



Speech Archive

Leader's speech, Scarborough 1951

Clement Attlee (Labour)

Location: Scarborough

Commentary:

The main purpose of Attlee's speech was to introduce Labour's manifesto for the 1951 general election. During its 18 months in office, Labour had continued to build up the NHS, while Britain was starting to reap the benefits of the nationalisation programme. Labour was also committed to a controlled economy, which Attlee claimed was a pre-requisite for co-operation with other nations. Such co-operation was evident in Britain's support for the UN in dealing with Korea, as well as for the Atlantic Treaty on defence. However, Britain was facing a number of challenges, among which were rising prices and the problem of equal pay, and Labour pledged to tackle them in its manifesto.

May I thank you for your very kind and generous welcome. My duty this afternoon is to introduce to you the Labour Party Manifesto for the Election of 1951. We shall discuss it during the next few days and others of my colleagues on the Executive will be speaking to you on various points, so my task is to give you a general introduction to the Manifesto and to commend it to you.

We open this Manifesto by saying that we are proud of our record. We have nothing to apologise for and we go into this Election full of confidence. It does not seem a long time ago since the 1950 Election. That Election was a remarkable achievement. It is rare for a post-war Government to survive a General Election in the atmosphere that follows a great war. There are inevitably many hardships, many individual grievances, which would perhaps tend to make people think, 'Let us have a change' and the idea 'Let us have a change' seems to be about the only thing the Tories are putting forward at this Election. But the electors showed a remarkable constancy. We had lost no by-election in the previous four and a half years. We came back with a majority, but a small one. And remember, at that Election we told the people the truth. We did not promise them lower income tax, reduced taxation and greater benefits for everybody. We asked them, as an educated electorate, to face the facts of the situation; and that, again, is what we are doing in this Election.

During those eighteen months of the 1950 Government we broke another record. For a Government with a small majority to get through eighteen months with no major defeat, with an Opposition thirsting for power, is quite unprecedented. Governments have lasted a long time on a small majority previously, but that was because the Opposition did not want to come in. Our Opposition has neglected no opportunity of trying to defeat the Government. And I want, here and now, to pay a high tribute to the Labour Members, of the 1950 Parliament. They have shown great loyalty, great constancy, great endurance. Many of them have attended the House at great personal sacrifice and at great risk; and I should like here to pay a tribute to one who, through illness, cannot be here today, and that is our great Chief Whip, Willie Whiteley.

In this year we lost a great man, a great Labour leader, the outstanding Trade Unionist of his generation, a man who contributed an immense amount to the winning of the war and the greatest Foreign Secretary we have had - Ernest Bevin. I should like to pay my tribute to another great servant of his country and of our Movement, Stafford Cripps. He wore himself out in devoted service and we all rejoice that his health is being restored. We hope to welcome him back.

Our work during those eighteen months has been difficult and necessarily not very spectacular, but I should like to say to all of you that there has been no halt in Labour's advance. Some people take a superficial view and think of our advance as signalled mainly by the passing of particular Acts of Parliament. The real measure of our advance must be taken in looking at what has been done in the field of administration, as well as of legislation. What has been occurring during the eighteen months has been the implementation of the great measures that we passed in 1945. You can pass great measures like our Health Act, the nationalisation of coal or of gas, or of electricity, but that does not mean that within a few weeks or months you are going to see a complete change in that service or industry. You can only begin the change, and it takes a great deal of time working it out.

The National Health Service has been steadily built up, but it is only recently that we got the full report of one year's activities. In the mines we had to overtake the neglect and mismanagement of decades. On the railways you had the same thing. During these eighteen months great improvements have been made. I would pay a tribute to what has been done by the members of the boards, by the managements and, above all, by the workers in those industries. I shall never forget the appeal that I made in the spring to the miners for extra work. It was not an appeal to their cupidity, it was to their patriotism and their sense of social service, and the response in which they gave us the extra coal we needed was a signal example of the new spirit that you get where there is work for the community.

Of course, the Opposition say nationalisation has failed. It has not failed. They say nationalisation was due to an

ideological prejudice. Nothing of the sort. Our nationalisation measures were essential for the reconstruction of the country. The fact that they were in Labour's programme only shows the prescience of Labour in knowing what the times required. I recall very well Sir John Anderson's words: 'In the case of the Bank of England, Transport, Cable and Wireless, Electricity and Coal the onus of proving the need for socialisation may not unreasonably be held to have been discharged.' No one expected that we could reap the full benefit of those changes in a few short months. It takes time to work the economy, it takes time even to work the new spirit that is required - and that applies to some of the personnel in those industries who have not yet got the new spirit.

