

THE POST-WAR LABOUR GOVERNMENT

The following text is taken from Clement Attlee's memoirs. Attlee reflects on the Labour government he led as Prime Minister between 1945 and 1951.

5 The Labour Party came to power with a well-defined policy worked out over many years. It had been set out very clearly in our Election Manifesto and we were determined to carry it out. Its ultimate objective was the creation of a society based on social justice, and, in our view, this could only be attained by bringing under public ownership and control the main
10 factors in the economic system. Nationalisation was not an end in itself but an essential element in achieving the ends which we sought. Controls were desirable not for their own sake but because they were necessary in order to gain freedom from the economic power of the owners of capital. A juster distribution of wealth was not a policy designed to soak the rich or to take revenge, but because a society with gross inequalities of wealth and
15 opportunity is fundamentally unhealthy.

It had always been our practice, in accord with the natural genius of the British people, to work empirically. We were not afraid of compromise and partial solutions. We knew that mistakes would be made and that advance would be often by trial and error. We realised that the application of socialist principles in a country such as Britain with a peculiar economic
20 structure based on international trade required great flexibility.

We were also well aware of the especially difficult situation of the country resulting from the great life and death struggle from which we had emerged victorious. But, in our view, this did not make change in the socialist direction less necessary. On the contrary, it was clear that there could be no return to past conditions. The old pattern was worn out and it was for us to
25 weave the new. Thus, the kind of reproach levelled at us by Churchill, that instead of uniting the country by a programme of social reform on the lines of the Beveridge Report, we were following a course dictated by social prejudice or theory, left us completely unmoved. We had not been elected to try to patch up an old system but to make something new. Our policy was not a reformed capitalism but progress toward a democratic socialism.

Clement Attlee, *As It Happened*, London, Heinemann, 1954.