The Brace of the Cabinet: The Legacy of Clement Attlee as Deputy Prime Minister

by

Stephen Thornton

Author details:

Stephen Thornton is Reader in Politics at Cardiff University. His works include *Richard Crossman and the Welfare State* and (with Adam Sharr) *Demolishing Whitehall: Leslie Martin, Harold Wilson and the Architecture of White Heat*. He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

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Abstract

The position of the UK deputy prime minister is clouded in mystery. The title suggests a minster of some seniority, one likely to step in for an absent premier to chair a cabinet meeting or perform at prime minister's questions (PMQs) – but that is merely supposition. No official statement exists to explain the functions the position entails or indeed to confirm that it endures as anything more substantial than a courtesy title. Using archive material and other resources, this article will try to expose this constitutional phantom. To achieve this task, there will be close examination of the first individual to be publicly announced – in February 1942 – as the UK's deputy prime minister, Clement Attlee. Though there will be discussion of some of the tasks Attlee performed in this capacity (tasks which have influenced the development of deputy prime ministership as an institution), the primary purpose of this article is to help lift some of the constitutional smog. In particular, it will illuminate why – in contrast to analogous positions such as the US vice president – the British deputy prime minister is still not regarded as any more likely to succeed a prime minister than any other senior minister.

Keywords

deputy prime minister; Clement Attlee, Winston Churchill; British constitution; succession

Introduction

This article examines one of the most inscrutable positions in the British constitution, that of deputy prime minister, focusing on the individual generally regarded as the first holder of that post, Clement Attlee. Though Attlee's life and career have been explored through many biographies and other studies,[1] the position of deputy prime minister is less known. Thus, though most studies of Attlee do touch on his influential role as deputy prime minister during the coalition government formed during the second world war, the focus tends to be on the individual, Attlee, rather than the institution itself. This article will collect these observations together and draw upon other sources, including archive material, to move the focus towards the creation of this indistinct, but sometimes significant institution. There will be discussion about some of the tasks Attlee performed in this capacity, highlighting two functions in particular have influenced how deputies who came after Attlee have performed the role. Borrowing from phrases used to describe deputy-related tasks during the 1940s, these functions will be called 'holding the baby' and 'running the home front'. However, the primary focus will be to shed light on the hazy constitution position of deputy prime minister, with this lack of clarity illustrated by the lack of scholarly agreement regarding the date Attlee took on that role.

Deputy prime minister

Constitutionally, the position of deputy prime minister does not formally exist, a situation Attlee faced despite being – from 1942 to 1945 – regularly referred to as the deputy prime minister in parliament and by the press. The official guidance from 1959 maintained that:

> There is no office of Deputy Prime Minister. The arrangements made by Prime Ministers for a senior colleague to deputise for them on the infrequent occasions when this is necessary have varied and there are no standing arrangements.[2]

By 2011 the post had become a more established part of the institutional furniture and the information about the official position on the deputy prime minister had expanded, though only marginally. The Cabinet Manual explains that:

> The title of Deputy Prime Minister is sometimes given to a senior minister in the Government, for example the deputy leader of the party in government or the leader of the smaller party in a coalition. The role of the Deputy Prime Minister is sometimes combined with other roles, but responsibilities will vary according to the circumstances [….] The fact that a person has the title of Deputy Prime Minister does not constrain the Sovereign's power to appoint a successor to a Prime Minister.[3]

Thus, even in the twenty-first century version, there is no mention of the deputy prime minister being appointed to that position, merely that it is a *title* sometimes bestowed. The Cabinet Manual also provides no indication of what the position involves, simply that it varies according to circumstance. Furthermore, as the final sentence highlights, the British deputy prime minister still lacks many of the usual responsibilities of analogous posts in other states: there is, for conspicuous example, no automatic assumption of the powers and duties of the prime minister in event of absence or illness, nor any right of succession should the premier retire, die, or be otherwise prevented from continuing in office.[4] Exploring the case of Attlee as the individual who, as Kenneth Harris argues, was the first to give 'meaning to the idea of "deputy prime ministership"' does help to account for some of this state of affairs.[5]

In addition to casting light on the constitutional uncertainty that lingers regarding the position, the case of Attlee also provides some insight into the way in which deputy prime ministership has developed an institutional character of its own. As Andrew Blick and George Jones note regarding the literature on prime ministers, there sometimes lacks clear

division between the *institution* of premiership and the *individuals* who occupy that position.[6] This danger is just as acute when studying the role of the premier's deputy. Peter Hennessy remarks, 'to adapt Asquith's famous one-liner about the premiership, the deputy prime ministership is very much what its holder chooses and is enabled or allowed by the Prime Minister (and, to some extent, his cabinet colleagues) to make of it.'[7] And it is fair to say that every deputy has performed their role distinctively, depending on contextual factors and personal style. Yet, the deputy premiership has developed some institutional character of its own, with those named deputy possessed of some idea what is expected of them even if it is not written down. For example, the deputy prime minister is routinely regarded as the default stand-in for the prime minister for events such as chairing the cabinet should the premier be ill or otherwise unavailable.

The idea that the behaviours of political actors connected to an institution have become, to some extent at least, shaped by the rules, routines and norms associated to that institution has been explained by James Marsh and Johan Olsen through their concept of the 'logic of appropriateness'.[8] It is also the case that events early in the creation of an institution can provide a particularly powerful conditioning effect further down the line, a phenomenon sometimes dubbed 'path dependency'.[9] As Stephen Krasner argues, 'once an historical choice is made, it both precludes and facilitates others. Once a particular fork is chosen, it is very difficult to get back on the rejected path'.[10] Attlee's deputy prime ministership can be regarded as one of these significant 'forks'.

The institution being as indistinct as it is, it is worth noting that pre-second world war candidates to the title of deputy to the UK prime minister exist. Andrew Bonar Law has a sound claim to be regarded as David Lloyd George's *de facto* deputy from 1916 to 1921[11], likewise Lord Curzon during Bonar Law's own illness-truncated 1922-23 premiership.[12]

However, it is Attlee who tends to head lists of those, in Vernon Bogdanor's careful wording, who 'have *acted* as deputy prime minister'.[13] By this, Bogdanor explains, the individual must have 'presided over cabinet meetings in the absence of the prime minister and chaired a number of key cabinet committees'.[14] Attlee is recognised as such by Peter Hennessy, Oonagh Gay, Philip Norton and Rodney Brazier.[15]Attlee also heads a short list presented to parliament in 1995 by the then prime minister, John Major, of those who created the precedent for Michael Heseltine's role as 'a Minister acting as Deputy Prime Minister'.[16]

Though there is consensus that Attlee should be regarded as having unambiguously *acted* as deputy prime minister, and that he likely did so first, there is dispute about when his period in that role began. For Major, the start date is a precise 19 February 1942.[17] Norton similarly suggests 1942.[18] Brazier, however, has Attlee's term as deputy starting in 1940.[19] Gay similarly proposes 'the role first came into existence with Clement Attlee, who served as Churchill's deputy as part of the wartime coalition from 1940-45.'[20] This discrepancy, the result of the unclear constitutional position of the role of deputy prime minister, will be explained in this article.

To explore both the constitutional and the institutional dimensions, this article will be divided into three sections. After introducing Attlee, the first of these sections, with the goal of providing as much clarity as possible regarding the peculiar constitutional status of the deputy prime minister, is an investigation into Attlee's claim to that title, noting relevant references in government archives, newspapers, *Hansard*, and the published accounts of contemporary ministers. This section will also explore that discrepancy between the start dates recorded for Attlee taking up the position to be Churchill's deputy. In addition, attention will be given to rivals for Attlee's claim to deputy status at this time, such as Anthony Eden, Sir Stafford Cripps and, perhaps most surprisingly, Neville Chamberlain. The

second area of study is to highlight the main functions performed by Attlee in his role. The final section will explore the legacy of Attlee's deputy prime ministership, highlighting features from that era that have particularly shaped – positively and negatively – the role of deputy prime minister as it has developed into a semi-coherent, if still constitutionally obscure, institution.

