do more than pursue personal vendettas; and Bevan was only able to straddle the movement as a whole at the very end of the war, and was an ‘outsider’ for most of it. Despite serious crises, then, the internal order was preserved though five years of separation. Hence, the real threat to the path chosen by the leadership group was instead diffuse – the general disaffection which pervaded the party. While widespread and exploited by others for their own ends, this disaffection had, through the various tactics of Attlee and the others, ultimately proven sustainable.

The period described in the current chapter had seen the culmination of the struggles which had driven Labour party politics for six years. Events came to be focused almost exclusively upon the decisive stage of the conflict between the leader and his challenger. The revisionist Morrison and the status quo Attlee waged an intense competition which dominated politics at the top of the party during the final year of the war. The period from mid 1944 until mid 1945 was essentially a year-long battle for the leadership itself. As we have seen, virtually *everything* became attached, and subordinated, to the conflict between Labour’s two senior politicians. The fracture of the leadership group into two camps fundamentally altered the nature of relationships at the upper echelons of the party, as co-operation ended and the façade of agreement dissolved into open rivalry. The long-running questions of whether to continue the Coalition and the position of the

Labour ministers within the government all became pawns in that competition. Ideology played little part in this conflict; fought between two temperamentally similar actors, it was driven by clashing self-interest, opportunism, and the naked pursuit of power. It was a contest in which both protagonists struggled for the credit to be won from undertaking a particular course of action, all the while pursuing their own agenda. It was a complex balancing-act, and one which produced an urgent and intense conclusion to the struggle. The pendulum in the conflict swung both ways over the period, from Attlee's early undermining of a weakened Morrison, to the Home Secretary's stunning resurgence after his defection from the leadership's collective position, and then Attlee's final victory in July 1945. If Morrison himself had not been destroyed by the events of that month – and he certainly had not – then his ambitions had been. Never again, moreover, was he to enjoy the influence that he wielded in the first half of 1945. Even more remarkable than the expansion of Morrison's power, though, was Attlee's eventual success. Even a rival at the height his powers, driving the party largely single-handed, had proven unable to dislodge the canny Labour leader. Possessing a landslide majority and ensconced independently in office, the party's situation at the end of the war was testimony to the skill with which Attlee, above all others, had directed Labour between 1939 and 1945. It was a direct result of his genius for party management. Labour's political credibility had increased exponentially, and its senior figures demonstrated themselves capable in guiding the nation's affairs. Far from being an anonymous leader, Labour's position was in fact a product of the authority of Attlee. Every bit as much as for Churchill, then, the Second World War had been Attlee's war.

Conclusion

It is certainly the case that, while scholars have always acknowledged that the Labour party gained valuable experience during the Second World War, and that the period was crucial in shaping Labour's fortunes and capacity for government, previous historiography has tended to concentrate primarily upon issues of policy. Comparatively little attention has been paid to issues of leadership relations and personal conflict at the top of the party. As the thesis has demonstrated, this is an important subject, and one which must be examined if the full significance of Labour's wartime experience is to be assimilated. This period, 1939 to 1945, represented the key formative years for the Labour party's development and consolidation into something it had never been before, and would not be again for almost half a century: a genuine party of government.

I

At the end of the war, the Labour party's political position had been transformed beyond recognition. Central to this was the leadership of Attlee. It was his strategy, determination to direct his followers as he saw fit, and desire to keep as many options open as possible, that determined the party's trajectory during six years of crisis. The thesis has conducted what amounts to an analysis of the 'making' of Attlee, that most impenetrable of politicians. Far from being a conventional biography, it has instead sought to fully integrate Attlee within the context of his environment. This has enabled the construction of a case study of his leadership, and consideration of its nature. Attlee has always been a puzzling figure, but more recent literature, by Beckett and John Swift, has seen him as a skilled leader. Perhaps the best grasp of Attlee, however, was offered by James Margach.¹ His analysis of the Labour leader's personality is worth drawing on at length. Far from being a weak figure, Margach has described the 'cold' Attlee as being 'as ruthless as a butcher' with 'extraordinary bloody mindedness', determined to establish his own position and preserve it against rivals.² He saw in the leader 'a streak of cruelty and cynicism', even 'callous indifference' and 'heartlessness', which enabled him to dominate the party and outmanoeuvre his enemies.³ Far from lacking ambition, Attlee 'captured the leadership when no-one was looking' and then retained it through cool calculation, deliberate measures, and careful manoeuvre for two decades.⁴ 'In the elusive art of managing men...Attlee was

¹ James Margach, *The Anatomy of Power: An enquiry into the personality of leadership* (London, 1979).

