

# Winston Churchill and the Wartime Coalition 1940-45

THE UNPREDICTABLE PAST

In examining British politics from 1940 to 1945, Kevin Jefferys explains why the man who was widely perceived as winning the war lost the 1945 election.

In the summer of 1945 Winston Churchill confidently looked forward to election victory. As Britain's revered war leader – the man who had come to the nation's rescue in the dark days of 1940 – Churchill hoped to reap the benefit of presiding, five years on, over the final defeat of Nazi Germany. In asking voters to return him at the head of a new Conservative administration, the Prime Minister claimed that he alone was suited to dealing with the legacy of six years of 'total war'. Among colleagues and political commentators, it was widely anticipated that Churchill would sweep back to power, just as Lloyd George had triumphed in 1918 as 'the man who won the [First World] War'. Few believed that Britain's premier could be defeated by the low-profile Labour leader, Clement Attlee, who was the butt of many cruel jibes. 'An empty taxi drew up', it was once joked, 'and Attlee got out'. The best Labour could hope for, it seemed, was to limit the scale of an inevitable Conservative victory.

But the pundits were wrong. As the election results came through, it became apparent that the Labour party had won a landslide victory. At the last pre-war election, held in 1935, Labour trailed the Tory-dominated National government by more than 200 parliamentary seats. In July 1945, however, Labour secured

ABOVE: Winston Churchill with a 'Tommy' gun, July 1941. Many approved of his war leadership, but far fewer thought he would be a good peace-time prime minister.

nearly half the popular vote, winning 393 seats, compared with 210 for the Conservatives. The swing to the left was high in towns and cities across the country; scores of unlikely constituencies returned Labour members to the House of Commons for the first time ever. Hence it was not Churchill but Attlee – looking 'very surprised indeed', according to the King – who went to Buckingham Palace to accept the royal invitation to form a new government. The enigmatic Labour leader was not the only one who was taken aback. 'But this is terrible', a lady diner at the Savoy Hotel was overheard saying: 'they've elected a Labour government, and the country will never stand for that!'

The explanation for this remarkable outcome lies in the history of the Churchill coalition, which governed Britain from 1940 to 1945 and which remains the only example in modern politics of the major parties working together over a sustained period. At the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, Labour turned down the offer of joining forces for the duration with the National government, led since 1937 by Neville Chamberlain. The outbreak of hostilities against Germany was a severe blow to Chamberlain, who had staked his reputation on preserving European peace. When the so-called 'phoney war' came to an end in the spring of 1940, British military failure in Scandinavia provoked an upsurge of criticism, even amongst some hitherto loyal Conservative MPs. After much pressure – it was like 'trying to get a limpet off a corpse', one critic said – Chamberlain resigned and was replaced by Churchill. The new Prime Minister formed a broadly based coalition, giving the opposition Labour and Liberal parties a share in power and offering the likes of Attlee a place in the War Cabinet.

Churchill was to achieve lasting fame as an inspirational leader, renowned for his defiant speeches and his 'bulldog' spirit. And in the fullness of time the coalition proved successful in achieving its overriding objective; it harnessed the desire of nearly all sections of opinion in Britain to see the defeat of Hitler. But it

would be wrong to assume from the high degree of unity on external policy that a new era of co-operation opened up in Britain's internal politics. The coalition was essentially a marriage of convenience, a union that produced little in the way of domestic bliss. We need to bear this in mind when addressing the two main questions that have concerned historians of wartime politics. In the first place, to what extent did the coalition lay the foundations of a new 'post-war settlement' – the common commitment to full employment, a mixed economy and the welfare state that characterised Britain for a generation after the war? Secondly, what caused the landslide that enabled Attlee to form Labour's first-ever majority government in 1945? Why, in spite of his undoubted popularity, was Churchill rebuffed at the polls? In order to answer these questions, it is first necessary to outline the major developments in the lifetime of the coalition, which we can see with the benefit of hindsight passed through several distinct phases.