Clement Attlee (1883-1967)

As noted earlier, Clement Attlee's life and career have been explored in many biographies. They note Attlee's middle-class, public school upbringing, social awakening in the East End of London, experiences as a soldier during the first world war (including involvement in the ill-starred Gallipoli campaign), before becoming MP for Limehouse in 1922 then rising through the ministerial ranks during Ramsay MacDonald's administrations, becoming deputy leader of the Labour Party in 1931 (almost by default, having been one of the few frontbench survivors of that year's calamitous general election for the party), and then leader in 1935. That particular leadership victory led Labour colleague Hugh Dalton to remark that 'and a little mouse shall lead them'.[21] Indeed, one important theme of each of these accounts is that, though now regarded as one of Britain's greatest prime ministers and a Labour Party icon (there is currently a market for t-shirts bearing the legend 'What Would Clement Do?'[22]), Attlee's position never seemed wholly secure, with many of his twenty years as party leader marked by rivals who regarded themselves as more talented trying to replace him. Attlee was certainly overshadowed in public consciousness by more charismatic colleagues, but his understated strengths of assiduousness, efficiency and loyalty made him a formidable deputy during the war. Highlighting Attlee's inconspicuous but highly capable character, John Bew notes the journalist Frank Owen's appraisal that Attlee's outstanding quality 'was that none of his qualities was outstanding'.[23]

Lacking the public profile of the wartime prime minister, Winston Churchill, or indeed that of other Labour colleagues in the coalition government such as Ernest Bevin and Herbert Morrison, the subtle but vital role Attlee played was first explored in this sympathetic *Observer* profile from May 1944:[24]

> At Cabinet meetings the Deputy Prime Minister always sits on the edge of his chair. The trick is typical of the man. It is a sign of diffidence, a lack of confidence, perhaps better a modesty, that must be almost unique in high politics.
>
> Yet this is the man who, on merit, is wartime Number 2 to Mr Churchill of all people. The debt owed to loyal Clem Attlee by the Prime Minister, the country, and the Labour Party is big. The post of Deputy Prime Minister was literally made for him and he for it; he fills it without envy.
>
> Outside the Councils of State, too, Mr Attlee is true to type. He is almost anonymous. Slight in figure, he does not stand out in a crowd. Thin in voice, he is at a disadvantage in this Broadcasting Age. He is the forgotten Minister who four years ago brought in the forgotten Bill to put all persons and all property at the nation's disposal.
>
> How is it that he can be called the 'brace' of the Cabinet? Back in the Cabinet room, or at Party meetings, the answer is plainer. Puffing at his pipe, he puts sound points well and simply. He is no colourful figure of champion of stirring causes; he is the impeccable Chairman – at a time when both Cabinet and Party, ill-sorted and on edge, much need a Chairman [….]
>
> There, in Downing Street, is indeed a Leader. Mr Churchill needs a Chairman for the humdrum essential work of government. The Deputy Prime Minister is also Lord President of Council, Chairman of the Ministerial Committee that sits on home

> affairs. He is, in these offices, the first-class captain of a first-class cricket side who is not himself a headliner. He makes men work together. He is a political catalyst.
>
> Historians will give Clem Attlee his due, even under the shadow of Churchill, for he, too, in his own way, is equally an English worthy, though not a Great one […]. While Churchill wages war, his Chairman keeps the peace behind the lines. The one, co-ordinating much more than creative, is at least as much a man of the times as the other, the captain general.

The constitutional position

The story of Attlee's working relationship with Churchill is well known. Michael Jago is one of many commentators to highlight that prime minister and deputy, '*prima facie* incompatible, worked so well together for the duration of the war. They shared the same relentless determination. That one was a showman and the other the very opposite was irrelevant; each was a shrewd and pragmatic operator.'[25] Similarly, Leo McKinstry suggests that 'there has never been a connection like that between Churchill and Attlee. Brought together in the perilous hour of 1940, they forged a partnership that transcended party lines for five years.'[26] Yet, the constitutional situation – as demonstrated by the lack of consensus about which year Attlee actually became Churchill's deputy prime minister – remains far less understood. This section, then, will try shed some light on this issue, starting with an explanation why some experts reckon Attlee's start date as deputy prime minister was February 1942, whereas others suggest sometime in 1940, the year in which the increasingly beleaguered Neville Chamberlain resigned as prime minister of a Conservative government to be replaced by Churchill as the leader of a cross-party national government.

Bew argues that Attlee was 'in effect' Churchill's deputy almost from day one of the national government, 10 May 1940.[27] Churchill's first act as prime minister was to invite Attlee and Labour's deputy leader, Arthur Greenwood, to discuss the creation of the new administration and, the following day, the Labour Party agreed to join the government. Attlee was appointed lord privy seal with a position in the war cabinet, and immediately took residence at Number 11 Downing Street. Bew remarks that 'he soon fell into a role for which he was naturally suited: the clearing house for government business and, in effect, though not yet officially, Churchill's deputy in government.'[28] Attlee himself wrote of this period: 'Though I was not at this time formally appointed Deputy Prime Minister, it was part of my work to relieve the Prime Minister of as much of the detailed work as possible.'[29] As both accounts suggest, Attlee was performing some of the activities associated with being the prime minister's deputy at this very early stage of the coalition, though no attempt had yet been made to signal to a wider audience that he was to be regarded as Churchill's most senior colleague.

Indeed, at this stage there was another candidate who challenged Attlee's position as *de facto* deputy in the war cabinet, albeit for a brief period. Churchill's first war cabinet consisted of five ministers, two from Labour – Attlee and Greenwood as minister without portfolio – and three from Conservative ranks: Churchill, Lord Halifax as foreign secretary, and former prime minister Chamberlain as lord president of the council. Though there were inevitable tensions between Churchill and his predecessor, the new premier realised that it was necessary to keep Chamberlain in the government as he retained much support with Conservative ranks, whereas Churchill was widely distrusted by many in his own party.[30] And it was Chamberlain – not Attlee – who was second in order of ministerial precedence and chaired meetings of the war cabinet in Churchill's absence.[31] Indeed, as John ('Jock') Colville, private secretary to both Chamberlain and Churchill recorded, the original idea was that Chamberlain 'should lead the House, as Lord President, like Bonar Law in the last war,

while Winston is the new Lloyd George.'[32] Chamberlain also remained leader of the Conservative Party. Indeed, Chamberlain's biographer, Robert Self, does construct a solid case to suggest that Chamberlain's role in the spring and summer of 1940 was something close to that of a deputy, or rather, as Self puts it, Chamberlain became the effective 'Home Front Prime Minister'.[33]

Churchill and Chamberlain did form a respectful working relationship. Moreover, Chamberlain assumed a strikingly diverse array of responsibilities, from drawing up legislation to introduce new emergency powers to trying to address the problem of supply of labour to agriculture. Of particular significance was Chamberlain's role as chair of the freshly dminted lord president's committee, a body established to become the central organ of state to address domestic issues. Though beset with teething problems, it was to become a body of considerable significance during the war. Indeed, it was primarily through this committee that Churchill hoped Chamberlain would 'look after the Home Front for me'.[34] To some extent, it was the antipathy of the Labour Party contingent in the war cabinet toward Chamberlain that prevented his having a greater role.[35]

Another factor impeding Chamberlain's contribution was illness. In July 1940 Chamberlain had an operation that revealed terminal bowel cancer, and though he attempted to return to work – even chairing the war cabinet on 12 September – he tended his resignation shortly afterwards, which Churchill reluctantly accepted on 2 October.[36] Chamberlain died on 9 November 1940.

Even if not widely to be considered a strong contender for deputy status, Chamberlain did leave a significant legacy in the history of the creation of the position. As Hennessy has noted, Chamberlain's illness led to the first recorded recognition by a senior member of the civil service that a prime minister could have a 'Deputy'.[37] This first mention occurs in a note

dated 2 October 1940 – the date Chamberlain's resignation was accepted – and was prepared by the secretary of the war cabinet, Sir Edward Bridges. The matter which Bridges addressed was the thorny issue of ministerial precedence. Having reminded Churchill that he could 'settle the order of Cabinet Ministers for Cabinet purposes as he pleases', Bridges listed a number of issues, the main one being the question of 'who you want to preside over the War Cabinet when you are away'.[38] Bridges continued by adding that Attlee had presided over the war cabinet during prime minister's absences while Chamberlain had been ill, but this would lead to a minor constitutional anomaly if the Labour Party leader continued 'to be your immediate Deputy'.[39] Despite this concern, Churchill was content to allow Attlee to continue in that role, and the following day a further note from Bridges ran: 'I imagine you will probably not feel that you wanted to disturb the Lord Privy Seal [Attlee] from the position he has de facto occupied during the illness of Mr Chamberlain as your immediate Deputy.'[40] Hennessy suggests that this latter note from Bridges 'marks the moment when, de facto (to borrow his words), the deputy premiership was created in reality'.[41]

As Hennessy indicates, this moment only possessed symbolic significance rather than being suggestive of any major change to practice. As Bridges' minute reveals, Attlee's primary role was simply to continue to deputise for Churchill when required. Indeed, in a piece that discussed the reconstruction of war cabinet following Chamberlain's resignation, *The Times* makes no mention of Attlee at all.[42] However, that Bridges did acknowledge Attlee as Churchill's immediate deputy in writing – albeit in a form not designed for publication – was an important staging post on the route towards widespread recognition of this position. Furthermore, Attlee *was* increasingly recognised as Churchill's deputy following the October 1940 reshuffle. Both *The Times* and *Daily Mirror* called Attlee 'Lord Privy Seal and Deputy Prime Minister' in articles published in August 1941[43], even though he was not formally presented as such.