² Margach, *Anatomy of Power*, pp.4, 11.

³ Margach, *Anatomy of Power*, pp. 11, 25.

⁴ Margach, *Anatomy of Power*, p.4.

outstanding'.⁵ Adept in the 'base techniques of cunning [and] calculation', he became the 'most unfeeling' of prime ministers, and is quoted by Margach as publicly expressing the view that 'ruthlessness' was the most important attribute for the successful politician.⁶ The current author has attempted to show how these qualities operated in practice. Observing Attlee in action at a crucial moment of the party's history, and in the period preceding his own ministry of 1945 to 1951, the current work has offered an examination of how a figure who had thus far been a largely unimpressive leader became so successful.

What was Attlee's own conception of leadership? He certainly lacked much in the way of a public personality. Even when he was prime minister, other members of the government were far more prominent than him. If we are to understand his leadership, we must therefore consider other factors. As the thesis has demonstrated, this man who engendered so much dissatisfaction, who often gave an impression of appearing ineffective, and for many years was widely seen as a stop-gap leader, in fact retained a strange ascendancy over his party. Even during 1935 to 1939 and again from 1951 to 1955, he survived frequent dissatisfaction and heavy criticism. Though he often appeared vulnerable, Attlee defeated or outmanoeuvred the most prominent politicians of his day. There is clearly, therefore, *something* about the precise nature of his leadership – how best to conceive of it – which must be grasped. It may be seen that Attlee's conception of leadership was, in fact, 'non-leadership', but that is too simplistic. Temperamentally inclined to appear – and be – passive, and preferring where possible to guide rather than dictate, we must not lose sight of the fact that Attlee still essentially made whatever decisions he pleased, and then put them into effect. He favoured a consensual style, but was quite capable of ruthlessness and being decisive when he saw fit.

Before offering a final assessment of Attlee's leadership, it is perhaps worth pointing out that this question, of the nature of political leadership and the way different actors operate, offers fertile ground for fresh historiographical enquiry. The best study of this type, of course, is Williamson's analysis of the leadership of Stanley Baldwin, and his consideration of the nature of leadership, and its impact, is worth drawing on at length.⁷ As he wrote of Baldwin, the key questions to consider are:

What gave Baldwin his dominance? What were the sources of his power, and how did he exercise it? What *kind* of politician was he, and what constituted his 'leadership'? Political leadership is not a single, undifferentiated, activity, conducted by all its practitioners in the same manner. If its essence is the

⁵ Margach, *Anatomy of Power*, p.14.

⁶ Margach, *Anatomy of Power*, p.25.

⁷ Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin*, especially the introduction and chapters two and five.

acquisition and retention of sufficient authority to command support or acquiescence, its performance is nevertheless a complicated matter. Support or acquiescence may derive from several sources, each with its own demands – Cabinet or shadow Cabinet, Parliament, party organisation, or wider public groups. The materials are correspondingly various: policy, legislation, or administration; strategy or tactics; parliamentary opinion, party management, the media, sectional interests, or public attitudes. ... If an individual leader is to be properly understood, the specific qualities of his leadership must be identified.⁸

Sustained attention to the problem of the nature of leadership would be rewarding. Because each possible study would be as distinctive from the others as their subjects, if more scholars were to think seriously about the way in which politicians operate in their leadership roles, incisive work could be undertaken. Unlike Baldwin, the example cited above, traditional charges against Attlee – that he was, in many respects, largely anonymous – are not without merit. Attlee, again unlike Baldwin, was certainly not a ‘political teacher’ or ‘public moralist’.⁹ But he did possess unusual talent. As above, then, we must look elsewhere: to his abilities of management, efficiency, and guidance of committees and bureaucracies. It was here that Attlee excelled in projecting himself, and it is here that the key qualities of his leadership can be identified. The thesis has been concerned primarily with describing Labour party politics and factionalism during the Second World War, rather than exclusively concerned with the question of the nature of leadership. But it does hope to have suggested the way in which we should seek to understand Attlee as a politician, and demonstrated his management of his own party. Whatever other judgements we might make on his wartime career, Attlee had demonstrated tenacity and a capacity for steeliness. He was plainly determined to control the Labour party, and, when he did let it off its leash, it was intended primarily as a device to frighten his Coalition partners. Attlee possessed a deep and strong conception of personal duty, something which manifested itself in his resolve that the party must serve the country, and willingness to disregard its immediate complaints. This had been at the centre of his wartime leadership, and was an approach, and mindset, quite different from that of his first four years as leader, when he had been seemingly content to let his party lead him, rather than the other way around.

