

## **Citizen and Subject: Clement Attlee's Socialism**

**By Ben Jackson**

John Bew, *Citizen Clem: A Biography of Attlee*, riverrun, London, 2016; 668+xx pp; ISBN 9781780879895

Is there anything new to say about Clement Attlee? Over the years many biographers have succumbed to the manifest attractions of Attlee's career. We therefore already know a great deal about his record in government, his stewardship of the Labour Party, and his understated, laconic leadership style. The most substantial of these biographies is by the journalist Kenneth Harris, who knew Attlee personally and drew on extensive conversations with him after Attlee's retirement from politics. First published in 1982 and then reissued in a new edition in 1995, Harris's *Attlee* remains an excellent book, which provides an exhaustive and illuminating account of Attlee's life, albeit one shorn of much in the way of an overarching historical interpretation or an adequate scholarly apparatus.<sup>1</sup> In addition to biographical treatments, Attlee's period in office has been extensively analysed by many great historians, including landmark works by Paul Addison, Kenneth Morgan and Ross McKibbin.<sup>2</sup> John Bew therefore enters a well-tilled field with *Citizen Clem*. Yet there is undoubtedly a gap – which Bew fills – for an up-to-date, comprehensive and scholarly Attlee biography that improves upon the accounts of Attlee's life currently available (Harris's *Attlee* is out of print). As the critical success of the book attests, new generations of readers are eager to hear Attlee's story retold and Bew has written a sympathetic, penetrating and gripping portrait of a fundamentally rather elusive character.

But Bew's ambitions are more than merely synthetic: he also offers two new perspectives on Attlee that he says correct well-entrenched conventional views of his subject. First, Bew suggests that Attlee is often viewed as a passive observer of events. Surrounded on all sides by outstanding political personalities such as Winston Churchill, Ernest Bevin and Herbert Morrison, Attlee has been neglected as a dynamic historical actor with his own role in acquiring and exercising political power. Second, Bew thinks that the importance of Attlee's own political beliefs has been downplayed and should be restored to a central place in any account of his career. Far from a bland or intellectually insubstantial figure, Attlee had a relatively clear world view that helps us to understand his political practice and remains in certain respects worthy of recuperation today.<sup>3</sup> I am not convinced that the first of these points is as underappreciated as Bew thinks. After all, the main burden of the vast literature on Attlee and the 1945 government has been to rescue Attlee from the condescension of his principal colleagues and political opponents, few of whom seem to have rated his political skills at the time. If anything, Attlee's reputation as a political actor has now risen a fraction too high, unhelpful though that judgement is for an author trying to generate a fresh biographical angle. However, Bew's second claim is more original and, although he does not say this, connects his biography to the wider historiographical trend to regard ideologies, rhetoric and culture as of greater importance to public life than more empiricist or economistic models of political history allow.<sup>4</sup> Although Harris's biography did include some perfunctory discussion of the intellectual and social roots of Attlee's socialism, *Attlee* was nonetheless a work that firmly focused on the details of high political decision-making and party management.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, Harris and Bew are complementary rather than like-for-like substitutes: Harris provides a deeper dive into the fine-grained complexities of Attlee's record as a manager and decision-maker, while Bew portrays more of the social and ideological context that framed Attlee's leadership.

In making his case, Bew notes that he has been influenced by the Labour MP Jon Cruddas whose 2011 Clement Attlee memorial lecture at University College, Oxford identified an ‘orthodox’ and an ‘unorthodox’ version of Attlee. The ‘orthodox’ Attlee, said Cruddas, was a managerial figure – ‘colourless, taciturn’ – who was an efficient technocratic administrator. In contrast, the ‘unorthodox’ Attlee was a romantic and an idealist, whose socialism was shaped by his reading of William Morris and John Ruskin and most of all by his participation in the early work of the British labour movement. This latter Attlee – whose ideas bear some resemblance to Cruddas’s own political views – was above all a left-wing patriot.<sup>6</sup> Bew picks up this emphasis on Attlee’s political inspirations by documenting what Attlee read as well as what he did, thereby reconstructing Attlee’s hitherto obscured intellectual life alongside his better known political activities. Each chapter begins with a book, poem or song that Attlee read at the time – Rudyard Kipling, William Morris, Edward Bellamy and so on – and uses it as a starting point to explore Attlee’s motivations and outlook. This conceit eventually becomes a rod for Bew’s back as it becomes harder later in the book to tie specific texts into Attlee’s own mental life. As the pace of events quickens, Bew has to cite texts that ‘set the mood’ around Attlee rather than ones that he engaged closely with himself.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, it is an illuminating exercise that does succeed in opening up a fresh perspective on Attlee’s socialism.