It was in February 1942 that a more formal form of identification of Attlee's status as Churchill's deputy arrived; though, even then, confusion ensued regarding the precise nature of this 'new' post. After a series of setbacks, not least the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942, Churchill was under mounting pressure, and feeling it:

> The real worries had to be borne almost alone. 'He [Churchill] said he was tired of it all,' Captain Richard Pim, the head of Churchill's Map Room, noted on February 18, 'and hinted that he was very seriously thinking of handing over his responsibilities to other shoulders.'[44]

The following day – 19 February 1942 – Churchill made real some of that desire to shift responsibility by reshuffling his war cabinet. As reported in *The Times* after the proposed changes:

> Mr. Churchill still combines the offices of Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, but his burden will be shared both by Sir Stafford Cripps, as Leader of the House, and by Mr. Attlee, who is to be Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for the Dominions.[45]

As noted earlier, 19 February 1942 is perhaps the most significant date in the history of deputy prime ministership in the UK, being regarded – by some authorities at least – as the start date of the office. Yet it is striking that this historic occasion passed by almost unnoticed. In the article in *The Times* mentioned above, rather than Attlee it was Stafford Cripps who received star billing in his new role as leader of the house – a position traditionally held by the prime minister.[46] The role of deputy prime minister was barely addressed; it was only Attlee's additional new role, as secretary of state for the dominions, that received significant attention.[47] Furthermore, it was Cripps, not Attlee, who drew comparison to the deputy-type role played by Bonar Law during the First World War, with

another article in the same paper suggesting that Cripps 'is to relieve the Prime Minister of some of his present duties by becoming Leader of the House of Commons, as Mr. Bonar Law acted for Mr. Lloyd George during the latter part of the last war.'[48] Similarly, in relation to the war cabinet reconstruction, Hugh Dalton – a minister throughout the wartime coalition – mentioned in his diaries that the 'entry of Cripps as L[ord P[rivy] S[eal] is very interesting', but Attlee's new title passed without comment.[49] Attlee's deputyship was, however, mentioned in the war diaries of Oliver Harvey, a diplomat who served as Anthony Eden's private secretary. Harvey recorded that when Churchill met Eden – who, by this stage, had replaced Halifax as foreign secretary – to explain the situation, 'he said that, although he would make Attlee Deputy Prime Minister, this did not mean that Attlee had any claim on the succession as the Prime Minister must be a Tory'.[50] As will be seen, this notable qualification from the first time a UK deputy prime minister was publicly announced has proved a highly significant 'fork', one that continues to influence the path of the institution into the twenty-first century.

Churchill announced the changes to his war cabinet in the Commons on 24 February, the first time a UK prime minister had acknowledged in parliament the existence of a deputy prime minister.[51] He noted that his new war cabinet drew some comparison with the Lloyd George's version, highlighting that the latter had only six or seven ministers, most of whom had no departmental duties, and that the most powerful members were the prime minister and Bonar Law. Churchill's version consisted of seven members, three without departmental responsibilities: 'One is Prime Minister, one is Deputy Prime Minister with the Dominions Office, and one is Foreign Secretary.'[52] In a fashion that was to remain frustratingly familiar through the succeeding decades, the definition Churchill provided for the role of deputy was vague: 'The leader of the Labour party, as head of the second largest party in the National

Government, acts as Deputy Prime Minister in all things, and in addition will discharge the duties of the Dominions Secretary.'[53] Later in his speech – and confirming that Attlee had already been operating as his deputy – Churchill announced: 'In my absence from this country, or should I be at any time incapacitated, my Deputy has acted and will act for me.'[54]

Thus, though Churchill's public announcement that Attlee was his deputy prime minister was another important symbolic act, it still did not mark a major change in Attlee's functions, nor did it define clearly what the position of deputy entailed. Furthermore, it seriously mudded the constitutional waters. In his account of the Second World War, Churchill alluded to the problematic constitutional situation when he recalled formalising – to an extent – Attlee's status as deputy in February 1942. He said that he proposed Attlee 'should take on the Dominions Office and should be styled […] Deputy Prime Minister', but he added that making Attlee his deputy was merely 'a change in form rather than fact' and that, crucially, 'no constitutional change would be made.'[55] Thus, though Attlee was to be known publicly as deputy prime minister, that was still not officially his role. It remained an act, even though the audience aware that Attlee was performing that particular role had expanded considerably.

One reason for this reluctance to make real the position of deputy prime minister was the attitude of George VI. The king refused to recognise a position that appeared to undermine the monarch's unfettered ability to choose a successor to the prime minister should the circumstance arise, and thus regarded attempts to introduce such a post as a 'constitutional solecism'.[56] As Hennessy has noted, in 1942 Churchill appeared cognisant of the George VI's view on this matter, thus carefully avoided putting forward the problematic title for the king's

signature of approval.[57] Attlee was only credited as 'Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs'.[58]

Churchill clearly thought long and creatively about Attlee's title. The relevant file in the archives contains a number of sheets containing a striking variety options for Attlee's position including 'Lord Privy Seal and Deputy Chairman of Defence C[ommi]tee', 'Deputy PM', 'Lord President', 'L[or]d Privy Seal and Deputy P.M.', 'Lord Privy Seal & S[ecretary] of S[tate] for Dominion Affairs', the eventual 'Deputy P.M. and S[ecretary] of S[tate] for Dom[inion Affairs]', and even 'Deputy P.M., L[or]d P[rivy] Seal & S[ecretary] of S[tate] Dominions'.[59] Tellingly, one putative list of the new war cabinet has Attlee's typed title as 'Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister', but has a thick pen stroke through the monarch-offending title, and, at the end of the full list of members, a hand-written addendum reads: 'Mr Attlee will also act as Deputy Prime Minister'. This particular formulation – will *act* as deputy prime minister – was the one that made its way into the official list of the new war cabinet reported in *The Times* on 20 February 1942[60] – and, with various future deputies, was to be used repeatedly and weaselly for decades to come. It is also worth noting that the author of the article that reported the new cabinet did not appreciate the sophistry at play because, as noted earlier, elsewhere in the piece it is reported that Attlee will 'be' Deputy Prime Minister, not merely perform that role.[61] As will be explained later, this confusion was not confined to Attlee's situation, and such vagueness has proved useful to a variety of prime ministers.

