hachette LEARNING

Modern History review

www.hachettelearning.com/historyreview

Winston Churchill and the 1945 general election

Alex Hill

Why did Churchill lose the 1945 general election? And why did Labour win?

At ten o'clock on the morning of 26 July 1945, the first results of the general election came through. They were not encouraging for the Conservative Party. Labour had already gained ten seats from them. Captain Richard Pim, head of Britain's Map Room, took the first results to the prime minister. Churchill was in the bath. Pim later recalled that Churchill 'certainly appeared surprised if not shocked'. He asked Pim to fetch him a towel and, within minutes, was dressed in his blue siren suit, cigar in hand, seated in his chair, following the election results constituency by constituency. He remained there for the rest of the day, watching the results roll in.

As the scale of Churchill's electoral defeat became clear, his wife, Clementine, attempted to console him. The election loss, she suggested, might prove to be a 'blessing in disguise'. Leadership had taken its toll on Churchill's health, after all. He responded dryly, 'Well, at the moment it's certainly very well disguised'. The result shocked the whole family. A few days later, Churchill's five-year-old grandson, also called Winston, was asked whether he understood what had happened in the election. He said he gathered he had a 'new grandpa'.

Britain had just voted out the prime minister who had led them through the Second World War. Labour won a landslide. Clement Attlee – quiet, unassuming, often underestimated – was prime minister.

Very well disguised?

The scale of Labour's victory came as a surprise to almost everyone, including Labour politicians themselves. Attlee later admitted to his private secretary that even in his 'most optimistic dreams' he had imagined, at best, a narrow Conservative victory – perhaps a majority of 40 seats. Hugh Dalton, who became Attlee's chancellor of the exchequer, predicted on the eve of polling that the Conservatives would win a majority of about 100. 'I dare say I am a bit of a pessimist', he recorded in his diary. Instead, Labour won 393 seats to the Conservatives' 197, a majority of 146. 'Nobody foresaw this at all,' wrote Harold Nicholson, Conservative MP for West Leicester.

International observers were equally baffled. Joseph Stalin, waiting for Attlee to return to the Potsdam Conference, had simply assumed that Churchill would 'fix' the result. The *New York Daily News* renewed its campaign for Churchill to be made Duke of Churchill, declaring that 'whether the country gives him his honours that are his due, or continues to heap ingratitude upon his head,' he would go down in history as the greatest Englishman of his time. To many abroad, Britain appeared to have repaid its saviour with rejection.

Yet there were signs – there are always signs – that an electoral landslide was coming. Opinion polling, still in its infancy, consistently showed a majority for Labour during the war. (In this period, however, most politicians were sceptical of this new method for measuring public opinion.) While

Labour and the Tories observed an electoral truce during the war, some wartime by-elections demonstrated significant support for fringe left-wing parties and independents.

Something – or, better yet, some things – had happened in British popular politics during the war, which Churchill could not make out, let alone control. The 1945 election was not a referendum on Churchill's wartime leadership. It was a choice about Britain's future.

Bravo, Churchill!

Churchill's popularity was undeniable. His speeches had sustained morale in 1940, when defeat seemed possible. His suspicions of Hitler in the early 1930s, his very vocal support for rearmament, and his hostility to appeasement – all these positions had been vindicated by events. His image – the cigar, the siren suit, the bullishness – became inseparable from the fight for survival.

That being said, there were parts of Britain where the Churchill brand was not popular. Jennie Lee, who became the Labour MP for the constituency of Cannock in Staffordshire, described how she was taken to the mining village of Hednesford. A local Labour leader, 'pointing to a pit in the valley below said, "That is where Churchill brought the troops."' Lee commented, 'For a moment I thought he was talking about some recent wartime event. No, it was a bitter recollection of 1910. As I have said, miners have long memories.' Churchill's stint as Home Secretary, and his role in putting down the Tonypandy riots in 1910, left him unpopular with some, particularly in Wales, and particularly among coal miners.

Still, in most parts of the country, Churchill was a popular figure. Tellingly, on polling day, the *Aberdeen Journal*, a staunchly pro-Conservative newspaper, published a list of 'Don'ts for Voters'. One of them read: 'Don't, if you have said you are voting for Churchill, write his name or expressions such as "Bravo, Churchill!" on your ballot paper.' Evidently, Churchill's supporters were so sure of his popular appeal that they even worried it might lead voters to accidentally spoil their ballots.

Cheer Churchill, vote Labour

But popularity did not necessarily translate into electoral support. Many voters admired Churchill but had some doubts about his suitability for peacetime leadership. And this distinction between wartime leadership and peacetime leadership was crucial. The election took place just weeks after VE Day. While memories of the war were fresh, voters were already thinking ahead – about housing, jobs, prices and security. Churchill spoke most comfortably about Britain's role in the world. Labour spoke about how ordinary people would live once peace arrived.