Attlee should therefore perhaps be understood in the following way: as someone who was a poor leader from 1935 to 1939, and a virtual non-entity from 1951 to 1955, but who was uniquely suited to the work he found himself faced with from 1939 to 1951. As Leader of the Opposition in conventional circumstances, when it was necessary to set out a vision for the party and country, Attlee was singularly ineffective. He lacked the charisma or dynamism to offer much in the way of vision, and was unable to motivate his followers or really *lead* them anywhere. He was always

⁸ Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin*, p.61.

⁹ Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin*, p.155.

an anonymous figure, poorly understood by contemporaries, let alone historians. But when faced with a specific task to master, with the need for careful positioning and patience, and when within reach of power, Attlee was in his element. This had been the case since his time in local government in East London. Few were better at working institutional levers and attaining their objectives by stealth. Similarly few were more adept in the black arts of manoeuvre. Many of the most guileful political actors are of the Disraelian or Wilsonian mould. But there is another kind as well – the behind-the-scenes manipulator and worker of committees. The former could go to a hostile meeting and, through a combination of dazzling boldness and craftiness, come up with a formula which enabled them to buy the support of different sections of the audience and win the day. The other type of actor would already know before the meeting how it would vote, having built a majority for his positions long before. Attlee was of the latter variety. We should therefore identify two distinct phases to Attlee's leadership: one to which he was temperamentally ill-suited, and one in which his quiet abilities in manoeuvre and administration made him the ideal figure.

From the beginning – coaching Greenwood from his North Wales sickbed during the summer of 1939, deciding on his own authority that Labour would enter the government – and then throughout the Coalition – resisting the demands of his followers, and finally attempting to prolong the lifetime of the cross-party alliance – Attlee displayed little willingness to submit to the dictates of others, and instead fought to hold control of decision-making in his own hands and retain freedom of action. Through this means, the leader was ruthless in ensuring that others would be unable to take the party on a different course. Successfully imposing himself on his followers, Attlee established the primacy of his own authority and forced the Labour party down his chosen path. Only once, in his bid to continue the Coalition in May 1945, was his decision-making defeated. Given the tensions his strategy engendered, Attlee's high-stakes juggling act over six years must be judged a remarkable political feat.

In May 1945, with his policy position on the Coalition destroyed by Morrison, it seemed probable that Attlee would fall and be replaced by his rival. But, in the event, the Labour party was not sentenced to Opposition once more, and Attlee seized the opportunity to defeat Morrison by simply refusing to even give his opponent an opening. Their rivalry had been ever present during the period, even if it had sometimes retreated into the background, and it dominated the final phase of the war. Morrison possessed strengths of personality that Attlee never could, but in the end, no matter how capable or 'legitimate' the heir apparent, the leader successfully saw off his opponent. Despite having been dangerously isolated by Morrison over the Coalition, he quickly changed position, his 'little man' persona facilitating a retreat that a more adversarial politician

could never have pulled off. In July, he then became prime minister before the heir apparent could mount a challenge. Attlee later recalled that ‘There was some little difficulty with Morrison who had some idea that he ought to be prime minister...The idea was fantastic and certainly out of harmony with the feeling of the party’.¹⁰ ‘Little difficulty’ was correct; in July 1945, Attlee secured a remarkably easy victory over Morrison. It was a moment of triumph and a fitting end to his wartime leadership. Securely in charge of his party, and prime minister with a huge majority, the strategy that Attlee plotted in 1939 had paid off handsomely: not only during the war itself, but in steering Labour towards its first successful ministry as well.