### Churchill and Britain's 'finest hour', 1940-41

Churchill came to power at a time of desperate crisis. On the same day that he entered 10 Downing Street, Hitler's forces invaded the Low Countries in an offensive that soon had the French and British in full retreat. In the weeks that followed, as British troops scrambled to return home in the evacuation from Dunkirk, Churchill's rhetoric was critical in rallying the nation. After the defeat of the French army in June 1940, Britain was left to stand alone against the might of Nazi Germany. Invasion looked to be imminent, and the prospect of 'fighting them on the beaches' continued to threaten until the Royal Air Force succeeded in denying the Germans aerial supremacy in the Battle of Britain. In the autumn the civilian population faced untold new horrors in the Blitz, but the likelihood of invasion had receded – for good, as it turned out – and the government could begin considering ways of striking back.

In this phase of the war coalition ministers, along with the nation at large, had

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only one real priority – survival. But domestic politics were not altogether devoid of important developments. In the early days of his premiership Churchill was not the universally-acclaimed leader of popular mythology. The majority of Conservative MPs – having faithfully backed Chamberlain since 1937 – were reluctant to come to terms with the new Prime Minister, whom many regarded on his past record as a dangerous adventurer. Tory back-benchers were equally unhappy about the suddenly enhanced status of the Labour party. It was only late in 1940, after the death of Chamberlain, that Churchill consolidated his authority by taking on the leadership of the Conservative party. At the end of a momentous year, an American journalist asked several British politicians who would take over if anything happened to Churchill. 'Nobody', he recorded, 'had any idea'. This phase of heightened national unity, with Britain struggling to survive, culminated with the ending of the Blitz in the spring of 1941. A year on from the momentous Norway debate, Churchill received an overwhelming vote of confidence from the House of Commons, with only three MPs opposing the continuance of the coalition.

### Churchill under pressure, 1941-42

During the second half of 1941, however, some of the shine came off Churchill's leadership. The main reason for this was that British forces in the various theatres of war experienced a prolonged sequence of setbacks and retreats. The British

## MAJOR POLITICAL EVENTS IN BRITAIN

<b>1939</b>	
3 Sept	Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain reconstructs National government; Churchill becomes First Lord of the Admiralty
<b>1940</b>	
7-8 May	Norway debate – government majority falls sharply
10 May	Chamberlain resigns and Churchill forms coalition
October	Chamberlain resigns as Tory leader; replaced by Churchill
<b>1941</b>	
8 May	Vote of confidence: only 3 MPs vote against coalition
<b>1942</b>	
19 Feb	Government reshuffle; Stafford Cripps enters War Cabinet
25 March	Grantham by-election: first of five Tory losses to Independents
1-2 July	Tobruk debate: vote of censure defeated 475-25
1 Dec	Publication of the Beveridge Report
<b>1943</b>	
Feb	Defeat of Labour amendment calling for 'Beveridge now'
March	Churchill announces four-year plan for reconstruction
<b>1944</b>	
17 Feb	Conservatives lose West Derbyshire by-election to 'Independent Socialist'
June	Publication of white paper, Employment Policy
August	Education Act receives Royal assent
<b>1945</b>	
21 May	Labour conference agrees to leave coalition
23 May	Formal ending of coalition; Churchill forms 'caretaker' administration
5 July	Polling day for general election
26 July	Announcement of election results; Attlee becomes Prime Minister

Expeditionary Force (BEF) acquired a new nickname: 'Back Every Friday'. Grumbling about the government, though muted at first, gradually built up, especially after it became impossible to take refuge in the excuse that Britain was fighting the Germans single-handed. The entry into the war on the Allied side first of the Russians and later the Americans raised expectations that Hitler would be beaten. But instead of early breakthroughs, British forces continued to suffer humiliation, notably when the Japanese captured Singapore early in 1942 – one of the greatest disasters in British military history, Churchill conceded. These reverses provided renewed scope for intrigue against the Prime Minister by 'Chamberlainite' Tory MPs still present on the back-benches. Under pressure, Churchill decided to freshen his team by undertaking a major reshuffle, finding a place around the Cabinet table for Stafford Cripps, a figure identified in the public mind with the need for sterner endeavours to win the war. Cripps, it has been noted, 'was a teetotaller and a vegetarian, and somehow it showed'.