George VI put up with the 'unofficial existence' of the title which he recognised as Churchill's attempt 'to mark the special position of Mr Attlee as Leader of the Labour Party'[62] – and made no attempt to intervene to prevent Herbert Morrison's occasional

'usage' of the title during Attlee's premiership from 1945 to 1951.[63] However, the king did respond robustly to Churchill's next attempt to appoint a deputy, when, in 1951, he tried to send a list of ministerial appointments to the palace that would have involved official recognition of, in this case, Anthony Eden as deputy prime minister. The result was a demand from the king's private secretary, Sir Alan Lascelles, that the original list be destroyed and a new one prepared 'in which the words "Deputy Prime Minister" did not occur'.[64] This unambiguous response demonstrated that Churchill's 1942 declaration that Attlee would *act* as deputy prime minister would mark the boundary of the monarchy's acceptance of the existence of this post. As expressed in official guidance issued during the reign of George VI's successor, Elizabeth II,'[i]f a Minister has to act as Deputy Prime Minister this […] must appear as a footnote and not among appointments the Queen has approved.'[65]

Back in 1942, despite the constitutional precariousness of the position, the post of deputy prime minister quickly became a regular fixture of political discourse. Tellingly – and in contrast to Bonar Law who went out of his way to deny being 'deputy to the prime minister [Lloyd George] in the ordinary sense of the word'[66] – Attlee himself soon started to use the title. In a public message to Australia and the other dominions made on 26 February, Attlee remarked that:

> I hope that the appointment of myself as a member of the War Cabinet and Deputy Prime Minister may be taken as a symbol of the determination of the Government and the people of this country to do all that is in their power to help their kinsfolk beyond the seas.[67]

Attlee routinely became known as the deputy prime minister in parliament and by the press. In terms of the former, a prime example occurs during a debate on the 'War Situation' recorded in *Hansard* on 19 May 1942.[68] Attlee, leading for the government, is described as

'The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Attlee)', and is referred to throughout the debate by various MPs by that title. Regarding the press, a representative piece, this time from the *Daily Mirror* – and one which highlights that the perceived holder of the new title was not immune from typical political criticism – describes a parliamentary debate that 'was opened by Mr. Attlee, Deputy Prime Minister, whose speech was called by one M.P. "an excellent elementary lesson in geography," and by another "an insult to the House."'[69]

Moreover, despite the constitutional difficulties, officials also referred to Attlee as 'Deputy Prime Minister' and the abbreviation 'DPM' was also used, at least in handwritten additions to various papers.[70] Furthermore, though the title of deputy prime minister was missed off the official listing of the war cabinet for 22 February 1943 (again, only the position of 'Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs' was attached to Attlee's name), on subsequent versions of the list – presumably ones not seen by George VI – Attlee is recorded as 'Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister'.[71] He was also regarded as deputy prime minister by fellow members of the cabinet: the foreign secretary, Anthony Eden noted in his memoirs simply that 'Attlee became Deputy Prime Minister and Dominions Secretary'[72] while, from the Labour side, Herbert Morrison – home secretary for much of the war – recalled that Attlee 'became recognized […] as deputy prime minister in February, 1942', though Morrison added, correctly, that the position was 'not officially recognised by the Palace.'[73]

It proved a testing first few months as Attlee settled into his position as the almost universally recognised deputy to Churchill as there was little on the horizon to provide hope of an eventual military victory. And, though Cripps' challenge though came to an abrupt end after his mission to secure India's full wartime co-operation failed and he was swiftly transferred to lead the ministry of aircraft production, he was replaced by a fresh rival. In Cripps' stead as leader of the house came a figure who had already become one of Churchill's most trusted

advisers in the war cabinet, Anthony Eden. On Cripps' transfer, in November 1942, Eden – who took up this new role in addition to his existing post as foreign secretary – also replaced Cripps as third listed in the war cabinet.[74]

Significantly, Churchill's trust in Eden was such that, in June 1942, he formally wrote to George VI to suggest, in the event of his own death, the king turn to Eden rather than Attlee to form a government. Eden, Churchill declared, 'will be found capable of conducting Your Majesty's affairs with the resolution, experience and capacity which these grievous times require'.[75] However, as Norton notes, this was advice the king had no obligation to accept; the real significance of Churchill's message was that it confirmed the position he had explained to Eden during their discussions prior to the announcement of Attlee's role, namely that 'there was no presumption on the part of the Prime Minister that his deputy had any right by virtue of his title automatically to succeed him'.[76] Incidentally, Attlee was not even the minister Churchill wished to be sent for in the event that both he *and* Eden were killed.[77]

It was the case, particularly in those times when Churchill despaired of having to work with the Labour Party in general and Attlee in particular, that – among members of the war cabinet – it was Eden to whom Churchill tended to turn.[78] There is also one undated draft of a reconstituted war cabinet in the files for 1943 which places Eden above Attlee in terms of precedence, which possibly suggests some consideration of relative seniority.[79] Furthermore, there was also an awkward occasion towards the end of the war when a list of names detailing the British delegation to the San Francisco Conference – the gathering which created the United Nations – was announced. Heading the list was Eden as foreign secretary, with Attlee second. This prompted Aneurin Bevan, an outspoken Labour MP then sitting on the opposition benches, to ask of Churchill:

> […] in view of the fact that throughout the war, when the Prime Minister has been absent from the country, the Deputy Prime Minister has acted in his stead, will he explain to the House why, now that the Prime Minister is not going to the San Francisco Conference, the Deputy Prime Minister, who has been active on his behalf, is not on this occasion to be his deputy?[80]

Churchill's response to Bevan, and to others in the Labour Party who asked similar phrased questions, was that Attlee had been asked of his opinion of the plan and had agreed to go along with it because he was 'not a self-seeking man', though – tellingly – Churchill also firmly pressed the strict constitutional line that the designation 'Deputy Prime Minister is a courtesy title and one that has no constitutional authority at this time.'[81]

Despite this challenge from Eden, it is clear Attlee remained the coalition government's effective second in command. Attlee was appointed lord president of the council in September 1943, and, while the position of deputy prime minister was once again not put before George VI, a handwritten addition to the confirmation of the appointments re-stated that Attlee was to continue in that role on assuming his new responsibilities.[82] Furthermore, although Churchill did not – as might be expected – ask Attlee to take on leadership of the house responsibilities during Eden's prolonged absence in 1943[83], he did confirm that Attlee would 'continue to answer my Questions for me, should I not be present on any occasion, and must of course remain available for emergencies requiring a War Cabinet Minister.'[84] And, crucially, it was Attlee who ordinarily chaired the war cabinet in Churchill's absence.

Indeed, it seems that, informally at least, Eden was granted the position of deputy to the deputy. A minute from November 1942 from the cabinet secretary, Edward Bridges, noted that 'the Prime Minister has said that the Foreign Secretary [Eden] should preside when the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister are away.'[85] Further evidence is available in a

later telegram from Quadrant, the code name for the August 1943 conference held in Quebec between Churchill and President Roosevelt, to War Cabinet Offices in London, which included this message: 'Mr. Eden last night mentioned to Prime Minister question of Mr. Attlee's leave. The Prime Minister agreed that Mr. Eden could take charge during absence of Deputy Prime Minister.'[86]

Moreover, rather than reading Attlee and Eden as rivals, it is more appropriate to view them as forming partnership to help Churchill run the country in a time of war, and perhaps more significantly, to rein him in at times. As Jago notes, '[d]uring the first few months of 1943 Attlee and Eden, whom the Prime Minister used as his principal lieutenants, struck an informal but effective alliance when they combined in attempts to block Churchill's more exotic plans.'[87] These included Churchill's scheme to discard General de Gaulle, leader of the Free French, and a similarly ill-considered idea to occupy the Azores.[88] The partnership between Attlee and Eden was an unlikely one as they were suspicious of each other at the start of the war, but trust grew with time, not least as they shared a similar appreciation of Churchill as brilliant at times but also moody and prone to supporting potentially dangerous courses of action. In his tribute to Attlee following his death in 1967, Eden – by then the Earl of Avon – mentioned how he came to value Attlee's 'true quality' as the war progressed, adding that his contribution to the war cabinet 'was balanced, it was brief and it was firm; and the value of it to his colleagues was something beyond price in dark days of difficulty.'[89]

Incidentally, there is an approximate parallel to this situation in more recent times. Between 2010 and 2015, Nick Clegg – leader of the Liberal Democrats, the junior party in a coalition government – was identified as deputy prime minister, and similar to Attlee, possessed a pivotal role in both government policy, enjoying an effective veto on some issues, and in the allocation of ministerial positions.[90] However, William Hague was first secretary of state (as well as, initially, foreign secretary) and he was dubbed by the then prime minister and fellow

Conservative, David Cameron, as his '*de facto* political deputy', suggesting that – similar to the role Eden played for Churchill – Hague acted as an important adviser and confidant to Cameron, not least regarding party matters.[91] Furthermore, like Attlee and Eden, Clegg and Hague did find sensible accommodation.[92]

Returning to the dark days of the second world war, despite one or two challenges – and the reluctance of George VI to recognise the position – Attlee acted as deputy prime minister from 1940 through to the end of the coalition government in May 1945. The February 1942 date is significant as the first time a prime minister had publicly declared the existence of a deputy prime minister, but – as highlighted – that made no constitutional difference to Attlee's position, and, as Churchill's statement in parliament acknowledged, Attlee had been acting as his deputy before the announcement. As Hennessy suggests, there are sound grounds to argue that Chamberlain's resignation in October 1940, leaving Attlee as Churchill's undisputed understudy, was the more significant moment in the creation of deputy prime ministership in the UK. However, such is the opaque nature UK's constitution, no definitive answer can be made when Attlee first became deputy prime minister. Rather, he gradually took on the responsibilities associated with that position and assumed the mantle while, at the same time – sometimes encouraged by proclamations such as the one made by Churchill in February 1942 – the audience of those who regarded him as deputy prime minister expanded (though that audience never included the monarch).

