

**Andrew ADONIS**  
***Ernest Bevin: Labour's Churchill***  
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Winston Churchill can certainly be described as one of the greatest statesmen of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and probably Britain's most well-known political figure. His political career, however, was suddenly interrupted in June 1945 when the Labour Party won the general election. Clement Attlee became Prime Minister in the first majority Labour government, and many of people whom he had surrounded himself with since his selection as leader of the party in 1935 took on ministerial roles alongside him. One of these was Ernest Bevin, a close friend and General Secretary of the powerful *Transport and General Workers' Union*, as well as Minister of Labour in Churchill's War Cabinet. He held the office of Foreign Secretary in the post-war government, and led the United Kingdom into the first years of the Cold War. He was thus undoubtedly one of the politicians who dominated the post-war Labour administration between 1945 and 1951. But he was later almost forgotten, destined to forever be overshadowed, or even mistakenly, his close namesake and founder of the *National Health Service*, Aneurin Bevan. The author of this book, Andrew Adonis, former Transport Secre-

tary in Gordon Brown's Labour government, and current member of the House of Lords, has endeavoured to bring the figure and successes of Ernest Bevin back into public consciousness, not least through the highly provocative book title, which compares him to Churchill. After all, the wartime leader himself described Bevin as by, "*far the most distinguished man the Labour Party have thrown up in my time*".<sup>1</sup>

It is also evident that Bevin is a greater figure of the Labour Party for the book's author. "*Ernest Bevin was one of the greatest and most inspirational leaders of the twentieth century*," he states in the introduction (p. I.). Even so, Bevin is not a common subject of academic literature. It has been almost forty years since the last part of the three-volume monograph covering Bevin's entire life by British historian, Alan Bullock. While Bullock's work remains highly respected and widely used, and Adonis himself often refers to it, this new biographical work is more than welcome.

<sup>1</sup> J. COLVILLE, *The Fringes of Power: Downing Street Diaries 1939-1955*, London 1985, p. 522.

Andrew Adonis's book can be divided up into two sections, in line with Bevin's life. The first covers the period he became known as a trade unionist, and the second begins when he first became politically active. Ernest Bevin did not experience the traditional political rise most statesmen did in his time. He did not go through officer training, and nor did he attend an elite university, as was common amongst politicians in important positions. Bevin was from a diametrically opposed background. He came from a very poor family. He had not known his father, and he was orphaned at eight years old. From a very young age, he had therefore had to work hard. Through hard work and diligence, he supplemented his education in the evenings. After he became General Secretary of the *Transport and General Workers' Union* in 1922, he also made his voice heard within the Labour Party. The author puts Bevin's political rise in the context of developments within the party in the interwar period. The Labour Party found itself in deep crisis in the mid-1930s, and so for Bevin it could have represented a suitable opportunity to become its leader. According to the author, there was one main reason why this did not occur – it was not his objective. Instead, he was to play a central role in removing the party leader, George Lansbury, who had led the Labour Party to pacifism and appeasement. It was for this reason that he supported Clement Attlee in the election, a candidate with whom he had an excellent relationship. While Bevin could be described

as inflexible, Attlee liked to find compromise. The author considers their alliance to be one of the most important in modern British politics, and it was one which also manifested itself in the post-war government. There is no doubt, however, that there would have been no Attlee without Bevin. And without the trusted Attlee, the Labour Party may not have won the post-war election.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, the United Kingdom had needed to move rapidly to a war economy. Bevin came from a working-class environment, one he was very familiar with. As such, Winston Churchill invited him to his wartime coalition, where he held the role of Minister of Labour. But Bevin didn't just endeavour to make labour as efficient as possible – he also endeavoured to improve working conditions. According to the author, the first signs of the welfare state can be seen around the then-Labour Minister during this time, even though the welfare state is generally attributed to the author of the renowned memorandum, William Beveridge, and Aneurin Bevan.

A substantial part of the book gives an analysis of Bevin's post-war activities at the Foreign Office, with the author justifiably considering Bevin's major triumph to be keeping communism out of Western Europe. Bevin was undoubtedly left-leaning, but he felt very little affinity for communism. According to Adonis, this aversion came from the period when he was a trade union leader. At that time, during the 1920s and 1930s, he saw what had

happened to trades unions and subsequently to rebellious workers themselves in Europe's totalitarian states. This was the reason why he felt zero admiration for the policies of the Soviet Union after the war, instead becoming a great critic of the country. At councils of foreign ministers, for example, he deliberately mispronounced Soviet Foreign Minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, as "Mr Mowlotov". He also demonstrated his energy and firm stance in negotiations with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. His orientation towards the United States, and not the Soviet Union, was later criticised by some Labour politicians. According to the author, however, the West owes a debt of gratitude to Bevin for his post-war diplomatic successes and the fact that British diplomacy found a strong and confident voice. Even so, he does not claim that Bevin was infallible.

It is worth noting at this point that the author of this book is a leading Labour politician who is close to the unions, and who evidently has a certain sympathy towards and admiration for Ernest Bevin. Even so, he does not shy away from also noting his failures. These include his negative attitude towards Jewish emigration to the British Mandate of Palestine and his disparagement of France and Germany's initiatives to create a strong Western European bloc as a kind of forerunner to today's European Union.

Bevin and many of his colleagues in the Labour and Conservative parties were not aware, or did not want to face the fact that the British Empire's powers were waning post-1945, and it was

no longer likely to play a major role in Western Europe. In any case, British foreign policy, even under the Labour government, did not undertake any major change of course in terms of international diplomacy. Bevin had grown up in the same Edwardian period as Churchill had, and this was reflected in his political thinking. While in domestic matters, each stood on opposite sides of the barricades, they agreed in broader matters of international diplomacy. As such, maintaining the Empire at the cost of involvement in developing Western European integration was a priority both for Bevin, and later for Churchill. In this light, Bevin's description as Labour's Churchill seems justified.

Ernest Bevin was forced to resign from active politics in 1951 due to chronic illness, and he died the same year at the age of seventy. He left behind a legacy as a successful union leader of many years who during the Second World War had worked on the foundations of the welfare state and the political consensus which lasted in the United Kingdom until the government of Margaret Thatcher. The pinnacle of his political career was his appointment as Foreign Secretary, in which role despite the above mentioned errors he managed to help ensure Western Europe would remain non-communist in the early post-war years. The example of Ernest Bevin thus demonstrates that although he was a socialist, he was not a threat to his country. As Adonis claims himself: "*Bevin was revolutionary about ends, democratic about means*" (p. XVI.).

In my opinion, this book is an excellent monograph of an important, yet paradoxically half-forgotten figure in post-war Labour politics. Although the author makes use of non-archival sources and the whole book is written in a slightly journalistic style, considering it is aimed at the general public,

this in no way diminishes the quality of the overall analysis of Bevin's life, whose merits have long been overlooked by academic literature. The book can thus be thoroughly recommended to both the lay public and academics.

*Václav Šipla*