Bew is sceptical that much in the way of specific policy positions can be salvaged for today from the Attlee era; he thinks that these depended on historical conditions that have now vanished. But Bew tentatively suggests that the ‘ethos’ of Attlee’s socialism remains relevant: an ‘unobtrusive progressive patriotism – built on a sense of rights and duties, a malleable civic code rather than a legal writ, with its emphasis on the “common wealth” above individual self-fulfilment’.<sup>8</sup> By the end of the book, however, it is hard not to wonder if Bew has it the wrong way round. A 1945-style refurbishment and extension of the public

realm could hardly be a more pressing policy issue, whereas Attlee's socialist 'ethos' was surprisingly forgiving of British social hierarchies and looks to be in need of some renovation.

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Attlee was born in 1883 – the same year, as Kenneth Harris noted, that John Maynard Keynes was born and Karl Marx died.<sup>9</sup> Brought up in an upper middle class household, Attlee's education at public school and Oxford left him a conventional imperialist Conservative. But in 1905, as he embarked on a career as a barrister, Attlee was drawn onto an entirely different path by his involvement in philanthropic work in the East End of London, initially through the Haileybury Club (founded by his former school). Here Attlee organised military-style training for teenage boys as a means of imparting respect and self-discipline. Attlee gradually gravitated towards full-time political work in the East End as his exposure to the poverty and solidarity of the working classes led him to socialist activism (activism which he was able to undertake because of income from his family). As a leading member of the Stepney Independent Labour Party (ILP), he acquired a thorough grounding in the hard graft of Edwardian political organising: speaking at street corner meetings to tiny audiences; organising and attending demonstrations; supporting striking workers and suffragettes; standing unsuccessfully for local office and so on. Attlee also involved himself in many of the most famous social reform campaigns and progressive institutions of the time: he worked for the National Anti-Sweating League; the campaign for the Minority Report on Poor Law Reform; briefly served as a public lecturer explaining the details of the 1911 National Insurance Act; and finally gained a tutoring position at the LSE in 1912 due to the patronage of Sidney Webb.

All of this builds a picture of Attlee as an activist and campaigner who had no particular thought of personal ambition at this stage – not least because the Labour Party was still an embryonic organisation – but who was closely linked to some of the key networks that would eventually coalesce into a Labour Party that could exercise independent political power. Unlike some leading figures in the ILP, and his closest brother, Tom, Attlee willingly served in the First World War. He ended the War with the rank of Major, having fought, among other places, at Gallipoli, and returned to the East End with enhanced political status due to his military service and rank. The War had transformed the electoral prospects of the Labour Party by breaking apart the Liberal Party. In this new political context, someone with Attlee's experience and connections was a prime target for recruitment as a Labour parliamentary candidate. Attlee duly acquired political office first as the Mayor of Stepney in 1919 and then MP for Limehouse in 1922 – the first Oxford graduate to become a Labour MP.

What sort of socialist was he at this stage? Bew draws our attention in the first instance to Attlee's engagement with the romantic critique of capitalism associated with Ruskin and Morris. What Attlee took from these writers was a strong sense of the dehumanising impact of industrial capitalism and a belief that higher principles of solidarity and 'fellowship' should ultimately displace economic individualism and acquisitiveness. But Bew adds a further twist to the story. In his view, although Morris and Ruskin were important to Attlee, he ultimately sided more with Morris's antagonist, Edward Bellamy, whose *Looking Backward* (1887) offered a modernist vision of the socialist utopia in which the benefits of industrialisation are widely spread through a state that owns the means of production, guarantees employment, and ensures an equal distribution of goods. It was Bellamy's utopia that famously prompted Morris to write his *News From Nowhere* in 1890, which imagined a less statist and industrialised version of the socialist future.

