

CHAPTER 13

WINSTON CHURCHILL

JOHN CHARMLEY

Churchill's electoral record shows two defeats – one by a landslide in 1945 and the other by a narrow margin in 1950 – and a single slender victory in 1951, in seats but not in the popular vote. As John Charmley notes, Churchill was unique in being given a third attempt after twice failing electorally. If not counter-intuitively, then certainly against the enduring common perception, Charmley argues that his leadership of the Conservative Party was more negative than this mixed record suggests. His electoral strategy was bereft of fresh ideas in 1945, and any reforms in organisation of the party's platform emanated from below, rather than from his leadership. Charmley contends that Churchill's management of the party was, at best, 'light touch', and, at worst, non-existent. In domestic policy debate, the Conservative Party did little to shift debate onto their terms; though, in foreign policy terms, his influence continued to be felt throughout the post-war period. Churchill's record as a party leader is, on balance, one of failure.

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Churchill would, of course, be delighted to have known that the 'statecraft framework', designed by Toby James and Jim Buller, fits him hardly at all; he would have expected no less. When Asquith's daughter once opined, 'We are all worms', Churchill's response was, 'But I do believe that I am a glow worm.'⁴⁷⁸ Churchill's lustre, as the fiftieth anniversary of his

⁴⁷⁸ Violet Bonham Carter, *Winston Churchill, As I Knew Him*, London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1965, p. 16.

death in 2015 showed, has not been dimmed by the passage of time; he is the opposite of a 'here today, gone tomorrow' politician. However, if 'statecraft' is to be measured by success in winning elections and holding on to power, then Churchill was pretty much a failure. He won only one general election – and on a minority of the popular vote at that, with a narrow parliamentary majority. In terms of providing a 'winning electoral strategy', his contributions were, at best, mixed. In terms of 'governing competence', there is more to be said on the positive side, but, when we include 'party management', the best that can be said is that Churchill did not get in the way of those better equipped than himself to undertake that thankless task. As for 'augmenting political hegemony', one might ask precisely whose hegemony he augmented, in what Paul Addison has called 'Attlee's consensus'. Only when it comes to 'bending the rules of the game' could Churchill be awarded a straight alpha plus, but, since he did not think the rules applied to him, that is hardly surprising. For all of this, however, Churchill remains the pre-eminent Conservative politician of the last century, and is one of the few to whom historians return again and again. He is one of only two about whom film-makers have bothered, and his historical immortality is assured. Nonetheless, as a party politician, and as a political leader, his record is distinctly mixed – but that should cause no surprise.

If we are talking context with Churchill, it is wise to bear in mind that the context that mattered most to him was the one inside his head. Most successful political leaders have something of the sociopath about them, which is more neutral than saying they are ruthless pragmatists who would sacrifice their own grandmother in order to attain and keep power. It was rightly said of Churchill that the only political party to which he was loyal was the one gathered under his hatband. Political parties like to use people, but tend to object when people use them. Churchill was one of the very few political figures of the first rank to return the favour, having not only 'ratted' from the Conservatives to the Liberals in 1905, but 're-ratted' to the Conservatives in 1924. Between 1903 and 1905, and again twenty years later, he tried to find a middle 'Liberal/Conservative/constitutionalist' position, and there is no doubt that, however fruitless that was in terms of finding a political berth, it

more accurately described his instincts. In 1923, he very much looked forward to a 'hung' election and to leading a group of right-wing Liberals into coalition with the moderate Baldwin. Only when the Red Scare of that year brought the Tories back with a majority did he formally agree to re-join the party he had left in 1903. This is worth mentioning because it reflects his attitude towards the Conservative Party, which was, at best, ambivalent – something that spilled over into his party management.⁴⁷⁹

After Baldwin's defeat in 1929, Churchill had tried to seize the party leadership, allying himself with the imperialist right – a tactic that earned him exile from the National Government formed in 1931.⁴⁸⁰ His attacks on its India Bill, again from the far right, sent him further into the political wilderness, from which he emerged only thanks to the efforts of Herr Hitler in September 1939. Neville Chamberlain needed a public demonstration of his determination to prosecute a war he had neither wanted nor knew how to manage, and the news that 'Winston is back' at the admiralty did the trick. But it was, again, Hitler who finally brought Churchill to the position he had long desired. The failure of the Norwegian campaign Churchill had planned led to a vote of confidence in Chamberlain's government, which coincided with the Nazi assault on the Western Front. When Chamberlain lost it, Churchill became, in the absence of any alternative, Prime Minister. Again, the circumstances of his accession to the premiership matter in terms of the 'statesmanship framework', because he became Prime Minister before he became leader of the Tory Party. It is worth noting that, on his first appearance in the House as premier, the Tory benches were silent, exploding into approval only when Neville Chamberlain, their leader, came into the chamber. That silence spoke volumes.⁴⁸¹ Had anyone predicted at that point that Churchill would have been Conservative leader fifteen years later, they would have been dismissed out of hand. He was sixty-five, drank and smoked too much, took no

479 Robert Rhodes James, *Churchill: A Study in Failure*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970, pp. 148–52.