Sniping in the House of Commons was the inevitable consequence of Britain's lack of success on the battlefield, and by the summer of 1942 Churchill believed that further defeats might threaten his position as Prime Minister. He was therefore alarmed when news came through that the Germans had captured the North African fortress of Tobruk in June. The level of anxiety among MPs was not reflected in the number of those who voted against the government in the debate that followed, and with Cripps threatening to resign the Prime Minister knew he had secured only a breathing space. When later asked to reflect on his most anxious period of the war, Churchill pointed not to 1940 but to the autumn of 1942, when he nervously awaited news of the latest Anglo-American initiative in North Africa. 'Haven't we got a single general who can even win one battle?' he asked. The answer came when General Montgomery secured victory at El Alamein, which was swiftly followed by further Allied success in North Africa and signs that the

## MAJOR MILITARY EVENTS

<b>1939</b>	
1 Sept	German invasion of Poland
3 Sept	Britain declares war on Germany
22 Sept	Germany and Russia announce partition of Poland
<b>1940</b>	
9 April	Hitler invades Norway and Denmark
2 May	British troops in Norway forced to withdraw
10 May	Germany invades Belgium and Holland
29 May	Evacuation begins of British troops at Dunkirk
22 June	Surrender of France
July-Sept	Battle of Britain
<b>1941</b>	
April	Withdrawal of Allied forces from Greece and Yugoslavia
June	Germans capture Crete
22 June	Nazi attack on Soviet Union
Dec	Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour brings USA into the war
<b>1942</b>	
Feb	British loss of Singapore to Japanese
21 June	British defeated by Germans at Tobruk in North Africa
Nov	General Montgomery defeats Rommel at El Alamein
<b>1943</b>	
July	Downfall of Mussolini as Allies advance in Italy
<b>1944</b>	
6 June	D-Day; massive Allied invasion in Normandy
Sept	Heavy losses at Arnhem delay Allied advance
<b>1945</b>	
Feb	Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin discuss peace plans at Yalta
May	Surrender of German High Command after suicide of Hitler



'All Behind You, Winston'. David Low's famous cartoon, published on 14 May 1940, disguises the differences of political principle that existed within the coalition government.

Russians were at last halting Hitler's advance on the eastern front. The effect of this 'turn of the tide' on British politics was dramatic. The Prime Minister was able to face the Commons secure in the knowledge, as he put it, that there was finally 'some sugar on the cake'. Cripps was demoted and Churchill's leadership, at last, was secure.

### Reconstruction, 1943-44

Before Allied military fortunes improved at the end of 1942, the Prime Minister paid scant attention to demands from various groups – including pressure groups and sections of the press – for a radical reshaping of British society. He was pre-occupied with military strategy and believed that discussion of sensitive domestic issues might endanger the unity of the coalition. But once victory became a real prospect, whatever the timescale, Churchill could no longer ignore

demands to give attention to 'reconstruction', the term which summarised the hope that this time – unlike after 1918 – Britain would become a 'land fit for heroes'. A new phase in the history of the coalition thus opened up as national attention turned to consideration of the domestic future. That this happened so rapidly after El Alamein was due in large part to a single event – the publication in December 1942 of the Beveridge Report.

Sir William Beveridge's blueprint for a brighter future was immensely popular with the public, coming at just the moment when it was possible to see some light at the end of the wartime tunnel. But Churchill's fears about coalition discord were borne out when the Commons debated the Report in February 1943. Tory MPs were suspicious of calls for an extensive new system of social security and other related reforms such as a national health service. There

was a strong feeling among Conservatives, in the words of one, that Beveridge 'was a sinister old man who wanted to give away a great deal of other people's money'. Labour back-benchers, by contrast, wanted to see immediate action, and voted *en masse* against the cautious position of the Cabinet, thereby dangerously dividing a government set up to demonstrate national unity. Enthusiasm for Beveridge did persuade the Prime Minister to announce a 'four-year plan' and to appoint a Minister of Reconstruction, charged with the task of co-ordinating wide-ranging proposals for change. But tangible results were slow in coming. By mid-1944 few reforms had reached the statute book, and after the D-Day landings in June 1944 – which raised expectations of an early end to the war – the problem of securing agreement between the two wings of the coalition became ever more acute.

