



## **Clement Attlee** **Labour Leader 1935 - 1955**

The son of a wealthy solicitor, Clement Attlee was born 3 January 1883 being educated at home until he was nine before entering the public school system in Hertfordshire. In 1901 he began studying at University College, Oxford before training for the Bar in his father's footsteps, passing these examinations in 1905.

A visit to a club set up by his old school for poor east end children affected him to the point that by 1907 he had started to manage the club. His later belief that charities were ineffectual in attempting to end poverty and that political action was necessary were probably developed during this time and led to him joining the ILP.

After the war politics began to take over his life, becoming mayor of Stepney in 1920. In January 1922 he married Violet Millar, and in November of the same year was elected Labour MP for Limehouse and not long after the PPS to the then Labour Leader Ramsay MacDonald.

During the brief 1924 Labour Government he became Under-Secretary of State for War. He was disappointed not to get a job in MacDonald's second government in 1929, but eventually became a minister in 1930 before the formation of the national coalition. The general election of 1931 saw Labour decimated, falling to just 46 MP's. By this time he had resigned from the ILP who he felt were becoming increasingly disruptive within the parliamentary party.

The 1931 election saw the Labour leader, Arthur Henderson, losing his seat, and so did all remaining members of the MacDonald cabinet. Only three MP's had any government experience. There was only one conceivable leader, Lansbury, and only one conceivable deputy leader, Attlee.

When Lansbury retired in 1935, Attlee won the leadership battle against Herbert Morrison and almost immediately began moving the party away from its pacifist traditions due to the emerging situation in Europe. By 1940 Attlee played a key part in the formation of a coalition government under Winston Churchill, making it clear that Labour would not serve under Neville Chamberlain. Shortly after Germany invaded Holland and Belgium Attlee and the new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, agreed on the composition of a new government. In February 1942 Churchill gave him the title of Deputy Prime Minister.

At the 1945 election, Labour was returned with 393 seats and became the first Labour leader to have a majority in Parliament. The central job of the 1945 government, as Attlee saw it, was the creation of the welfare state and on 5 July 1948 the National Health Service came into existence with the NHS Act, as well as National Insurance Act, Industrial Injuries Act and National Assistance Act. In the same year the government nationalised inland transport – railways, canals, and road haulage as well as electricity and gas. The Bank of England had been nationalised in 1945 and Iron and steel followed in 1949.

Attlee drove these measures through against a background of dire warnings that the war-shattered economy could not afford them.

At the February 1950 election, Labour polled the highest popular vote any party had ever polled but their overall majority was down to five. October 1951 Attlee again went to the country, again winning most votes, but Churchill ended up with more seats and an overall majority of 17.

Attlee led the Labour Party to the 1955 General Election, retiring as Leader and as an MP in December 1955. He was created Earl Attlee and Viscount Prestwood and became in 1956 a Knight of the Garter. He had been made a Companion of Honour in 1945 and was awarded an Order of Merit in 1951. His wife died in 1964 Attlee himself died in his sleep on 8 October 1967.