Main duties

Turning to the what Attlee actually did, his own memoirs provide a characteristically brisk account of his duties as 'Deputy Prime Minister':

> I acted for Churchill on the fairly numerous occasions when he was absent from the country at various conferences. This gave me valuable experience for the future. It fell

> to me not infrequently to have to announce bad news to the House of Commons, notably the unexpected fall of Tobruk.[93]

Thus, for Attlee, the main task as deputy was simply to act as prime minister in Churchill's frequent absences, in other words to conduct the duty of 'carrying the baby while the PM is away' as Attlee himself put it in a letter to his brother written while Churchill was overseas in December 1941.[94] This duty Attlee performed regularly, and in many settings. For example, he regularly had to lead government business in parliament while Churchill was away, with one of his earliest tasks, in May 1940, being to introduce the Emergency Powers Defence Bill which gave the government immense power to introduce conscription and mobilise the national economy in any way it saw fit to achieve victory.[95] As Attlee noted, he also regularly had to deliver news to parliament which, particularly during the first three years of the war, tended to be of the unwelcome variety. During the latter stages of the war, while increasingly often acting as Churchill's *locum*, he also had the experience of leading the debate on the King's Speech and broadcasting the New Year's message to the nation.[96]

In this period before a regularised prime minister's question time (PMQs) was established, Attlee also had to respond as the acting head of government to the unsystematic but nevertheless persistent questioning of MPs. These questions ranged from grave matters regarding the conduct of the war to the more frivolous: 'Will the Deputy Prime Minister give a pledge not to renew the charter of the B.B.C. unless they abolish that appalling feature known as the Brains Trust?'[97] In these circumstances, and others, Attlee recognised that trying to replicate Churchill's style would have been unwise. In a letter to his brother written in August 1941 he noted: 'I had to take the place of the PM last week […] I eschewed embroidery. It is no use trying to stretch the bow of Ulysses.'[98] For some, such as Conservative backbencher Sir Cuthbert Headlam, this comparison was particularly odious: 'Attlee, who acts as Winston's second in command, is poor stuff – feeble, inaudible,

ineffective.'[99] Attlee also had to step in to provide speeches at various events. Again, comparison with Churchill was rarely favourable. As Attlee himself mentioned in another letter to his brother, Tom, in May 1943: 'it is not easy to sub for the PM. It is obviously futile to try to put on Saul's armour, but I seek in a more pedestrian style to preserve a mean between dignity of language and dullness.'[100] Nevertheless, through his unflashy frankness, he could make his mark. Even Dalton, never one to praise Attlee fulsomely, recorded in his diary after an Attlee speech that: 'He does quite well in his funny little unimpressive way'.[101] Jago suggests, not unreasonably, that by the end of the war Attlee 'had won the respect of the electorate, having been the voice of the government when Churchill was absent – as he frequently was.'[102]

In Churchill's absence, Attlee also had to conduct the general business associated with leading the country, not least chairing meetings of various meetings of the core executive such as the war cabinet and defence committee. Comparison with Churchill was generally more favourable in this department, with observers commenting on Attlee's capacity for diligence, concentration and – above all – briskness. As Morrison noted, '[t]hese meetings were not so entertaining as those with Churchill in the chair but they were more business-like and ended sooner. Attlee was a good chairman.'[103] Similarly, though more critically, Sir Alan Brooke (later Viscount Alanbrooke), Chief of the Imperial General Staff, remarked: 'A Cabinet under Attlee, how different from those under Churchill! In many ways more efficient and more to the point, but in others a Cabinet without a head.'[104] Regarding Attlee's capacity to deal with the general paperwork associated with leading the government, Jock Colville, Churchill's private secretary based in 10 Downing Street, made a further revealing observation: 'The P.M.'s absence makes an astonishing difference: there is practically nothing to do, though Attlee – who is deputizing in the P.M.'s absence – keeps on ringing up

to know whether there are any papers for him to sign, like a child with a new toy it is longing to use.'[105]

As important as Attlee's chores as Churchill's primary stand-in were, the main significance of Attlee's performance as deputy comes from those he undertook as part of his regular duties. At the heart of this was Attlee's prominent position on various committees that were largely responsible for the conduct of government during the war. These interconnected bodies were the war cabinet itself, the defence committee, and the lord president's committee which ran the civil side during the war. As Harris points out, Attlee was the only member of all three.[106] He was deputy to Churchill on the first two, though this often meant chairing them while Churchill was away. This alone meant that Attlee had an important role in the conduct of the war and was influential in foreign affairs. Nevertheless, valuable though this proved to be,[107] it was Attlee's involvement with the more domestic policy-focused of the three committees, the lord president's committee, that proved the most significant in terms of the development of the position of deputy prime minister.

As noted earlier, the lord president's committee was established during Chamberlain's brief tenure in Churchill's war cabinet with the aim of co-ordinating domestic affairs during the war. Effectively it was a steering group, initially co-ordinating the work of five civil committees (of which Attlee chaired two, those on home policy and food policy). It became, as Churchill described it in February 1942, 'almost a parallel Cabinet concerned with home affairs.'[108]Attlee was instrumental in the committee's establishment and was a prominent member throughout its existence in the coalition government, chairing it from September 1943. As John Mackintosh noted, the system of government established to run the government during the war was centred around Churchill, and it was he who controlled foreign policy, but that was only possible because he 'knew home affairs would be conducted

in the manner which gave most support to his war effort.'[109] Easy to overlook, the lord president's committee was an essential cog in the machinery of government in time of war.

Attlee's own account of this committee's founding and function is illuminating, both to explain the committee's purpose and to highlight Attlee's own priorities:

> I had long been persuaded that a small Cabinet was essential in time of war. Winston took the same view. We started with five members and although it increased a bit later we never let it get above eight. But it isn't enough to keep a Cabinet small, you've got to prevent it being snowed under, leave it free to deal with the big issues and get on with the urgent jobs. So I started by taking a look at the organisation of the Government under the old lot [Chamberlain's government], with Greenwood to help me. We found a mass of committees. […] [We] started afresh. We began with a Lord President's Committee. It had about five top-ranking Ministers with power to act, and it relieved the Cabinet of an immense amount of the civil work of government. […] [After Chamberlain and Sir John Anderson] I took over this committee. We decided differences between Ministers and acted on a whole range of matters that needed a serious decision but weren't big enough to come to the Cabinet. It made for rapid business.[110]

Hugh Dalton, who – as president of the board of trade – became a member of the lord president's committee in February 1942, remarked in his diary that the business of this committee was not always as rapid as Attlee suggested: 'This afternoon my first experience of the Lord President's Committee. It is awfully slow, and ministers talk much too long and say the same thing one after another.'[111] However Dalton recognised the committee's vital importance to running the domestic side of the war – dealing with a panoply of issues such as prices, wages and financial policy, foreign trade, food rationing, civil defence – and he also

highlighted its significance as an important body for getting Britain ready for the end of hostilities, noting – in September 1943 – that 'Attlee, as Lord President, was generally responsible for "co-ordinating" post-war stuff.'[112]

The glory days of the lord president's committee were largely over by this stage, partly because, by the time Attlee became lord president, some of its powers had been distributed to other bodies. Nevertheless, this does not diminish Attlee's crucial role in establishing the remit of committee nor the importance of his position as an influential member during the golden period when it was led by the former civil servant, Sir John Anderson (another figure sometimes known as the 'Home Front Prime Minister').[113] Anderson possessed considerable administrative ability, but lacked political standing – indeed, he did not belong to a political party – so it was largely through Attlee's membership of the committee that backing for its policies was achieved by sufficient MPs, and that the trade union movement was largely supportive of its activities.[114] In essence, Attlee succeeded in the task Churchill had hoped Chamberlain would be able to fulfil, namely to 'look after the Home Front for me', and – in so doing – left a template for future deputies to follow.