In contrast, the Labour party’s great dynamic force, Morrison, failed to seize that which he most desired. Morrison is often portrayed in historical writing as the near farcical ‘villain’ of Labour politics, the constant schemer who never quite became leader. He is also depicted as bumbling and clumsy. Yet this is unfair, and clearly informed by hindsight – we know that he never became leader, and so he is a convenient adversary figure. Morrison in fact possessed energy and flair matched by very few, and prevailing perceptions of him overlook just how capable a politician he really was: to suffer so many defeats, reversals, and set-backs between the 1930s and the 1950s, and yet to remain at the top, and the assumed leader-in-waiting for two decades, is – or should be – instructive. Almost all politicians would have faded away, fatally damaged, after just a handful of the blows Morrison suffered. Yet his position never collapsed, and he remained at the pinnacle of politics for twenty years. That he never became leader should not prevent recognition of the fact that, as a politician, he was every bit the equal of his rival Attlee.

Morrison’s wartime rise to a prominence, via his stewardship of the Home Office, was matched only by Bevin and Churchill. He possessed an effortless air of authority, and hugely strengthened his position in 1944 to 1945 as he repeatedly outmanoeuvred Attlee in a demonstration of his claim to the leadership. Morrison engineered the destruction of the Coalition, depicted himself as Labour’s champion, and was the architect of the party’s entire general election effort. From the beginning, Morrison had exploited the fact that Attlee’s position required him to hold the line; hence, while the Home Secretary was more draconian towards dissent than anyone, when it suited his purposes he was willing to adopt positions which would undercut Attlee. Carefully positioning himself in the political and rhetorical space between Attlee and the Labour party, Morrison spent six years building his strength, taking any opportunities to weaken his opponent, and awaiting an opportunity to strike. Morrison did at first sight appear to be the party’s natural leader. But, in the end, that counted for little against an entrenched institutional manipulator like Attlee. The incumbent displayed a better awareness of the location of power in the party. Thus,

¹⁰ Churchill College, Cambridge, Attlee papers, 1/17, draft autobiography.

while Morrison was more publicly prominent and popular than Attlee, this in itself was no route to the top. Attlee had three central advantages over Morrison – he was backed by the bulk of the union MPs, was the incumbent where Morrison was the challenger, and the division of the leadership group into rival camps in 1944 occurred firmly in his favour. Morrison was in a camp of one, and simply outnumbered. Whereas Attlee had most senior figures supporting him (albeit with varying degrees of enthusiasm), Morrison's most prominent ally was Laski, who was not even an MP. Other senior figures did not come out in his favour. His biggest supporter among MPs was Wilkinson, but she was a minor politician and much too emotional about him. The support that Morrison possessed thus posed little threat to the formidable base of Attlee. But, regardless of this, and the failure of Morrison's primary objectives, his wartime career as a minister had been a resounding success, and his position as overlord in the new government reflected his abilities and central importance. No-one was better suited to co-ordinating the government and attempting to put into effect its programme. Despite having just sought to dislodge the prime minister, Morrison was in that respect virtually untouchable.

It must be suggested, then, that it would have been better for the challenger to Attlee's position if Labour had lost the 1945 election. With victory in the bag, it would be difficult in any circumstances to dislodge a newly-appointed prime minister. But if Labour had lost the election, things could have proven quite different. A defeated party may well have been receptive to Morrison and reticent to support a leader whom few felt they ever understood. Given the trajectory of their conflict over the preceding months – with momentum clearly in Morrison's favour – another election defeat would have presented the ideal opportunity to replace Attlee. Moreover, as the new leader Morrison would likely have been able to tack back towards his original position, and persuade the party to reform the Coalition after all – the option he had craftily established prior to his sabotage of the government in May 1945 – with 'trade union common sense', as Dalton noted during the phoney war, recognising that office was preferable to Opposition. As it was, the election victory, and the security it afforded Attlee, was instantly exploited to scupper Morrison's chances. Moreover, Attlee's recognition of Morrison as the 'number two' was so vague as to commit him to nothing specific. Morrison had supplanted Greenwood as Attlee's deputy. But that was as far as it went.