480 Stuart Ball, *op. cit.*, 1988.

481 John Charmley, *Churchill: The End of Glory*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1993, pp. 396–400.

exercise, and would have found life insurance expensive – all of which goes to show how unpredictable politics is.

The parallel in Churchill's mind in 1940 was with the position of Lloyd George in 1916, when Asquith had remained leader of the Liberal Party – that had not ended well for the Great War leader. With that in mind, when, only a few months later, in October, Chamberlain stood down because of cancer, Churchill immediately accepted the leadership of the Conservative Party. In the circumstances of October 1940, it was inevitable; but neither he nor his party imagined it would be a long-term arrangement. In many senses, this feeling is key to Churchill's period as leader: it meant neither he nor the party planned for what would happen after the end of the war; and, later, it would mean that those discontented with the old man were wary of trying to oust him, not just because of his great fame after 1945, but because it hardly seemed worth the effort when he was over seventy and prone to strokes. Yet his willpower proved formidable.

During the war itself, Churchill was, of course, the leader of a national coalition – something that suited his temperament admirably. He liked being the 'father of the nation', and he loved directing the war. He was very happy to let the self-effacing Attlee chair most of the Cabinet committees dealing with the Home Front, and to let Bevin and Morrison get on with whatever it was they needed to do in terms of mobilising labour and local government. Churchill knew these things mattered, but had no interest in them when there was a war to win. Churchill was incredulous when Rab Butler elected to go to the board of education, rather than the War Office, in 1943 – it confirmed him in the thought that Butler was rather 'wet'.⁴⁸² This would not have been quite as fatal for the Conservatives as it was to prove in 1945 had his deputy Anthony Eden been a bit more interested in the party; but he was not, detesting large sections of it almost as much as Churchill himself. The result was that the once formidable party election machine suffered neglect; some of that was the natural result of the war, but the lack of interest from Churchill and Eden played its part as well.

⁴⁸² Anthony Howard, *Rab*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1987, pp. 109–10.

In the circumstances of 1945, none of this seemed to matter. Churchill had no intention of calling a party political election, and neither did Attlee. Both men recalled well what had happened in the khaki election of 1918, when the triumphant Lloyd George had gone to the country at the head of a coalition and slaughtered the opposition. But, when it came to it in May 1945, the Labour Party conference refused to continue with the coalition. Churchill was hurt at what he took to be the waspish tone of Attlee's rejection, but it is indicative of his approach that he refused to form a purely Conservative government.⁴⁸³ Instead, as he would in 1951 when he finally won an election, he formed what he called an 'all-party' government. Although the Liberals refused to join, the former National Liberal Party leader Lord Simon did, and stayed on as Lord Chancellor. The former civil servant Sir John Anderson remained at the Exchequer, and Lord Woolton – a non-party figure, who had been a great success as Minister of Food – joined the Cabinet as Lord Privy Seal. Along with a smattering of other independent or 'national' ministers, the caretaker government was a declaration of Churchill's intention to form something less than a purely Conservative administration.

James and Buller remind us that part of the context within which we have to judge leaders is a collective one. Leaders rarely tower above the political scene, to the extent that, before their first election victory, they have anything approaching total dominance. That was not true of Churchill in 1945. Indeed, as one David Low cartoon – which pictured Brendan Bracken, in the uniform of the First Lord of the Admiralty, and Lord Beaverbrook, in his usual 'crusader' outfit, in a boatyard with a figurehead of Churchill – commented: 'We've got an admiral, we've got a figurehead, and, with a bit of luck, they won't notice we don't have a ship.' But, as the result showed, 'they' did.

The Conservatives suffered from a number of disadvantages in 1945 – none of which the presence of Churchill was sufficient to outweigh. Indeed, he was, in some ways, one of them; although the question of whether anyone could have done better only has to be posed to suggest that the context

⁴⁸³ Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, Vol. 8, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1988, pp. 20–21.

of the 1945 election was not one favourable to the Conservatives. Easy – and, in some senses, correct – as it is to note the factors against which no Conservative leader could have prevailed, it is necessary, in the context of measuring Churchill's success as party leader, to point out his own peculiar failings as well.