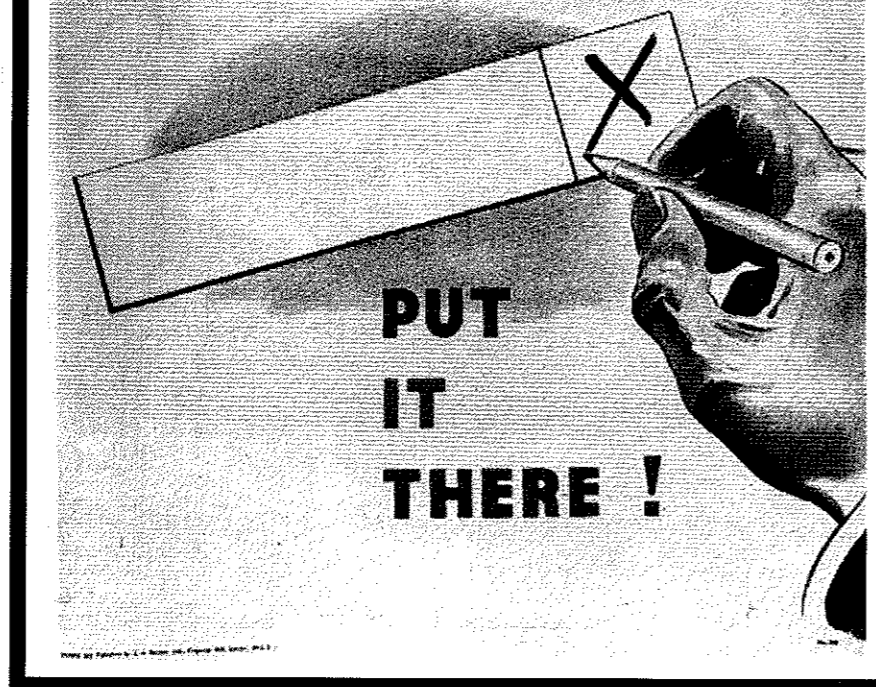


**The break-up of the coalition, 1944-45**

The final defeat of Hitler was to take longer than anticipated, but it did not prevent mounting speculation about the ending of the coalition. The belief that a return to conventional party politics was inevitable first manifested itself away from Westminster in the localities. Coalition leaders were bound by the terms of an electoral truce, which outlawed by-election contests between the main parties. But this did not prevent independent candidates standing, with increasing success particularly in Conservative-held constituencies. Many Labour activists, sensing a leftward shift in public opinion which they could not exploit, looked for ways of circumventing the truce. The most notorious example came when an 'Independent Socialist' – a stalwart of the local Labour party – triumphed over his Conservative rival at the West Derbyshire by-election early in 1944.

Pressure from rank-and-file workers eventually ensured that Labour made a formal commitment to leave the coalition. When news came of Germany's surrender in May 1945, senior Tories looked for an early contest, hoping to capitalise on Churchill's prestige. Some Labour leaders preferred to wait on tactical grounds, believing that a delay would lessen the impact of the 'Churchill factor', but by mid-May the die was cast. The coalition was wound up and a 'caretaker' administration formed pending the election, to be held in early July. As the campaign got under way, the Prime Minister dismayed many voters with an opening broadside which claimed that the introduction of socialism in Britain required 'some form of Gestapo' – a great slight on colleagues with whom he had worked since 1940 and a remarkably tactless comment when the full atrocities of the German concentration camps were becoming public knowledge. Attlee's dignified response and handling of the Labour campaign did much to enhance his public standing, but he and other party leaders still found it difficult to take in the scale of their victory when it was announced in late July.

# CONFIRM YOUR CONFIDENCE IN CHURCHILL



A Conservative poster from 1945. The Tories tried to turn the campaign into a personal plebiscite for Winston Churchill, whereas Labour stressed policies, including full employment, better houses and a welfare state.

**A new 'consensus'?**

The first major historiographical debate about Churchill's coalition was initiated by Paul Addison, who argued in a pioneering study that the war placed on the political agenda the key items of the post-war welfare state. In contrast to the sterile negativity of the inter-war years, the drive for reconstruction heralded a new cross-party commitment to welfare reform. This new 'consensus' was to fall, Addison claimed, 'like a branch of ripe plums, into the lap of Mr Attlee'. Such an outcome was deplored in a controversial work by Correlli Barnett, who claimed that Britain failed to give priority to industrial regeneration because too much time was spent thinking about how to create a 'New Jerusalem', as evangelised by wartime 'do-gooders' such as Beveridge. But other writers, including Stephen Brooke and the present author,

take a different view, suggesting that there was little firm evidence of the parties moving closer together on economic and social policy.