These eighteen months have been marked by great progress; but it is progress that must be judged by remembering what the difficulties are. If Len Hutton goes in to bat for England and bats for three hours for 50 or 60 runs it may be an enormously creditable achievement on a very sticky wicket. We have had to bat on a very sticky wicket and great progress has been made. That progress must not be stopped by these great undertakings passing under the control of a Government whose members do not believe in the principle on which they were erected. That principle was the organisation of the economic resources in the interests of the whole of the people.

During those years we have had the incessant work of planning. There are a few eccentrics in the House of Commons who do not believe in planning at all. They believe you can go back to *laissez faire*. There are others on the opposite side who believe in planning, but their objectives are different from ours. I assure you that a government in a modern state must plan the internal affairs of the country and must join with others in planning for a world society, because conditions in the modern world are such that you cannot plan in isolation.

We are constantly in touch with our friends of the Commonwealth. Only last week there was a conference of Economic Ministers. We are constantly planning in the United Nations with other nations, because we cannot make progress without co-operation with other nations. Experience has shown that to have effective co-operation you must have control over your own economy. There have been Governments that have rashly abandoned controls, gone to their electors, told them they must give up controls, and they have met themselves coming back; they have had to put back the controls that they rashly abandoned. In our Government we achieved a very great success through the co-operation of all the Ministers and the country, but in particular this is connected with the name of Stafford Cripps.

The people of Britain under the leadership of the Labour Government did a great work in reconstructing our viable economy and dealing with that difficult problem of the balance of payments. It was a great disappointment that, just as we were beginning to see daylight, we were forced to embark on rearmament.

It is right that in our Manifesto we should give the first place to peace. Peace is a thing that we all desire, but peace does not come about through wishful thinking. Peace is not just a negative absence of war; peace means that you get rid as far as you can of the causes of war.

We have taken our stand through very many years, through good or ill, on support for the rule of law. That other great Foreign Secretary of ours, Arthur Henderson, laid down the lines on which we have acted. Throughout we have supported the United Nations and when the challenge came in Korea we unhesitatingly went in with other members of the United Nations Organisation representing the democratic forces of the world. We realised that Korea was a test case we realised that armed aggression had arisen once more in the world and we accepted the logic of the situation, as a matter of responsibility, first of all to our own people and secondly to the whole of the free world.

It is common practice of our opponents to try and run down Britain in the eyes of the world and to say that we have lost our influence. It is quite untrue. We hold a unique place. From our geographical position we are a vital link between Europe and the New World. From our position as a leading member of the Commonwealth we bring together nations in all the continents and in particular we unite in one great association the nations of Asia as well as of Europe. Thus Britain has great experience.

It is not our fault that the world is divided. We do not wish to see a great gulf between East and West. We have done everything we can to bring them together. We stand ready at any time to meet and deal with the people on the other side of the Iron Curtain. The fault is on their side of the net. They have only to make a real response, a response not only in words but in actions, to be able to get rid of this cloud of suspicion. But we have been forced by their attitude to build up a great non-aggressive treaty of defence, the Atlantic Treaty, and we have had to make our contribution to that.

We worked out how much that contribution would be. We had to hold a balance all the time between the necessary support for armaments and the support of a viable economy in this country. That programme is going forward. We realised that sacrifices would be necessary, but it was essential, if the world is to be free from fear, if we are to get an accommodation of relations with the other side of the Iron Curtain. I believe that there should be adequate strength in the freedom-loving nations. We do not like having to spend a great deal on arms, but we have to recognise the mentality of the people with whom we deal, who have a materialist philosophy and think in terms of strength.

We get a lot of criticisms of our foreign policy. If we act independently we are told we ought to have consulted other people. If we consult other people we are told we are being subservient. The fault is always ours, never the other people's. In foreign affairs you have got to work with other people and you cannot just lay down your policy and expect everyone to accept it. Believe me, it is a hard life being a Labour Foreign Secretary!

We keep a steady course and we have a steady people. That is an essential in a world where there is a good deal of nervousness and where it is easy for people to yield to hysteria. We shall keep on that steady course. We support the United Nations; when disputes arise we take them to the United Nations, as we did in the case of Albania, as we have done in the case of Persia.