The war with Japan still raged as the election was taking place. Churchill, Attlee and a small group of advisers knew about the American atomic project and the possibility that such a weapon would be used against Japan, but the British public generally assumed that the war in Asia would go on for several more years. For many, this was yet another reason to vote for Attlee. Churchill, they thought, would press on with war indefinitely. Attlee would be more concerned with ending the war quickly.

Labour picked up on this dynamic – Churchill as the man of war, and Attlee as the man for peace – and exploited it effectively. They noticed that Churchill was a huge draw for crowds during the campaign. In Manchester, he addressed more than 50,000 people on a blitzed site near Piccadilly, standing amid the ruins left by German bombing.

But Labour also noticed that the crowds that turned out for Churchill did not necessarily support Conservative policies. Alison Readman watched Churchill campaign in Glasgow. She described how the crowd erupted when he first appeared. But when Churchill reluctantly turned to politics, 'it seemed that reluctance was reflected in the crowd'. Only as he finished did the cheering resume, 'unmixed with any harsher hostile cry'.

Labour campaigners quickly learned how to exploit this dynamic. George Strauss, Labour MP for Lambeth North, recalled that Churchill held a well-advertised open-air meeting near his constituency. Churchill was warmly received. But Labour posters nearby gave clear instructions: 'Cheer Churchill – Vote Labour.' Many voters followed exactly that advice.

The 'Gestapo' speech

Labour's ability to push past the popularity of Churchill was best illustrated in their response to his now infamous 'Gestapo' speech. In his first radio broadcast of the election campaign on 4 June, Churchill told listeners that any socialist government, unable to tolerate dissent, 'would have to fall back on some form of Gestapo, no doubt very humanely directed in the first instance'.

In this moment, Churchill had linked Attlee and Labour, his partners in the wartime coalition, with the methods of their enemy, the Nazis. Clementine had tried to advise him against it. 'You cannot use this expression,' she told him, 'I think it will offend people'. But Churchill, who had cut his teeth in the rough-and-ready elections of the Edwardian era, went ahead with the 'Gestapo' speech.

Many Conservative MPs were delighted by it. Henry Channon MP recorded that in the House of Commons the next day, 'the Labour boys seem very depressed and dejected by Winston's trouncing. I met Attlee in the lavatory, and he seemed shrunken and terrified, and scarcely smiled'. But Attlee had a plan.

He responded that evening with his own radio broadcast. Sarcastically, he thanked Churchill for the speech he had given, saying that the prime minister had reminded the electorate that he was actually two men, combined: 'Winston Churchill, the great leader in war of a united nation, and Mr. Churchill, the party leader of the Conservatives'. Attlee's point was that Churchill, now in election mode, had reverted to his latter persona: the bad-tempered, ill-mannered, virulently anti-Socialist politician. Attlee attacked the privilege of Churchill's Conservative Party. They were, he said, a 'class party', not peopled by the 'ranks of the wage-earners' but by the representatives of 'property and privilege'.

Remember the past, face the future

If Churchill's personal popularity could not save the Conservatives, it was largely because of their record before the war. Although Churchill himself had been marginalised during much of the 1930s, he still led a party associated with mass unemployment, poverty and appeasement.

The public's memories also reached back further than the 1930s, to the end of the First World War. Then, voters remembered that the Liberals and the Conservatives had promised them 'Homes fit for heroes'. What they got instead was recession and unemployment. Many voters feared that a Conservative victory would mean a return to those conditions.

Labour exploited these fears skilfully. Labour's manifesto, 'Let us face the future', offered a clear, practical programme. It promised nationalisation, welfare reform and full employment, and to 'put the community first and the sectional interests of private business after'.

The runaway success of the 1942 Beveridge Report also helped Labour. The report called for a comprehensive welfare system 'from cradle to grave'. It sold hundreds of thousands of copies and catapulted Beveridge to celebrity status. He was so popular that there was even an exhibit of Beveridge in a waxwork show on London's Oxford Street. Labour embraced the report enthusiastically. The Conservatives hesitated. Churchill praised the report's ambition but avoided committing to its full implementation. This hesitation mattered; it allowed Labour to position itself as the party of social reconstruction.

So, Labour's victory was not simply a product of Conservative weaknesses. They made themselves appear to be the more credible prospect. Labour leaders had governed as part of the coalition that existed since 1940 and were seen as competent administrators. Ernest Bevin had run the Ministry of Labour and Herbert Morrison served as Home Secretary. Attlee himself was underestimated by Churchill and the other Conservatives. Brendan Bracken MP had famously, and cruelly, dismissed him as 'a sheep in sheep's clothing'. But Attlee's modest demeanour reassured voters.

The contrast between Churchill and Attlee was perhaps best captured by their transportation. When Churchill resigned as prime minister after the election, he was driven away from the palace in his chauffeur-driven Humber. Attlee then arrived, driven by his wife Violet, 'Vi', in their more humble Minx family saloon. She waited in the car while Attlee met with the King. Characteristically, Attlee would later describe it as 'quite an exciting day'.

Alex Hill is a research fellow in politics at the University of Sussex. His research looks at the political culture of modern and contemporary Britain.