As early as 1942, Lord Beaverbook had noted that, just as Liberalism had been the main victim of the Great War, Conservatism would be the victim of this one.⁴⁸⁴ The causes were not far to seek: the war was a collective war, one in which the state mobilised all its resources to win. A statist party would present that as the way to build the 'land fit for heroes' that Lloyd George had promised and failed to deliver. It was a collective war in which the communist bogey that had served the Conservatives so well since 1917 was being put to rest (for a while, as it turned out) by the success of Soviet arms, and in which an appeal to the common people had been made – along with promises about welfare for the future – that, again, a socialist party would appear to be better equipped to deliver. On top of the toxic legacy of the Depression (which, whatever revisionist historians now tell us, seemed to have been very real to those who had lived through it) and of appeasement (which, by 1945, not even those Conservative and Labour MPs who had supported it at the time remembered supporting), there was also the fact that Churchill took very little interest in his party or, indeed, in electioneering. There was a powerful tide running against the Conservatives, but their leader did nothing to help them – mainly because he assumed the party would continue to provide him with a platform for power and, given his lack of interest in it, he failed to realise it needed his help.

One very common complaint encountered in the diaries and letters of their contemporaries is that neither Churchill, nor his deputy and putative successor Anthony Eden, were 'real' Conservatives, or 'party' men. Eden disliked electioneering almost as much as he disliked most of his fellow Conservatives. He was, understandably, distracted by the fact that his eldest son

⁴⁸⁴ John Charmley, *A History of Conservative Politics Since 1830*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2008, p. 133.

was missing in action, and pondering whether to become head of the new United Nations. Churchill, who took equally little interest in the mechanics of electioneering, simply expected things to work as they always had, taking no account of the effect of the war on local party organisation, and paying no attention to those like Rab Butler, who were cognisant of the fact.

The closest Churchill came to having a winning electoral strategy was to assume that his reputation as ‘the man who won the war’ would win him the election. The war against Japan was not over, and Churchill was sure the electorate would want him to ‘finish the job’ and negotiate a successful peace settlement.⁴⁸⁵ Never knowingly weary of a war himself, Churchill seems to have been blissfully unaware that, for most of his fellow countrymen, its ending was a blessed relief. The thing they looked forward to was the thing that bored him – the details of post-war reconstruction. Harold Macmillan, in his first ministerial post (Secretary of State for Air), was a lone voice in urging Churchill to ‘go full steam ahead with the programme of social reform prepared by the coalition government’, and to ‘abandon clumsy anti-socialism’. His advice fell on deaf ears.⁴⁸⁶

Even if Churchill had heeded Macmillan’s good advice, his own pre-war record – like that of his party – would have rendered them unconvincing harbingers of the New Jerusalem, not least in the face of a set of more plausible candidates. Labour’s leaders – national figures because of the role they had played in the coalition – had far more political credibility than they would have had in 1940, when they had been out of power for nearly a decade. The old Tory tactic of claiming Labour lacked experience of governing could not be deployed against Attlee, Bevin and Morrison. With the sole exception of Butler, no Conservative minister was associated with the Home Front, and, when it came to – as it did – a competition to decide which party would build the New Jerusalem, there was little doubt.

There were clear signs during the election campaign that playing the

485 Gilbert, *op. cit.*, 1988, p. 9.

486 D. R. Thorpe, *Supremacy*, London, Chatto & Windus, 2010, p. 237.

khaki election card was not a winner. Late in the campaign at Walthamstow, Churchill found himself at the receiving end of abuse from crowds chanting: 'What about jobs? What about houses?'⁴⁸⁷ His one memorable utterance in the general election was when he referred to Labour needing a 'Gestapo' to implement its policies; even Martin Gilbert could find nothing in that to praise.⁴⁸⁸ It was an important blunder, because it played to the Labour narrative that Churchill, although a great war leader, was an old man, out of touch with what the ordinary people needed.

Here Churchill's dominance was something of a curse. It was easy enough for the opposition to paint him as the great war leader who would be a poor peacetime one, and his standing was such that none of the other leading Tories could even come close to him. Eden, the only other figure of any stature, was much more interested in emphasising the need to finish the war against Japan and to keep the peace in Europe than combating Labour on the front that mattered – housing and prosperity.⁴⁸⁹ The fact that the Conservative manifesto placed 'home affairs' in fourth place, after 'the world', 'the empire' and 'defence', spoke of where Churchill's real concerns lay.