I am always hearing voices raised clamouring for what they call a strong foreign policy. What does 'a strong foreign policy' mean? People who use that phrase are living in the past; they are thinking of Lord Palmerston. Those days have gone for ever. But because we support the rule of law it does not mean that our policy in any case has been weak and vacillating. It does mean that everywhere we do the utmost we can by negotiation.

Rearming has inevitably meant an increase in world prices. The fact is that if (as we do), we desire a rise in the standard of living in the world, particularly in all those areas that have had such a raw deal in the past, inevitably we increase the pressure of demand on available supply. Our policy at home has done that. Take electricity: there is a tremendous demand on our electrical resources. Why? Because so many more of our people want to use this amenity. There is a tremendous demand on the telephones unsatisfied. I can remember being Postmaster-General in

1931, and inaugurating a campaign to get people to have telephones. Why was there not that demand then? Because the masses of the people could not afford them.

Therefore, you must not be surprised that there are these rising prices. They can only be met in the long run by increased production in the world. We have been following a policy of abundance. The other way that was tried between the wars was a policy of restriction, of grinding down the demands of the people, with the result that in the 30's you had what they called a crisis of abundance, because there were things that no one could buy. We do not want to see the clock put back to that kind of thing. The answer is: increase production and meanwhile we must try and follow out a policy of fair shares.

As a result of my visit to Washington last December we have been trying to deal with raw materials on an international basis, trying to get fair shares. At home here, too, we work on a policy of fair shares. Wherever there is this increase of demand and this shortage of supply there are the profiteers opportunity. You will see set out in our Manifesto additional measures that we want to take to deal with those who profit out of the nation's needs.

We have already sheltered our people very largely by such things as food subsidies and price control. We are going ahead with such things as fruit and vegetable marketing; restriction of dividends; public ownership wherever it is necessary and desirable; and the policy of redressing the inequalities of wealth, the policy of getting a greater distribution of wealth.

Only a few years ago Wales was in danger of losing an enormous proportion of its population, of becoming derelict. Today Wales is a land of hope and a land of achievement. We have the same thing in Scotland, not only in the industrial belt but in the highlands and islands. You have the same thing in the countryside of Britain. Before the war there was increasing disequilibrium between town and country and here, too, you had those depressed areas. All that has gone and you see today a more prosperous countryside than we have ever had before. You have had a Government that has not only looked at the countryside as a means of producing food, but as part of our great national heritage of beauty. We are now cleaning up some of the mistakes of the past and we are throwing open the beauty of our country to all our people. Under the heading of Social Justice in our Manifesto we draw this contrast between the past and the present, but we are not satisfied with the present; we are pressing on for the future. As I said, the rate of our progress is conditioned by circumstances.

We as a Government are always faced with multitudinous demands, all desirable in themselves. They are pressed by different groups of people and it is good that there should be this enthusiasm. But the task of a Government is to make a decision on priorities and it is not an easy choice. You see some set out in our Manifesto. There is the problem of equal pay. We want to do it, but we have to find a time when we can do it. All these things must be conditioned by circumstances; we must make decisions on priorities.

The crucial question of this Election, on which every elector must make up his or her mind, is this: What kind of society do you want? We know the kind of society we want. We want a society of free men and women - free from poverty, free from fear, able to develop to the full their faculties in co-operation with their fellows, everyone giving and having the opportunity to give service to the community, everyone regarding his own private interest in the light of the interest of others, and of the community; a society bound together by rights and obligations, rights bringing obligations, obligations fulfilled bringing rights; a society free from gross inequalities and yet not regimented nor uniform.

Our opponents, on the other hand, regard the economic process primarily as the giving an opportunity to the individual to advance his own interests; community interests, national interests, are regarded as a hypothetical by-product. Their motto is: 'The world is my oyster; each one for himself.' The result of that policy can be seen by all.

There was the army of the poor; there were the slums; there was beautiful Britain defiled for gain; there were derelict areas. The fruits of our policy can be seen in the new fine generation that is growing up, in the new houses - because we have done a great work in housing. You hear only of the people who are not satisfied. The people who are snug in a Council house do not write to you about it.

The fact is that a very remarkable job has been done under great difficulties. You see our new towns, you see our smiling countryside. I am proud of our achievement. There is an immense amount more to do. Remember that we are a great crusading body, armed with a fervent spirit for the reign of righteousness on earth. Let us go forward in this fight in the spirit of William Blake:

I will not cease from mental strife,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.