While these distinctively anti-capitalist influences were important, Bew also stresses that Attlee was in many respects a characteristic late Victorian who subscribed to a strong notion of patriotic duty. His decision to enlist in 1914 should be seen in this context – Attlee was actually officially too old to join the army and had to go to some effort to get a posting. His brother Tom, who had accompanied Attlee in his growing involvement in the labour movement, was a conscientious objector. Attlee's civic patriotism is the central recurring motif of Bew's biography. Curiously, though, Bew says relatively little about the intellectual structure of Attlee's strong sense of British national identity. Yet this is a subject that would repay closer analysis, since it helps us to understand why it was much easier for Labour in the 1930s and 1940s to accept and amplify a traditional version of Britishness than proved to be the case in later periods. Briefly, Attlee – like almost every other leading figure in the Labour Party – subscribed to a Whiggish view of the development of British political institutions, which depicted the British constitution as a uniquely flexible method of securing individual liberty and parliamentary government. From this perspective, the organising historical narrative of Britishness was a progressive, modernising one in which parliamentary institutions became ever more inclusive over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The leaders of the Labour Party therefore presented the emergence of the party as the next stage in this broader historical sweep, signifying the rise of the working class to political power and the need to complement existing civil liberties with freedom from poverty and economic insecurity. They contrasted this view of Britain as an arena of progressive and democratic change with the revolutionary upheavals and despotisms to be found elsewhere in Europe.<sup>10</sup> But while this constitutional patriotism was politically effective for the left in the decades around the Second World War, it would later come under significant pressure and prove much harder to defend in the late twentieth century, not least because it could plausibly

be argued that other nations now embodied a more satisfactory model of liberal democratic government than Britain.

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Attlee served as a dutiful member of the Parliamentary Labour Party between 1922 and 1931, but only emerged as a leading national political figure because he was one of the few experienced Labour MPs to hold their seat in the disastrous 1931 general election that followed the collapse of the 1929-31 Labour government. This was the stroke of luck that in due course enabled him to become leader of the Labour Party almost by default in 1935, a position he then held on to until 1955. Bew is less engaged by questions of party management than some of Attlee's other biographers, who have devoted considerable attention to Attlee's agility in keeping the fissiparous factions and personalities of the Labour Party together throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Nonetheless, it is clear from Bew's account that Attlee's success on this score rested in part on his status as a kind of unflashy, almost neutral party chairman who was able to maintain a balance of power between the more charismatic figures who surrounded him and who could never agree on which of them was best placed to replace Attlee as leader. But Attlee's success was also due to his respect for the internal pluralism and collective decision-making of the labour movement. Attlee's formation as an ILP activist, well before Labour looked capable of becoming a party of government, meant that he conceptualised it as a broad-based social coalition comprised of an ideologically and socially diverse group of legitimate actors – a radical left, a more cautious right, a trade unionist base, a fraction of middle class intellectuals. This is not to say that he was content with, say, the left, or certain recalcitrant intellectuals, at any given time, but he did strain every sinew to keep the party together and never got too far ahead of median opinion within the broader

movement. Bew interestingly notes that Attlee wrote a personal list of his sixteen major political achievements on a single piece of paper. By my count at least six of them related to keeping the party united and working as a team at different stages of his career, both in opposition and in government (these he ranked as equivalent to such accomplishments as ‘dealing with the India problem’ and losing no by-elections when Prime Minister).<sup>11</sup>