When all the results were in on 26 July 1945, the Conservatives had suffered their greatest defeat since 1905, with only 215 seats against Labour's 395. Twelve million had voted for Labour; only ten million for the great war leader. Even in Churchill's own seat of Woodford, an independent had polled more than 10,000 votes. Churchill had spectacularly failed to repeat the success of his old friend Lloyd George.

The defeat landed the Conservative Party with a problem it proved unable to solve, which preoccupied its leading figures for the next decade. The ideal thing would have been for Churchill to have retired and to have been replaced by Eden, who was younger, more liberal and more photogenic, but the old man showed no sign of wanting to go. Had he actually shown signs of

⁴⁸⁷ A. Horne, *Macmillan*, Vol. I, London, Macmillan, 1988, p. 286.

⁴⁸⁸ Gilbert, *op. cit.*, 1988, p. 39

⁴⁸⁹ Anthony Eden, *Freedom and Order, selected speeches 1939–1946*, London, Faber & Faber, 1947, p. 347.

wanting to lead the party, there might have been something to have been said for his staying, but the difficulty was that he showed no such sign, preferring to spend his time writing his lucrative war memoirs and wintering in warmer climates. As his one significant ('Iron Curtain') speech in 1946 at Fulton, Missouri, showed, he had also found a new cause – the struggle against the Soviet Union. This, allied to his determination to reverse the humiliation of 1945, ensured that Churchill remained in position. His fame, and his age, created a situation whereby Eden – Churchill's most likely replacement – felt unable to ask him to go, or to plot his removal.⁴⁹⁰ What, after all, was the profit in trying to remove an aged legend, who surely, Eden thought, must, in the way of things, go soon? If Eden, as the main beneficiary, would not try to remove the old boy, no one else would try to do so either. The result was that Churchill stayed where he was. The Conservative Party, as was its wont, found a way of working around this major problem by producing policy documents to which Churchill, rather reluctantly, gave his imprimatur.

Churchill came from a political tradition that did not believe in setting out detailed plans in opposition – something his own experience suggested offered hostages to fortune. But Rab Butler, at the head of the revived Conservative Research Department, put forward a series of 'charters', designed to show that the Tories were 'modern' and able to combat Labour on the Home Front.⁴⁹¹ Churchill is said to have looked at the Industrial Charter, which accepted most of Labour's nationalisation measures, and have commented that, with policies like that, Attlee would lose. Butler persuaded him to endorse it all the same. Whatever the truth of that, it embodied, like many political legends, a greater truth. Many of the younger and more liberal Conservatives, like Harold Macmillan, had lost their seats in 1945, and it was the older and more right-wing who had kept theirs. Butler could have had real trouble with free marketeers such as Churchill's friend Brendan Bracken, so Churchill's consent, however ill-informed, was vital. In this negative sense,

490 D. R. Thorpe, *Eden*, London, Chatto & Windus, 2003, pp. 416–20.

491 A. Howard, *op. cit.*, pp. 153–63.

Churchill played a part in allowing Conservative policy to be re-shaped. His own lack of interest in domestic policy helped this process, as did the fact that world affairs increasingly preoccupied his attention.

If we can acquit Churchill of any part in shaping Conservative policy on the domestic front, the same is not true of foreign affairs. Whatever the rule that foreign affairs rarely abut on general elections, the 1940s and early 1950s were an exception to it. Churchill, like Attlee and Labour, had wanted a post-war world where cooperation with the USA and the USSR would be possible, but, even before the coalition of 1945 had ended, it was becoming clear that Stalin did not trust his allies to give him the sort of territorial settlement to which he felt entitled. His idea of what that should be was not one acceptable to a country that had gone to war to stop one power dominating Europe. Opposition ought to have meant that Churchill played little part in the emergence of a policy of containment, but his role transcended that of party leader. It suited both the Truman administration and Attlee and Bevin that he should have delivered the stern warning contained in the 'Iron Curtain' speech in March 1946 at Fulton, Missouri, and, while both groups distanced themselves from its 'war mongering' at the time, a year later they were happy to have used the speech as an indicator of the way the wind was changing. If, as some have argued, there was an 'Attlee consensus' after 1945, its foreign policy component was, at least in part, Churchill's doing. That 'Atlanticist' consensus would outlast the social democratic one by many decades.⁴⁹²

In one sense, one might have thought that the growing perception of the USSR as a threat might have helped shift things Churchill's way as the election of 1950 approached. One of the few consistencies to be found in his career was his opposition to communism, against which, as Lloyd George had once said, his grand ducal blood revolted. But with Bevin having overruled Attlee's more cautious approach to the USSR, and with Labour being able to claim credit for NATO and 'the bomb', it was hard to pin the appeasement label on them. However, the now Labour-supporting *Daily Mirror* did not

492 John Charmley, *Churchill's Grand Alliance*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, pp. 117–30.

find it hard to pin the ‘war monger’ label on Churchill at that election, so it may be doubted how far geo-political circumstances played to his advantage.