II

Attlee and Morrison had been the central figures in defining Labour's war, and it had been their rivalry and co-operation that had determined much of the events described here. But Labour's wartime politics were about more than just these two men. A wide array of individuals had all

played significant roles. More than anything else – ideas, philosophical clashes, sociological and economic change – the period was therefore shaped by people. Any conclusions must thus be predicated on reiteration of the centrality of power-political struggle and sheer ambition. Events, and the sequence of these events, make clear that the struggles between prominent figures were plainly those of personal conflict, not ideology. Bevan's rise, Morrison's scheming but parallel intolerance of dissent, Attlee's canny leadership, Bevin's petulance and authoritarianism, Greenwood's resurgence, Laski's increasing impotence, and Dalton's disinterest in sectional concerns and immersion in office, to name merely some of the most significant shaping forces: in a cumulative sense, these politicians give form to a distinctive story about Labour during the war; but as individuals, they also tell very different stories: about what they perceived their interests to be, their personal rivalries, and individual manipulation – for many different ends – of a highly unusual political situation. The structure of wartime politics provided a framework for Attlee and the other leaders to fulfil their ambitions and exercise power in the arena they were instinctively at home – government. The goals pursued by these individuals, and the conflicts they entered into, represented the core of the Labour party's wartime evolution.

As far as the leadership group themselves were concerned, united by a shared conception of the importance of office and determination to keep their followers subordinate, the differences between them were purely personal, not ideological or even, for the most part, political. But while many of their enemies held different ideological views, nonetheless even their concern had been with self-advancement and the pursuit of vendettas, constantly orienting themselves around the party itself, and seeking power in that context, in contrast to the leadership's rather different horizons. Those within the political system, at its apex – the leadership group – were animated by an attempt to play that system and maintain the status quo. Those outside it were intent on forcing their way within it. The situational and ideological differences between the dissentients and the Labour ministers should not obscure recognition of the fact that they were in reality playing rather different games. The notion of temperament – used by Lewis Namier to identify different conceptions of advancement, self-interest, and power-seeking behaviour – may be a valuable tool for understanding Labour politics.¹¹ But the most difficult opponents of the Labour ministers as the war progressed turned out to in fact be their ideological and political bedfellows. The gulf between them, and the conflict which threatened Attlee's balancing-act, was marked more by disaffection and restlessness than genuine divergence over policy.

¹¹ Though one must be very careful not to tie Namier and Cowling together, nonetheless the similar interpretations of politics advanced by both are useful to any attempt to rethink Labour politics in this direction. Cowling conceded that Namier's 'historical manner and interests contributed so much...that it is difficult to be sure where his influence has been operative' – Maurice Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England, volume III: Accommodations* (Cambridge, 2001), p.646.

The 'second division' of figures had also been of great significance in Labour politics during the war. Men such as Greenwood, Lees-Smith, and Pethick-Lawrence provided the allies that the Labour ministers so needed. It was once remarked of Thatcher that every leader 'needs their Willie', and, in a sense, the same held true here. Without the support of those able to manage the party and maintain its support, Attlee and other senior figures would have been in real trouble. But the 'second division' was important in other ways as well: the war served the purpose of weeding out the ineffective and highlighting the incapable, both within and outside the government. Some politicians had risen, others had fallen. For example, by 1945 Greenwood and Shinwell were marginalised, while, in contrast, Bevan was someone who could no longer be ignored. The hierarchy which prevailed at the end of the war was rather different from that which might have been expected in 1939. The war thus provided a crucial testing ground. This group of figures, particularly the loyalists, also permits a wider point to be made, again about Attlee: his tactic of employing the abilities of virtually everyone around him, even his enemies. This was more than simply binding them to him; it reflected a willingness to recognise the talents of others – even if he was prepared to simultaneously put the screws to them in other ways.