Bew’s core interest in the book is less such staple questions of Labour Party history and more Attlee’s orientation towards foreign policy, in particular his role in firmly shifting the Labour Party toward participation in the 1940-45 wartime coalition under Churchill and then in the emergent American pole of the Cold War. Bew’s emphasis on Attlee’s patriotism is intended to set the stage for Attlee’s starring role in the formation of British foreign policy after 1945. Bew is supportive of Attlee’s ‘realist’ foreign policy stances, and has been strongly criticised by John Newsinger in the pages of the *New Left Review* for offering an account of Attlee transparently designed to prop up today’s Labour right against Jeremy Corbyn’s takeover of the party.<sup>12</sup> This is a more accurate comment about the reception of Bew’s biography than a fair assessment of the book itself. The effusive response it received from broadsheet commentators and politicians was undoubtedly fuelled by a desire to show that Labour’s mainstream foreign policy tradition was far from the one represented by Corbyn. Great play was made of Attlee’s support for the formation of NATO; the creation of British nuclear weapons; and Britain’s diplomatic and military alliance with the United States against the Soviet Union. But while Bew himself is indeed sympathetic to Attlee’s foreign policy positions, he is hardly unusual in this assessment – almost everything written on Attlee pre-Corbyn also takes the same line, the exceptions being the critiques authored by New Left writers such as E. P. Thompson and John Saville.<sup>13</sup> Both sides in this dispute exaggerate how much scope the Attlee government had to choose a different path and thus how far it deserves either praise or blame for the foreign policy it followed. Bew is no different, though he



buttresses Attlee's drift into the Cold War by presenting him as a long-standing admirer of radical politics in the United States, stretching all the way back to his close reading of Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. There is a clearer case for Attlee making a difference on the independence of India, where he and Stafford Cripps were decisive in recognising that they had to engineer a quick exit before popular resistance dragged Britain into a quagmire. Yet even here, as Bew shows, Attlee's criticisms of British imperialism were by no means unilluminated. He remained wedded to the paternalistic narrative that Britain deserved credit for having exercised stewardship over the empire until the conditions were right to bring about a peaceful transition to self-government.<sup>14</sup>

On domestic policy, Attlee's government had much more agency. Bew gives a lively though schematic account of the creation of the universal welfare state, the nationalisation of industry, and the attempt to introduce economic planning (characteristically he maintains the American connection by calling it 'the British New Deal').<sup>15</sup> Bew implies that Attlee's real passion was the government's social policy and that economic questions about public ownership and planning were of less interest to him. This is somewhat in tension with the portrait of Attlee that Bew constructs earlier in the book – the enthusiastic reader of Morris and Bellamy – and ultimately reads more like an attempt to minimise Attlee's socialism than like a rounded historical verdict. A more challenging and invigorating approach would be to acknowledge that Attlee was indeed by formation and instinct a strong supporter of the collective ownership and control of the means of production. As Attlee remarked to Labour's 1947 conference, his government's purpose was 'to effect two transitions, one from a war to a peace economy and one from a capitalism based on private enterprise and private property to a socialist economy based on the control and direction of the wealth and resources of this country in the interests of all the people.'<sup>16</sup> Among the many interesting questions generated by this commitment to a socialist economy is how Attlee could combine such heterodoxy

with his rather conventional acquiescence in many of the social and cultural orthodoxies of his time.