Legacy

As wartime deputy to Churchill, Attlee's job was immense. As Harris notes, he had, amongst his tasks:

> to conciliate Conservative backbenchers, reassure Labour, mediate between Labour and Conservative ministers and even between quarrelling Labour ministers, and manage Churchill's enormous political and personal idiosyncrasies. These were enormous burdens, borne largely in private.[115]

Inevitably some of these tasks were specific to that particular time, and thus carried limited significance on the future direction of the role of deputy prime minister. Nevertheless, Attlee

did leave a legacy in that role. Indeed, Attlee has remained something of a touchstone for that role. Half a century after he ceased to hold that position, Anthony Howard suggested Attlee remained the most successful deputy prime minister the UK has ever had.[116] It is also fair to suggest that, notwithstanding the untypical circumstances of both world war and, for Westminster at least, coalition government, Attlee did – as Harris suggests – give real meaning to that role.

One of the meanings that was established during Attlee's tenure as deputy prime minister was the assumption that the person given that title will be the one most likely to fill in for the prime minister when necessary (the 'holding the baby' function), for example when chairing the cabinet or responding to questions in parliament. And, although the days have long gone when Harold Macmillan would tour the Commonwealth leaving his deputy, R.A. ('Rab') Butler, to 'hold the baby' for many weeks at a time, the function remains in place to this day.[117] For example, deputy prime ministers (when they exist) are still the most likely candidates to chair the cabinet when the prime minister is absent, and this can occasionally be consequential. John Prescott's chairing of the cabinet on 19 June 1997, when Tony Blair had to leave the meeting early, was significant in the process of gaining approval for the Millenium Dome project.[118] Furthermore, Oliver Dowden is just the latest deputy to stand in for a prime minister at PMQs and, like Attlee eighty years ago, in these circumstances Dowden is referred to in *Hansard* as 'Deputy Prime Minister'.[119] This convention has now extended such that, during PMQs, the deputy leader of the opposition (currently Angela Rayner) also takes centre stage. However, as Norton notes, reflecting the lack of job specification and constitutional clarity that has existed since Attlee's day, the prime minister can still, if so minded, designate a different minister to perform these 'holding the baby' duties.[120]

Another expectation that became firmly associated with the post during Attlee's time was that a deputy would likely possess a central co-ordination role, particularly over domestic policy, one which tends to involve the chairing of various important committees. This could be called the 'running the home front' function. It was Attlee who established the role of deputy as this important behind-the-scenes facilitator; the essential, if unheralded, cog in the machine who performs – as 1944 *Observer* profile of Attlee highlighted – 'the humdrum essential work of government', and many of those who followed Attlee as deputy have assumed this role.

This was certainly the case for Herbert Morrison in the period from 1945 to 1951, when Attlee himself was prime minister. As David Marquand has explained, 'Attlee gave him a vague and ill-defined overlordship of the entire home front'[121] and, through that position, Morrison – who was widely regarded as deputy prime minister, despite George VI's disapproval of the title[122] – was responsible for co-ordinating much of the Labour administration's ambitious domestic programme.[123] Moving forward to the period between 1979 and 1988, William ('Willie') Whitelaw played a similar role. Though Margaret Thatcher was aware, correctly, that the title deputy prime minister had 'no constitutional existence', she did regard Whitelaw as her 'irreplaceable deputy prime minister'[124] and he was widely seen as such.[125] Particularly after he stopped being home secretary in 1983, Whitelaw enjoyed a highly significant central co-ordination role in domestic affairs, not least through his position as chair of the so-called 'star chamber', a key public spending committee.[126] At other times, those widely regarded as deputies such as Butler, Heseltine, Prescott, and Clegg have also performed important co-ordinating roles at the centre of domestic politics.[127] Dowden, who, on becoming deputy prime minister in April 2023, already sat on more cabinet committees (nine) than any other cabinet minister by virtue of his

position as chancellor of duchy of Lancaster – a post he continues to occupy whilst Rishi Sunak's deputy – is likely to continue in this tradition.[128]

However, despite the establishment of these two functions – 'holding the baby' and 'running the home front' – that have become, to some extent, part of the institution of deputy prime ministership, the main legacy from Attlee's period as deputy to Churchill has been the position's stubborn resistance to be pinned down constitutionally. By finding a formula to by-pass the sovereign's approval – through making the post 'a footnote' which suggests that a minister is merely acting a role – Churchill set a precedent that subsequent prime ministers have found advantageous. It allows for a senior colleague to be offered a title that confers a sense of status, sometimes to soften an accompanying blow to that minister's pride, but – when challenged – the prime minister can always claim, as Churchill did in 1945, that 'Deputy Prime Minister is a courtesy title and one that has no constitutional authority at this time.' Macmillan said something similar about his great rival Butler in 1962, when remarking in parliament, that '[t]his is not an appointment submitted to the Sovereign but is a statement of the organisation of Government.'[129] However, the most conspicuous example of this exploitation of the deputy's flimsy constitutional standing took place in 1989, when Sir Geoffrey Howe was forced out of his position as Margaret Thatcher's longstanding foreign secretary. As part of fraught negotiations, Howe managed to secure the title of deputy prime minister from a reluctant Thatcher.[130] As Thatcher put it, she used the title deputy prime minister 'in reserve as a final sweetener'.[131] Howe was quickly disappointed to find that his new position was not as substantial as he had hoped. The palace – it was claimed – demanded Churchill's evasive styling; so the statement about his new post was eventually released which bore the familiar wording: 'Sir Geoffrey will act as Deputy Prime Minister'.[132] Sir Bernard Ingham, the Downing Street press secretary, compounded Howe's misery by emphasising the constitutional emptiness of the title.[133] In his memoirs, Howe

reflected that his short-lived position as deputy was one marked by a sense of 'responsibility without power'.[134]

The position of deputy prime minister appears more secure now. On the government website, it bullishly claims that Dowden was 'additionally appointed Deputy Prime Minister on 21 April 2023' rather than the traditional, he will *act* in that capacity.[135] Yet, there is no evidence available to suggest that the monarchy has formally accepted the position of deputy prime minister. The still-current Cabinet Manual only refers to the deputy prime minister as a 'title sometimes bestowed', whereas, in contrast, 'a minister may be *appointed* First Secretary of State to indicate seniority'.[136] It also remains the case that no minister named deputy prime minister has taken on this role without an additional position: as Attlee became dominions secretary while deputy, so Dowden remains chancellor of the duchy of Lancaster and secretary of state in the cabinet office. Additionally, there have been many periods where prime ministers have not publicly designated anyone to be deputy prime minister; though, quite often, there has been a figure widely regarded in the light, even if the title that 'dare not speak its name' has been carefully avoided. Peter Mandelson, Damian Green and David Lidington are recent examples of this phenomenon, which just adds to the constitutional fog. It is also the case that there is no definitive list of ministers who have held the office of deputy prime minister. Even Heseltine, who – in a period between 1995 and 1997 – performed a role that ticked all the traditional criteria used to indicated deputy prime ministership such as being styled deputy prime minister in *Hansard*[137], was, as noted earlier, still referred to by the then prime minister as 'a Minister acting as Deputy Prime Minister'.[138] As such, it is perfectly possible that all prime ministers since Churchill have avoided offending the monarch by simply not submitting the problematic title for royal approval. Thus, as yet, no 'seals of office' pertaining to the deputy prime ministership have required

collection, nor has it been necessary for any salary or pension been drawn in respect to the position.

Consequently, through the careful maintenance of a piece of constitutional legerdemain performed by Churchill back in 1942, the curious situation where a government can present to the world a minister to be widely regarded as second only to the prime minister in terms of seniority, whilst not unduly disturbing the sovereign's supposed unfettered ability to appoint a future prime minister, has been preserved for over eighty years. And will likely continue to do so for some time to come, provided nobody investigates too closely.

One important feature of this powerful institutional legacy is that being named deputy prime minister has proved to be no advantage in terms of succession, in marked contrast to the situation in the US where many vice presidents have gone on to become president. Attlee did become prime minister in July 1945, but that was because he was leader of the victorious party at a general election not because he had been Churchill's deputy, and Eden did succeed Churchill in 1955, but that was more because he had long laboured under the weight of being widely considered Churchill's 'crown prince' rather than the influence of his nebulous position of deputy since 1951.[139] After Eden, no-one widely regarded as deputy prime minister has gone on to gain the keys to No. 10. Indeed, there have been many occasions where a prime minister has been keen for the deputy *not* to succeed them and acted on that impulse: Attlee with regard to Morrison; Macmillan with regard to Butler; Thatcher with regard to Howe. In each case, personal enmity was the motivation.[140] Cameron also would have been keen for his deputy, Clegg, not to succeed him, but for different reasons. To use the language of March and Olsen, in normal circumstances, no unwritten rule or routine has been established to connect the institution of deputy prime minister to the idea of likely

succession. Former chancellors of the exchequer or foreign secretaries appear far more likely candidates.