The thesis has attempted to assemble a concerted study of party management, manoeuvre, and the calculated and instrumental usage of rhetoric. Attlee had been the embodiment of this, balancing tensions, striking poses intended to impart different things to different audiences, and all the while pursuing his own goals. But the other key figures within the party had joined in this game as well – and 'game' it was. The leadership's concentration on using policy statements, speeches, literature, and legislative measures as a means to mollify their followers underline not only their close attention to the problem of party management but also, perhaps, offers a glimpse into what politics is really like, leaders suddenly deciding they had better produce new initiatives to keep their followers happy while concentrating on their own objectives. The Labour ministers also articulated a doctrine of 'responsible' conduct as a means to ensure that the Labour party remained subordinate to their own choices, applying it in various forms from 'constructive Opposition' to the electoral truce, the Churchill Coalition to the by-election 'coupon', the need for patience to implied threats of the risks of electoral annihilation. The willingness of the Labour leaders to continue the Coalition also shows that the mood of wartime radicalisation of politics was perhaps less significant than is commonly thought. To assume otherwise is to confuse the sociological with the political, or to be hoodwinked by historical mythologies. Attlee's wartime doctrine had been sufficiently persuasive to his followers – even if most of the party did not like its prescriptions – to keep them in check and permit the Labour ministers to concern themselves with the opportunities of office. Henry Kissinger once remarked that 'the real distinction is

between those who adapt their purposes to reality and those who seek to mold reality in the light of their purposes', and the Labour ministers had achieved this with a virtuoso performance of political leadership.¹² Michael Bentley has commented that 'doctrine can be understood both as an intellectual domain and as a mechanism whose function consists less in complementing thought than in obviating it'.¹³

The doctrine shaped a commonly-held set of assumptions in the political world about 'what to do' given the emergency facing the country which was persuasive, powerful, and difficult to dissent from (not least because it was actually *true*) and thus sustained a distinct political language and framework for wartime politics. It is perhaps worth pointing out that Churchill did something broadly similar with his own party, to sideline his Conservative opponents. The leading political actors from all parties thus sought a strategy, rooted in the language of national 'crisis', which enabled them to 'get on with the job' and cluster into their hands a huge amount of power. But nowhere was this more effectively conceived and employed than by Attlee within the Labour party. Central to this was their willingness to use rhetoric, in many different forms. Rhetoric is, as Bentley argued, an 'intellectual art-form' taking on numerous manifestations – policy initiatives or appeals for support through manifestos, broadcasts, articles, and formal speeches.¹⁴ Other forms include shaping policy options, and restricting what is politically possible in order to advance a particular agenda – which the Labour ministers' dominance of government committees left them particularly well suited to. There is certainly a distinction between different types of rhetoric. One is just that, rhetorical: perhaps not strongly believed even by those who utter it, and utilised purely for purposes of manipulation. The other is thematic, and agenda-based, and is more substantive. It is projected in order to attain a specific goal. 'Rhetoric' therefore encompasses shaping the political environment in two rather different ways. The two can sit comfortably alongside one another, but they are distinct. Both had been present here. This careful and deliberate reliance on rhetoric provided critical ballast for the leadership group during the war.

That Labour politics was driven by, on the one hand, intense personal conflict, and, on the other, the leadership group's struggle to maximise their power relative to the wider political nation, would again suggest the merits of the 'high political' approach in assisting interpretation of this period. Though at first sight it may appear that internal politics during the war was dominated by

¹² This is one of Kissinger's best known maxims, but the original source is unclear. It can, however, be found online at <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/3095.html>, accessed 9 August 2007.

¹³ Michael Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine and Thought', in Bentley and John Stevenson (eds.), *High and Low Politics in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 1983), p.143.

¹⁴ Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine and Thought', in Bentley and Stevenson (eds.), *High and Low Politics*, p.137.

ideological conflict, as the moderation of the leaders clashed with the socialist demands of their followers, the thesis has demonstrated that this was in fact not the case. It was this environment in which the leadership of Attlee flourished. Moreover, while political circumstances were undoubtedly restrictive, nonetheless the thesis' concentration upon this very narrowness has actually permitted construction of a focused analysis of how politicians behaved. Though there remains the problem, as posed at the outset of the thesis, of the decline of personal papers and correspondence which took hold from c.1940, as politicians saw each other more regularly or simply picked up the telephone (and which impacted upon many of the politicians considered here), nonetheless this can, and should, be folded into a wider question: can we still 'do' high level political history for the period after c.1940?