For all its virtues, we can now see that Attlee's socialism was incomplete. To regard his 'ethos' as a plausible resource for politics today – as Bew suggests we might – underestimates the historical gulf that now separates us from Attlee's generation. Attlee's socialism operated against the backdrop of a much more deferential society, preserving intact many hierarchies and inequalities that were, by the time of his death in 1967, already beginning to seem questionable, whether in the family, schooling, the universities, the House of Lords, the civil service, the military, the management of industry, or come to that the leadership of the trade unions.<sup>17</sup> What seems vibrant and urgent in Attlee's socialism today is the radical expansion of collective action to solve market failures and equalise life chances. Bew is less keen to press such a policy agenda on us than to make a case for the persisting relevance of Attlee's British patriotism and his insistence that socialism must emphasise civic duties as well as rights. This 'citizenship ideal that defined Attlee's career' has been forgotten by the left 'somewhere along the way', Bew argues.<sup>18</sup> But a more precise way of putting this is that Attlee's notion of patriotic citizenship was well-suited to the 1940s and the high tide of confidence in Britain's parliamentary democracy and ruling elite. With the subsequent decline of social deference that was in part initiated by the rise of Attlee's welfare state and in part the product of complicated cultural shifts after the 1960s, it became much harder for the left to see the appeal of a worldview that accepted an antediluvian status hierarchy, conflated England and Britain, evinced a sense of superiority over other nations, and was fundamentally not as democratic as its exponents, including Attlee, thought it was.<sup>19</sup> Of course, the British right had less difficulty with continuing to promote such an agenda. But that only deepens the mystery of why it would be a good idea for the left to return to a set of assumptions that were progressive in the 1940s but are conservative today.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Harris, *Attlee*, London, 1995 [1982]. Other valuable works on Attlee include Roy Jenkins, *Mr Attlee: An Interim Biography*, London, 1948; W. Golant, 'The Early Political Thought of C. R. Attlee', *Political Quarterly*, 40: 3, 1969, pp. 246-55; John Saville, 'C. R. Attlee: An Assessment', *Socialist Register*, 20, 1983, pp. 144-67; Trevor Burridge, *Clement Attlee: A Political Biography*, London, 1985; Francis Beckett, *Clem Attlee*, London, 2000; David Howell, *Attlee*, London, 2006; Nicklaus Thomas-Symonds, *Attlee: A Life in Politics*, London, 2010; Robert Crowcroft, *Attlee's War*, London, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945*, London, 1975; Kenneth Morgan, *Labour in Power 1945-51*, Oxford, 1984; Ross McKibbin, *Parties and People: England 1914-51*, Oxford, 2010. Other important works on Labour in office in the 1940s include Stephen Brooke, *Labour's War*, Oxford, 1992; Peter Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain 1945-51*, London, 1992; Stephen Fielding, Peter Thompson and Nick Tiratsoo, *England Arise! Labour and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain*, Manchester, 1995; Martin Francis, *Ideas and Policies Under Labour 1945-51*, Manchester, 1997; Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption 1939-55*, Oxford, 2000; Jim Tomlinson, *Democratic Socialism and Economic Policy: The Attlee Years*, Cambridge, 2002; David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain: 1945-51*, London, 2007.

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<sup>3</sup> John Bew, *Citizen Clem*, London, 2016, pp. 17-20.

<sup>4</sup> See for example the classic statements of this case by Gareth Stedman-Jones, 'Rethinking Chartism', in his *Languages of Class*, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 90-178; and Philip Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin*, Cambridge, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Harris, *Attlee*, pp. 21-4.

<sup>6</sup> Jon Cruddas, 'Attlee, the ILP and the Romantic Tradition', University College Clement Attlee Memorial Lecture, 28 October 2011, available at <https://joncruddas.org.uk/sites/joncruddas.org.uk/files/Clement%20Attlee%20Memorial%20Lecture%2028th%20Oct%202011.pdf> (accessed 12 April 2018); Bew, *Citizen Clem*, pp. xvi-xvii.

<sup>7</sup> Bew, *Citizen Clem*, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Bew, *Citizen Clem*, p. xx.

<sup>9</sup> Harris, *Attlee*, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Attlee himself set out such a historical analysis in his *The Labour Party in Perspective*, London, 1937, pp. 7-32.

<sup>11</sup> Bew, *Citizen Clem*, pp. 551-2.

<sup>12</sup> John Newsinger, 'Much to be Modest About', *New Left Review*, 108, 2017, pp. 151-9.

<sup>13</sup> E. P. Thompson, 'Mr Attlee and the Gadarene Swine', *Guardian*, 3 March 1984; John Saville, *The Politics of Continuity: British Foreign Policy and the Labour Government 1945-46*, London, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Bew, *Citizen Clem*, pp. 44-5.

<sup>15</sup> Bew, *Citizen Clem*, pp. 386-409.

<sup>16</sup> C. R. Attlee, speech to 1947 Labour Party conference, Margate, 27 May 1947, at <http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=157> (accessed 12 April 2018).

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<sup>17</sup> This point has been made most persuasively in McKibbin, *Parties and People*, pp. 140-76.

<sup>18</sup> Bew, *Citizen Clem*, p. 556.

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed exploration of this crucial historical shift, see Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics and the Decline of Deference in England, 1968-2000*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018.