The succession issue also includes the potentially important matter of who should take over the business of leading the government in times of crisis. Since Churchill's telegram to George VI expressly to advise that his declared deputy should *not* be the one chosen in the event a successor was needed in urgent circumstances, the situation has remained that there is no automatic procedure to maintain leadership of the government should disaster strike. In the event of the prime minister's sudden death, a deputy could be considered for the role of acting or interim prime minister until the main party of government had chance to elect a new leader, but this is far from guaranteed. According to Norton, the likely candidate would be a senior figure in the cabinet, but also one not seeking to contend the party leadership.[141] A minister of sufficient political weight based in the House of Lords would be ideal. However, even this is merely well informed speculation. Despite various occasions where senior officials have had to consider such circumstances – such as the aftermath of the bombing of the 1984 Conservative Party Conference in Brighton – there remains 'no agreed mechanism for ensuring continuity.'[142]

The most recent incident to test the UK's capacity to conduct business in the absence of a functioning prime minister occurred in April 2020, when Boris Johnson was hospitalised with symptoms of coronavirus. At that time, however, there was no designated deputy prime minister. The closest was Dominic Raab, in his capacity as first secretary of state, and it was indeed Raab who, while Johnson regained his health, performed various acting prime ministerial roles, such as chairing the cabinet and the national security council, and representing the UK at a virtual summit of G7 leaders.[143] However, it need not have been Raab. It only was because Johnson, before being rushed to St. James Hospital, had the

opportunity to specify that Raab was 'to deputise for him where necessary'.[144] It is easy to presume Dowden, as the current designated deputy, would likely replace Sunak should a similar, or worse, event occur, but – in the conspicuous absence of that 'agreed mechanism' – this too remains speculation.

Conclusion

This article has made the case that the manner by which Attlee became deputy prime minister – not via official appointment, but largely through performance – is a story of significance. It established a procedure whereby a prime minister could identify a designated deputy without having to make any changes to the constitution, and – once this path had been established – it has proved difficult for prime ministers to turn away from this path to plough a more constitutionally secure furrow. As illustrated, it is also the case that there has been little incentive for successive prime ministers to challenge a situation which often works to their advantage.

In addition, is has been argued that some of the functions Attlee established as part of this performance have provided meaning the concept of deputy prime ministership. These include functions dubbed here as 'holding the baby' and the 'running the home front', functions that remain part of the duties of the current deputy, Oliver Dowden. Attlee's legacy as deputy prime minister remains potent.

A final point to be made is that exploring the role of the deputy prime minister is not simply a matter of identifying an interesting constitutional curio. As Steven Barnes remarks:

> Deputy Prime Ministers are usually overlooked in discussion of political leadership. It is understandable that they do not attract the spotlight as their stories tend to be less exciting than those of their leaders. However, such an omission overlooks the role

> played by deputies in the political process. Leaders need support to be successful, and deputies are an essential pillar in the political process.[145]

Though Barnes was referring to the situation in New Zealand, this point seems to apply to the UK too. It is notable that the three prime ministers who populate the top three positions in recent league tables that record perceived postwar prime ministerial success (Attlee, Thatcher and Blair),[146] all possessed long-standing and politically substantial deputies (in Morrison, Whitelaw and Prescott respectively), which is not the case for prime ministers at the other end of these tables. Perhaps similar to Attlee himself at one time – 'the forgotten Minister' – it has been all too easy to miss the significance of this unshowy, constitutionally inscrutable, yet sometimes vital part of the government machinery; one that can, on occasion, still operate as the 'brace of the Cabinet'.

Notes

[1] Works include Bew, *Citizen Clem*; McKinstry*, Attlee and Churchill;* Harris, *Attlee*; Jago, *Clement Attlee*; Thomas-Symonds*, Attlee: A Life in Politics*; Beckett, *Clem Attlee*.
[2] National Archives, Kew (henceforth NA) CAB 164/1393/1, Cabinet Office Precedent Book, 1973-1978, Annex C, No. 10 Handbook, material dated 1959.
[3] *Cabinet Manual*, 22.
[4] Norton, "A Temporary Occupant of No. 10".
[5] Harris, *Attlee*, 208.
[6] Blick and Jones, *Premiership*, 10.
[7] Hennessy, *Hidden Wiring*, 16.
[8] March and Olsen, "The New Institutionalism"; March and Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions*.
[9] Pierson, "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics".
[10] Krasner, "Approaches to the State".
[11] Kirkup and Thornton, "Elusive Position".
[12] Norton, *Governing Britain*, 141.
[13] Bogdanor, *Monarchy and the Constitution*, 88.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Hennessy, *Hidden Wiring*, 14; Gay, "Deputy Prime Minister", 2; Norton, *Governing Britain,* 143; Brazier, "The Deputy Prime Minister", 177.
[16] *House of Commons Debates* (henceforth *HC Deb*), vol. 263 cols. 798-799 (July 14, 1995); the others on the list are Rab Butler, Willie Whitelaw and Geoffrey Howe. Most other lists of those widely recognised as deputy prime ministers are more expansive and tend to include Herbert Morrison and Anthony Eden. To bring this list up to date, the ministers after

Michael Heseltine's stint as deputy who would like have met John Major's criteria are John Prescott, Nick Clegg, Dominic Raab, Thérèse Coffey (during Liz Truss' brief premiership), and Oliver Dowden.

[17] *HC Deb*, vol. 263 cc. 798-799 (July 14, 1995).

[18] Norton, *Governing Britain*, 143.

[19] Brazier, "The Deputy Prime Minister", 182.

[20] Gay, "Deputy Prime Minister", 2.

[21] Dalton, *Political Diary,* 195.

[22] https://www.redmolotov.com/what-would-clement-do-tshirt, accessed 26/07/22.

[23] Bew, *Citizen Clem*, 547.

[24] Quoted in Harris, *Attlee*, 232-3.

[25] Jago, *Clement Attlee*, 117.

[26] McKinstry, *Attlee to Churchill*, 5.

[27] Bew, *Citizen Clem*, 248.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Attlee, *As It Happened*, 114.

[30] Self, *Neville Chamberlain*.

[31] NA PREM 5/431, 1940-1945 Ministerial Appointments, note from Edward Bridges to Churchill dated October 2, 1940.

[32] Colville, *The Fringes of* Power, 121, diary entry for May 10, 1940.

[33] Self, *Neville Chamberlain,* 438.

[34] Churchill quoted in Self, *Neville Chamberlain*, 439.

[35] McKinstry, *Attlee and Churchill*, 211.

[36] NA PREM 5/209, letter from Churchill to Chamberlain dated October 2, 1940.

[37] Hennessy, *Hidden Wiring*, 15-16.

[38] NA PREM 5/431, note from Edward Bridges to Churchill dated October 2, 1940.

[39] Ibid. The anomaly was that Attlee would, in cabinet, preside over the new lord president, Sir John Anderson, while on the lord president's committee – on which Attlee was a member – the situation would be reversed.

[40] NA PREM 5/431, note from Bridges to Churchill dated October 3, 1940.

[41] Hennessy, *Hidden Wiring*, 16.

[42] *The Times*, "Reconstruction of the Government", October 4, 1940.

[43] *The Times*, "Mr Churchill meets the President", August 15, 1941; *Daily Mirror* "At 3pm Attlee Radios Secret to You and U.S.", August 14, 1941, 1.

[44] Gilbert, *Churchill*, 718.

[45] *The Times*, "A New War Cabinet: Easing the Prime Minister's Burden", February 20, 1942.

[46] Ibid. Note, Cripps at this stage had been (and was to be again) a Labour MP. However, in 1939, he had been expelled from the party in reaction to his advocacy for the creation of a 'popular front' of anti-Conservative forces, one that included the Communist Party. Churchill appointed him ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1940 and Cripps returned in 1942 as one of the most popular politicians in the country.

[47] Ibid.

