

In the age of coronavirus, we should look again at how Britain was rebuilt after 1945

Shadow home secretary Nick Thomas-Symonds on Ernest Bevin and Labour's postwar achievements.



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Ernest Bevin speaking at the Labour party conference, 1947

Two foreign secretaries were brought up in the small Exmoor village of Winsford. One, Boris Johnson, held the office without distinction. The other, Ernest Bevin, was, as Andrew Adonis argues in his fine new biography, *Labour's Churchill*: “an international leader of unique charisma and authenticity”.

Bevin was born on 7 March 1881, the seventh child of his single mother, Mercy, who died from cancer when he was eight. An orphan, he went to live with his half-sister Mary, before leaving school at 11. He worked as a farm boy, then joined his elder brothers Jack and Albert in Bristol at the age of

13. There, his many jobs included working as a barrow boy, selling mineral water from a cart. He was drawn to local politics, and met Flo, whom he married at 25, at the Bristol Socialist Society: they had one daughter, Queenie.

In his working life, the step-change came at 29, when he became the organising secretary of the carters' branch of the Dockers' Union. An inspirational official, he became a public figure through his forensic and impassioned presentation of the dockers' case for a pay rise in the Royal Courts of Justice in 1920. He was christened the "Dockers' KC": the equal of any King's Counsel – the most elite of barristers.

With the collapse of the "Triple Alliance" on Black Friday, 15 April 1921, as the transport and railway unions withdrew their support for the miners, Bevin saw the need for "fewer unions and more trade unionists". He seized the opportunity to create an amalgamated dockers' and transport workers' union, founding the Transport and General Workers' Union in 1922, and became its first general secretary.

It marked the start of Bevin's extraordinary period of public service over the best part of 30 years. Alan Bullock's monumental biography divided his life into three volumes totalling over 2,000 pages: *Trade Union Leader 1881-1940*; *Minister of Labour 1940-1945*; and *Foreign Secretary 1945-51*. Adonis does not seek to challenge Bullock with a swathe of new primary material. Rather, his aim is to provide an interpretation of Bevin from the vantage point of the 2020s: "To understand modern Britain, warts and all, you need to understand Ernest Bevin."

[see also: *To win again, Labour must embrace radical patriotism*]

The book provides a concise, accessible and balanced account. Adonis does not shy away from criticism. The current Labour leader has, rightly, pledged to tear out the poison of

anti-Semitism by its roots. In Bevin's failure to find a solution in Palestine, Adonis identifies a "significant strand of anti-Semitism". Bevin was also wedded to the British empire, disliked Indian independence, and dismissed the idea of the European Coal and Steel Community, the precursor of postwar European integration. None of this finds favour with Adonis, whose chosen title is, at least partly, a lament: "He was an unreconstructed imperialist, which made him all too literally Labour's Churchill."

Instead, Adonis argues convincingly that Bevin's great insight was the "equation of fascism and communism, and the imperative to resist both". As a trade union leader, which is how he always saw himself, Bevin was pragmatic – not least during the General Strike of 1926 – and kept political control with a firm grip of the union bureaucracy.

Appointed minister of labour in 1940, Bevin entered parliament via an unopposed by-election in Wandsworth Central. Determined to defeat fascism, he worked alongside the trade unions' sworn enemy, Winston Churchill. He not only mobilised the Labour force in the war effort, he also set the direction of employment policy for decades through a "framework of mandatory tripartite negotiations on wages, conditions and production". Bevin had a long-term ambition: "They say Gladstone was at the Treasury from 1860 to 1930. I'm going to be minister of labour from 1940 to 1990." Margaret Thatcher thwarted him, but only by a few years.

After Labour's landslide victory in the 1945 general election, Bevin supported the prime minister even when he could have taken the top job himself. In Clement Attlee, he saw a leader who could hold together a cabinet of talented rivals. Bevin had his own enemies: one, Nye Bevan, created the NHS. Another, Herbert Morrison, oversaw the Labour government's whole domestic agenda – a reason, along with George VI's preference – why Attlee made Bevin, a committed Keynesian, foreign secretary, rather than chancellor, so as to keep them

apart.

Bevin's focus was to prevent Stalin from dominating western Europe. This he did, drawing on all his skills as a union negotiator. Adonis regards his greatest achievement as the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949. He had a crucial role in negotiating Marshall Plan aid to boost European economies and in tying the US to the continent's future security through the foundation of Nato in April 1949.

[see also: The new wobbly world order]

It proved a high point. From the autumn of 1949 he was a semi-invalid, and it restricted his ability to influence events. This was significant: Adonis believes that, had Labour kept the Tories out of power for over a decade after 1945, then "maybe Britain today would be less like the United States and more like Sweden".

As it was, Attlee misjudged the timing of the 1950 general election: a winter poll on 23 February yielded a Labour majority of just five. Bevin was ill in Eastbourne when the crucial pre-election meeting took place to fix the date: he offered no view, writing in to say he was "no politician". After the split caused by Nye Bevan's resignation in April 1951 – which Harold Wilson continued to believe a fit Bevin could have averted – Labour lost the following general election on 25 October. By then, Bevin was dead. Attlee kept his friend in post as long as he could, despite his rapidly declining health, before replacing him as foreign secretary with Morrison on 9 March 1951, only weeks before Bevin died on 14 April.

Bevin was central to the achievements of the 1945-51 Labour government. This timely biography offers the chance to revisit how Britain was rebuilt after the collective sacrifice of the Second World War: a sure guide for how the country should respond to the coronavirus crisis.

[see also: How the coronavirus crisis has renewed the

case for the welfare state]

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