The thesis hopes to have suggested that, whilst much rich information will inevitably be lost where papers and correspondence are less voluminous, if different types of sources – for example, official records – are available, then enough information can still be gleaned to permit an examination of the outlines, and trajectory, of political action. This sort of analysis can therefore be attempted even where the decline of correspondence is a serious problem. We can build up a picture of the things politicians do and say, as well as the contradictions between these things, and, by tracing their activities and their private intentions where we can discover them, map out their behaviour and the objectives which animated them. Or, as Jonathan Clark has put it, 'the discernment of agency by the narrative of political action'.¹⁵ To conclude otherwise would be a rather depressing conclusion. The thesis also serves to suggest the merits of 'high politics' to Labour history as a whole, which is usually dominated by ideological or sociological explanations. Cowling observed that 'even' Labour politics 'have to be understood as a matter of ambition, manoeuvre and situation'.¹⁶ Given the manner in which Labour party history has always been written, the historiographical implications of this position are considerable. As Kenneth Morgan has noted, it is a part of Labour 'tradition' and 'mythology' 'that it has always been a different kind of party, a crusade, born anew in the working-class struggles of the late Victorian era'.¹⁷ This is key to the party's identity, just as is the underlying Conservative doctrine of resistance to certain social changes and the maintenance of economic inequality. But whether this provides a useful map to the history of Labour party politics is, frankly, open to doubt.

III

¹⁵ J.C.D. Clark, *English society, 1660-1832: Religion, identity and politics during the ancien regime* (Cambridge, second edition, 2001), p.2.

¹⁶ Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine, volume III*, p.539.

¹⁷ Kenneth Morgan, 'The High and Low Politics of Labour: Keir Hardie to Michael Foot' in Bentley and Stevenson (eds.), *High and Low Politics*, p. 287.

As we have seen, Attlee's leadership was consistently impressive, and at times commanding. Often it left many of his followers exasperated, but this was because, trapped in a strange netherworld between party and office, the bulk of the Labour party had little to do but dream of the future. They would have eagerly supported the Beveridge report and other programmes for social reform anyway, but simple boredom meant that they seized on such episodes with an excitement that inflamed the issues to the point of combustion.¹⁸ But the course chosen by the leaders, building Labour's credibility, experiencing office, and extensive leverage and influence within the administration, erased the damage done by 1931 and re-established the party as a vehicle capable of winning elections. However different in personality, all four of the leadership group were born administrators and expert workers of a bureaucratic machine. This was critical in their success and enjoying so much influence. Few Conservatives could match them, and never before had Labour wielded such power and influence as here. It is certainly true that the internal criticism of the ministers was unfair: they wielded authority within the government, dominated the home front through control of key portfolios, and of the five War Cabinet members who were to all intents and purposes irremovable, three – Attlee, Bevin and Morrison – were Labour politicians. Only two – Churchill and Eden – were Conservatives. The Labour party could hardly be said to have a bad deal from the prime minister. The Coalition was a genuine Ministry of Talents, or something approaching it, and was 'above' party at its upper echelons, a remarkable feat given the continued prevalence of partisan feeling. At the end of the war, virtually all the leading politicians in the country, both Labour and Conservative, wanted to continue the Coalition rather than return to traditional party politics. Moreover, the Labour ministers were well respected by their colleagues, and Churchill was sympathetic to their internal difficulties.¹⁹ The charge that Attlee secured a bad deal from the Conservatives in 1940, or that the Labour ministers represented the party ineffectively, cannot be sustained.

Sometimes cautiously, sometimes coercively, at times sincerely and at others duplicitously, the Big Four's collective direction of the Labour party between 1939 and 1945 was an almost unqualified success. The Labour ministers established themselves as credible statesmen, and were

¹⁸ Of course, that the internal schisms which occurred when the bulk of the Labour party failed to discern that, while the government refrained from using socialist *language*, much of what it was doing was in fact socialist, paradoxically demonstrates once again the overriding role of rhetoric in politics: without it, the Labour party could not grasp the *substance* of what was really happening! Divorcing these two concepts in understanding political leadership is impossible.