Several factors have been cited in support of the latter argument. As we have seen, Churchill deliberately limited discussion of domestic issues in order to preserve unity on external policy. The proposals which came forward – mostly in the form of white papers – were not intended as binding commitments on any post-war administration, and were carefully chosen to minimise controversy. Educational reform was a subject which caused dissension within as much as between the parties, and was a relatively inexpensive option. The Treasury view was that it would be better to find money for education than to 'throw it down the sink with Sir William Beveridge'. In addition, reconstruction promised far more

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than it delivered, with educational reform and family allowances the only major reforms enacted by 1945. The main reason for this was that ideological differences between the coalition partners remained deep-rooted. Whereas Labour sought extensive reform, mainstream Conservative opinion shared Churchill's lukewarm attitude towards social change. Anticipating electoral victory at the end of the war, Tory MPs saw no need for far-reaching reform. It follows from this line of analysis that the creation of a 'post-war settlement' did not emerge from the simple working through of agreed wartime proposals; more important was the distinctive agenda of Attlee's Labour government after 1945. The war, in short, helped to make possible the creation of a 'New Jerusalem'; it did not make it certain.

**Why was Churchill defeated in 1945?**

As far as the second debate among historians is concerned, it has long been recognised that the Conservatives suffered from the implications of what was called a 'people's war'. In the First World War the prevailing ethos had been that of serving one's King and Country, but after 1939 it was widely believed that Hitler was being opposed in the interests of the ordinary citizen. In an atmosphere of

upheaval caused by German bombing, mass movements of population and industrial conscription, social distinctions began to break down and the demand for equality of sacrifice became intense. Although it is easy to exaggerate the degree of social levelling which resulted, the trend towards egalitarianism was a powerful one. In Paul Addison's vivid phrase, it was a time when Colonel Blimp – the reactionary cartoon character who represented the 'old gang' – found himself 'pursued through a land of Penguin Specials by an abrasive meritocrat, a progressive churchman, and J. B. Priestley'.

But the concept of a 'people's war' does not tell the whole story. As the majority party throughout the 1930s, the Conservatives suffered at by-elections in the early war years when voters were anxious about shortcomings in Britain's military effort. But the Tory malaise arguably deepened to the point where it became irreversible only after 1943, when the opportunity of shaping public expectations about reconstruction was missed. Above all, the coolness of Conservative leaders towards Beveridge proved to be profoundly damaging. Expectations raised by the Report turned, after the inconclusive parliamentary debate of February 1943, to anger at the prospect of reform being shelved. Public feeling, monitored by the government, varied from despondency to hostility: 'Why', it was asked, 'get Beveridge to make a plan, if you are going to turn it down?' As the government continued to give the impression of dragging its feet during 1943-44, signs of Tory unpopularity multiplied, both at by-elections and in opinion polls, though commentators continued to believe this would not prevent Churchill triumphing at a general election.

As one lone writer perceptively pointed out in 1944, voters were capable of making a clear distinction between 'Winston the War Leader, Bulldog of Battle', and the Prime Minister who showed himself 'no man of peace, of domestic policy or human detail'. It was possible to view Churchill, in other words, both as a highly regarded war

**Books on The Churchill Coalition**

P. Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (1994 edn)

C. Barnett, *The Audit of War: The Illusion and Reality of Britain as a Great Power* (1986)

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

K. Jefferys, *The Churchill Coalition and Wartime Politics, 1940-45* (1995 edn)

K. Jefferys, *War and Reform: British Politics during the Second World War* (1994)

leader and as an unsuitable candidate for presiding over a return to peace – a striking reversal of how Attlee was perceived by the end of the war. We thus find that a close link, often overlooked, exists between the two issues that have concerned historians of wartime politics. Conservative defeat in 1945 had much to do with the party's inability to ride with the tide of reconstruction, something for which the Prime Minister bore a large share of responsibility. If Churchill had used the period after 1942 to forge a popular domestic policy, and had adopted a less truculent tone in the election campaign, then suspicions about Tory intentions for the post-war world might have been at least partially overcome. This is not to suggest that, with different presentation, the Conservatives could have won in 1945; but the election might well have been a much closer run thing. As it was, the Prime Minister's handling of events helps to explain one of the major ironies of Britain's wartime experience: Winston Churchill, the great national hero who 'won the war', was the same party leader who 'lost the peace'.

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