Opinion polls played very little part in anyone’s election strategy back in 1950, although they showed Labour in with a good chance of holding on to power. With major changes to the constituencies – eleven new seats added, six abolished and 170 changes in all – along with the abolition of plural voting, it is hard to commute how far these things factored into the result, which gave Labour a slender lead of five (with 315 seats to Churchill’s 297, on a higher number of votes).⁴⁹³

Historians, not least Conservative ones, have paid much attention to the Conservative Research Department and Rab Butler’s ‘charters’, and they certainly played a part in allowing the Conservatives to suggest that they were not going to turn the clock back to the 1930s. But it is hard to know what part that played in the Tory revival. The charters were a sign of something that was important: the reform of local Conservative associations opened them up to young men of talent like Ted Heath, Iain Macleod and Enoch Powell – men who, in the past, would have been fortunate to have found a winnable seat first time around. With the Woolton reforms to expand and energise the party, and with the ‘Attlee terror’ providing plentiful targets, the local associations grew in size and helped mobilise the Conservative vote as of old. So, it is likely it was the faltering performance of an exhausted Attlee government, and disappointment with the slowness of the transition away from wartime privation, that tipped the balance of an election in which Labour still obtained more votes.⁴⁹⁴

Had the Conservatives not come so close, the demands for Churchill to have gone might have been irresistible; at the age of seventy-six, five more years of opposition would have been beyond him, and, whatever he had thought, others would reach that conclusion. But few thought Attlee would labour on with so small a majority, and so, in anticipation of another election in the near future, no challenge to Churchill emerged.

493 Anthony Seldon, *Churchill’s Indian Summer*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1981, pp. 5–21.

494 *Ibid.*, pp. 5–70

The narrowness of the Conservative defeat also encouraged party unity, and Eden, the heir apparent, was convinced that the 'old man' would go once he had finally erased the defeat of 1945. So it was a united party that went into the election Attlee called in early 1951. Labour collected a quarter of a million more votes than Churchill and the Liberals, but too many of them were in safe Labour seats, so they ended up with 295 seats compared to Churchill's 321.

It is indicative of Churchill's mindset, however, that he had tried to woo the Liberals, and that, when he formed his government, he invited in non-party figures such as Lord Alexander and Lord Monckton. The role of Conservative Party leader sat uneasily on Churchill – unlike the role of Prime Minister, a post to which he hung on for another four years. Despite another major stroke, Churchill was still in post in 1955, and it was only the prospect of another general election that persuaded him to stand down and give Eden a brief period at No. 10 before winning the election of that year.

Was Churchill a successful party leader? The blunt answer has to be no. It was not a role he relished, nor was it one upon which he spent much of his time. But there were advantages to the party in this – at least between 1945 and 1951. Self-confident and uninterested in detail, Churchill's approval of Butler's various charters, and his rebranding of the party, stilled the right-wing discontent with Butler. How could one be more Conservative than 'Winston'? He allowed the necessary reforms to take place and bed down. He effortlessly commanded the attention of the press, the newsreels and radio, and, in the absence of any more 'Gestapo' gaffes, his prestige continued to lend the Conservative brand something it lacked, by way of gravitas.

Of course, Churchill stands quite independent of any success, or otherwise, as Tory leader: that is not what his fame is based upon, nor what he sought to be remembered for. We might note, in passing, that the one area of his career before 1945 he never wrote about was his time as Baldwin's Chancellor; domestic politics failed to interest him. And yet, as we have seen, he is unique among Conservative leaders in losing two elections and being allowed the time to win a third one. It is doubtful – even given the lack of

mechanisms for selecting and deposing leaders – that any other Conservative leader would have been extended such an opportunity. Easy though it would be to conclude this chapter by saying he stood aside from and above the context, it is clear that the 1951 victory owed far more to others than it did to him. For all the Butlerite attempts to claim victory as a triumph for his reforms, it was as much a reaction to Labour's exhaustion and want of ideas as it was to anything else. Still, the horse had carried the jockey home and, for Churchill, that was enough.

For all his fame, Churchill's record as a party leader and election-winner confines him very firmly to the lower part of any league table based on success in these areas. That his fame will outlast that of all those who finish above him in such a table is, of course, simply proof of something Churchill always knew: the rules did not apply to him.