¹⁹ For example, when Dalton and Attlee had been confronted with intense Conservative opposition to their requisitioning plans for the coal mines, Churchill – who, of course, had little instinctive feeling for the Conservative party anyway – sided with the Labour ministers. He warned Attlee 'Don't let them [the Conservatives] all form up on you', and offered to assist by broadcasting to the nation on the need for coal economy in order to force Conservative compliance – Harris, *Attlee*, p.200.

now at the head of a reinvigorated party and a strong government. Attlee and the other leaders largely achieved the goals they had set out with in 1940: enhancement of their own standing, preservation of their authority, experience of governing and advancement of a Labour agenda. But the strategy was always about more than the immediate interests of themselves and the Labour party; it was also about long-term success. Refusing to serve in the country's hour of need would have been political suicide, but, due to their exertions, Attlee and the rest of the leadership group had exploited their access to power, and Churchill's neglect of the Conservative party, to establish Labour as a viable candidate to form a government in its own right. They could thus look forward to the future with confidence. Through their experience of the Second World War, then, they finally completed the project that they had, in different ways, embarked upon fourteen years before: the rebuilding of the Labour party. Far more than the internal struggles of the 1930s, it was in truth the experience of 1939 to 1945 which produced the party that emerged into the new dawn of the post-war world. Moreover, through the quality of its leaders, it was a Labour party stronger than its numerically more powerful Conservative rivals. Unlike the leaders of that party, the Labour leadership had never ceased paying attention to their own party or to the future. Even if it had not been a pain-free education, a recovery which seemed inconceivable had been affected.

Despite all the qualifications which can be put on Labour's 1945 election victory, and mindful of the dangers of being seduced by prevailing historiographical perceptions of the 1930s as a 'bad time' and the Attlee government as the nation's deliverance, nonetheless, something clearly *had* changed. True, public opinion was moving towards the Conservatives in the three weeks preceding the election; Conservative local organisation was in ruins, while Labour's was beginning to perform well; enemy bombing, industrial reorganisation, and other causes of the mass exodus of the population from parts of the country left some constituencies resembling modern day Old Sarums, easy prey for the Labour party; and only a minority of the middle class voted Labour. But, despite all this, as far as can be seen, the election really was determined by a war-weary populace. Simon Green has attributed to the legacy of wartime deprivation 'a critical alteration in common culture', with 'the eclipse of the idea of austerity' and other Puritan virtues, as evidenced by the rise of the wartime black market.²⁰ Far from being an understandable response to the possibility of death in war, this signified 'a more permanent change in popular attitudes towards consumption'.²¹ In other words, a people who had money now wanted, expected, and demanded *things*; Labour promised more to satiate them than the frugal

²⁰ S. J. D. Green, 'The Strange Death of Puritan England, 1914-1945', in Wm. Roger Louis (ed.), *Yet More Adventures with Britannia: Personalities, Politics and Culture in Britain* (London, 2005), pp. 185-202, at 201.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Conservatives.²² Further, and perhaps most significantly, the choices open to politicians were now immensely restricted, more so than before; declaring the need for a return to the pre-war order, or denying the aspirations of the population, would have been politically inept. For thirty years, politicians had managed to stave off the full effects of democracy; but now the necessity of appeasing a restless people defined the parameters of what was politically possible for generations. In many respects, then, the democrats had at last got what they wanted. Whether this turned out to be a good or bad thing is a matter of debate. But a substantial degree of power had been shifted from the politicians to the populace.

Labour's Utopian promises were decisive in winning them the election, as well as negative perceptions of the Conservative party that even the most popular politician of the entire century could not arrest. But the course favoured by Churchill was hardly one of heartless penny-pinching, as so often depicted; his background as an enthusiastic social reformer alone belied that. The prime minister's position was instead 'no promises but every preparation'.²³ He simply focused upon what was, after all, reality – that Britain's post-war financial position could not be predicted – while Labour offered a pipedream. The people were, understandably, sick of reality, and many of them bought into Labour's dream; but then, as Geoff Fry has remarked, 'came the reckoning'.²⁴ The reforms of the Attlee government may have been pushing at an open door, but given Labour's subsequent disregard for Britain's long term strength in putting its schemes for El Dorado and Shangri-La so completely into effect, it is difficult to escape the belief that the country would have been better off with a Conservative victory in 1945. With the last vestiges of an old political and economic order soon to be destroyed forever, for Britain, and its people, the tragedy of the 1930s was complete.

²² Wages had outstripped price inflation during the war, but, at government diktat, there were precious few consumer goods to spend the money on.

²³ W. S. Churchill, 'No promises but every preparation', *The Listener*, 25 March 1943.

²⁴ G. K. Fry, *The Politics of Crisis: An Interpretation of British Politics, 1931-45* (Basingstoke, 2001), p.209.

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