

LABOUR'S FIRST YEAR

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PENGUIN BOOKS (1947)

This can hardly be a conventional book review that might influence new sales. The book was published in 1947 and written by an author who had close experience of the events of the time in the House of Commons and takes no particular party-supporting position. My somewhat battered copy of this short (213 pages including notes and index) book has scrawled on the front in pencil its second hand price of 3d.

Reading it, what came across was the contrast between the seriousness of politicians in that immediate post war period and those of today. Those politicians were well aware of the extent and complicated nature of the tasks they faced. Yes, the language of Churchill opposing, for example, Nationalisation, was in both technicolour and stereo, but he presented arguments that required considered responses. Attlee, in black and white and mono, was more than capable of quietly and effectively winning those arguments.

The gloomy vulture of nationalisation hovering over our basic industries-Winston Churchill.

Is it his view that our basic industries are so rotten that they attract the vultures?-Clement Attlee.

The chapters in the book cover what I would argue were the significant events and issues of the time. They include the establishment of the Welfare State and the NHS that we might trace back to Gladstonian liberalism; the American Loan that, for me, demonstrated the post war selfish behaviour of a country realising that it had new exploitative powers; and how the money was to be found for the country not only to survive but also to make massive changes that would establish a post war consensus that survived until Thatcher.

We also learn of the impact of Zionist terrorism in Palestine by organisations such as the Stern Gang. Certainly the government of the day not only had to bring about long-lasting domestic changes but also to deal with huge post imperial pressure and need for change. Little of this was straightforward and mistakes were made.

The author gives us a comprehensive set of chapters based upon Parliamentary discussion of domestic and foreign affairs. The repeal of the 1927 Trade Disputes Act meant so much to the government and, in particular, to Ernie Bevin who had been General Secretary of the TUC. That Act had been passed the year after the General Strike and had suppressed Trade Unions. Suddenly it seems that we are

hearing a young again Trade Union activist as Bevin speaks on a subject he holds dear. I admit that the significance of the repeal of that Act had passed me by. Now it adds perspective for me to think about later governmental suppression of trade unions.

Ernie Bevin is also listened to respectfully as he describes to the house the issues and problems of establishing the United Nations and in particular how difficult it was to negotiate issues with Vishinsky, leader of the Soviet delegation.

“Those who make up the Soviet Union are members of the proletariat , and so am I. We are used to hard hitting, but our friendship remains”. -Ernie Bevin.

I cannot help thinking of the contrast between Bevin as Foreign Secretary and his Tory counterpart, Anthony Eden.

Aneurin Bevan is more rumbustious, but clever, opposed by Churchill’s Tory Party very unwilling to support the establishment of the NHS. Today we might think that the NHS provided us with a service free at the point of use. But Bevan also rationalised a system in which provision was very variable. We had, for example, a mixture of local authority and private hospitals, big and small. He created a single service.

Until the NHS so many hospitals had depended upon tax exempt contributions from wealthy donors.

I believe it is repugnant to a civilised community for hospitals to have to rely on private charity. It is well established that one of the chief qualifications of some of the ornaments of the medical profession is their ability to attract money to the hospitals from rich individuals. -Aneurin Bevan.

And we hear from and about Manny Shinwell, Herbert Morrison, Hugh Dalton, Ellen Wilkinson and so many others. All of them, I would say, arguing lucidly for and sometimes against the proposals of government.

My admiration for Attlee is confirmed. In 1945 we told ourselves that we had won the war. I remember first the VE signs being painted on so many walls. Later came the VJ signs. So, we won. Won what? A bankrupt country with so much to fix. The government could have done only that, a bit of fixing. In that first year of government there were seventy eight Bills, many of which absorbed considerable energy and required a lot of homework. What it did was to declare war once again. This time we might say it was upon the Five Giant Evils of Beveridge. They were:

WANT, DISEASE, IGNORANCE, SQUALOR, IDLENESS.

The book provides a sense of the influence of Beveridge’s Report of 1942. Incidentally, do we remember that a fellow Liberal Party member, Harold Wilson, was his research assistant? Or that so much is owed to the work of Wilson when the mines were nationalised?

Young Labour Party MPs such as Wilson seldom feature in the book. There are plenty of big names from the War and earlier that command the stage.

Gladstone believed that if a social wrong was identified it was the state that had the power and the duty to right that wrong. The values of Corbyn's 2019 Party Manifesto are similar to those of the 1929 Liberal Party's. In between comes the Labour Party of 1945. They would, I suggest, be happy in each other's company. If, today, Corbyn is labelled Far Left what on earth would New Management Labour call Attlee?

Yes, Attlee's administrations did declare war upon those Giant Evils but they also introduced a set of social values that were widely accepted. Accepted for a long time.

I find that the book is available second-hand. If you read it I am sure that you will realise that I have only sketched what you will find inside.

Cliff Jones

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