[48] *The Times,* "Cabinet Reduced to Seven", February 20, 1942.

[49] Dalton, *Second World War Diary*, 373, diary entry for 19 February 1942.

[50] Quoted in McKinstry, *Attlee and Churchill*, 292.

[51] *HC Deb*, vol. 378, col. 37, (February 24, 1942).

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid., col. 38.
[54] Ibid., col. 42.
[55] Churchill, *Hinge of Fate*, 80.
[56] Wheeler-Bennett, *King George VI*, 797.
[57] Hennessy, *Hidden Wiring*, 16.
[58] NA PREM 5/211, Ministry of Winston Churchill, 10 May 1940: part 3.
[59] Ibid.
[60] *The Times* "A New War Cabinet", February 20, 1942.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Wheeler-Bennett, *King George VI*, 797.
[63] Ibid.
[64] NA CAB 164/1393/1, note by Sir Alan Lascelles titled "Deputy Prime Minister", dated October 28, 1951.
[65] NA CAB 164/1393/1, Cabinet Office Precedent Book, 1973-1978, Annex C, No. 10 Handbook. Brazier notes that Elizabeth II was fully aware of this point and 'continued her father's objections' (Brazier, "The Deputy Prime Minister", 176).
[66] *HC Deb*, vol. 90, col. 492, (February 13, 1917).
[67] *The Times*, "Victory After Dark Days", February 26, 1942.
[68] HC Deb, vol 380 cols. 43-204 (May 19, 1942). See also *HC Deb*, vol. 378 col. 1509 (March 18, 1942); *HC Deb*, vol. 383 cols. 168-9 (September 9, 1942)
[69] *Daily Mirror*, "M.P.s Attack Premier and Govt.", May 20, 1942. See also, *Daily Mail*, "Million Tons – in Ships", March 23, 1942.
[70] NA PREM 5/211, Ministry of Winston Churchill, 10 May 1940 (coalition government): part 3.
[71] NA PREM 5/431. 1940-1945 Ministerial Appointments.
[72] Eden, *The Reckoning*, 322.
[73] Morrison, *An Autobiography*, 209.
[74] NA PREM 5/431, 1940-1945 Ministerial Appointments.
[75] Churchill, *The Hinge of Fate*, 375. See also Wheeler-Bennett, *George VI,* 544.
[76] Norton, "A Temporary Occupant of No. 10", 26.
[77] Ibid. The minister to be called upon in that event was Sir John Anderson, of eponymous shelter fame.
[78] Rhodes James, *Anthony Eden*, 263.
[79] NA PREM 5/212, Ministry of Winston Churchill, 10 May (Coalition government): part 4, letter from Churchill to Attlee dated 12 March 1943.
[80] *HC Deb*, vol. 409 cols. 997-8 (March 22, 1945).
[81] Ibid. Attlee's memoirs confirm he 'had no hesitation in accepting his [Eden's] leadership' (Attlee, *As It Happened*, 132)
[82] NA PREM 5/212, confirmation of approval of appointments by the King, undated but sent September 1943.
[83] NA PREM 5/212, Ministry of Winston Churchill, 10 May (Coalition government): part 4, letter from Churchill to Attlee dated 12 March 1943.
[84] NA PREM 5/212, letter from Churchill to Attlee dated March 12, 1943.
[85] NA PREM 5/431, note by Bridges entitled 'Precedence of Minister' dated November 23, 1942.
[86] NA PREM 5/212, cypher telegram from Quadrant to War Cabinet Offices dated August 28, 1943.

[87] Jago*, Clement Attlee*, 137.
[88] Eden, *The Reckoning*, 386 and 391-392.
[89] *House of Lords Debates*, vol. 285 cols. 1341-2 (23 October 23, 1967).
[90] Hazel and Yong, *The Politics of Coalition*, 61-63.
[91] BBC "Hague"; to note, the office of first secretary of state was created by Harold Macmillan in 1962 to signify Rab Butler's seniority without having to use the monarch-offending title 'deputy prime minister'. For a while, first secretary of state worked as an effective signal of *de facto* deputy prime ministership, but this convention broke down (see Thornton and Kirkup, "Rab to Raab").
[92] Clegg, *Politics*, 74 and 204-205. This accommodation had a literal dimension. Clegg and Hague shared the 'grace and favour' country retreat of Chevening, though, as Clegg notes, '[n]ot at the same time; that would have been taking coalition cooperation a little too far', 74).
[93] Attlee, *As It Happened*, 125. According to Dalton, Attlee's memoirs are 'unbelievably laconic. No statesman who was not an Englishman could have written such a book.' (Dalton, *Political Diary,* 621, diary entry for 11 April 1954).
[94] Harris, *Attlee*, 193.
[95] Bew, *Citizen Clem*, 255-256.
[96] Thomas-Symonds, *Attlee: A Life in Politics*, 117-8.
[97] *HC Deb*, vol. 407 col. 1625 (February 1, 1945). PMQs began in 1961.
[98] Thomas-Symonds, *Attlee: A Life in Politics*, 104.
[99] Headlam, *The Headlam Diaries,* 208, diary entry for June 18, 1940.
[100] Quoted in Jago, *Clement Attlee*, 139.
[101] Dalton, *Second World War Diary,* 295, diary entry for October 15, 1941.
[102] Jago, *Clement Attlee*, 5.
[103] Morrison, *Autobiography*, 209.
[104] Brooke, *War Diaries 1939-1945*, 452, diary entry for September 13, 1943.
[105] Colville, *The Fringes of Power*, 424, diary entry for August 4, 1941.
[106] Harris, *Attlee*, 179.
[107] Gilbert, *Churchill*, 651. It is likely Attlee's most important foreign affairs intervention came in support of Churchill when, just the days after the formation of the coalition, he – with his fellow Labour member of the war cabinet, Arthur Greenwood – supported Churchill's rebuff of Lord Halifax's suggestion (hesitantly backed by Chamberlain) to negotiate peace with Hitler.
[108] Quoted in Morrison, *Government and Parliament*, 32.
[109] Mackintosh, *The British Cabinet*, 495.
[110] Attlee quoted in Williams, *A Prime Minister Remembers*, 40.
[111] Dalton, *Second World War Diary*, 384, diary entry for February 26, 1942.
[112] Ibid., 646, diary entry for September 27, 1943.
[113] Bew, *Citizen Clem*, 249.
[114] Harris, *Attlee*, 180.
[115] Harris, *Attlee*, 179.
[116] Howard, "History offers scant hope to bearer of grand title", July 6, 1995, 3.
[117] Extending the metaphor introduced by Attlee, there is a cartoon by Vicky - one reprinted in Rab Butler's memoirs - which shows Macmillan about to leave for a long overseas trip. Also pictured are an anxious-looking Butler with seven screaming babies. The caption has

Macmillan saying to Butler: 'Well, so long Rab! I'm off to see the family, but I know you are the best baby-sitter we have!' (Butler, *Art of The Possible*, 197).
[118] Campbell, *Alastair Campbell Diaries*, 62-64, diary entry for June 19, 1997.
[119] *HC Deb*, vol. 733, col. 724, (June 7, 2023).
[120] Norton, "A Temporary Occupant of No. 10".
[121] Marquand, *The Progressive Dilemma,* 104.
[122] Wheeler-Bennett, *King George VI*, 797.
[123] Donoughue and Jones, *Herbert Morrison*.
[124] Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, 27.
[125] Stothard, "What now for the ever loyal lieutenant?".
[126] Garnett and Aitken, *Splendid! Splendid!*.
[127] Kirkup and Thornton, "The Elusive Position".
[128] Freeguard and Tingay, "Cabinet Committees".
[129] *HC Deb*, vol. 663 cols. 632-3, (July 19, 1962).
[130] Howe, *Conflict of Loyalty*, 586-590.
[131] Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, 757.
[132] Howe, *Conflict of Loyalty*, 590; note, there is some debate whether the palace had actually been contacted, but, such is the power of the convention, Howe believed it anyway.
[133] Bevins, "Tories in turmoil".
[134] Howe, *Conflict of Loyalty*, 602
[135] Gov.uk, "Deputy Prime Minister".
[136] Cabinet Manual, p.22, author's emphasis.
[137] Kirkup and Thornton "Elusive Position", 497.
[138] Note, Heseltine himself was fully aware of the wispy constitutional nature of deputy prime ministership, so insisted on various other guarantees and symbols of status including possession of an imposing office (Heseltine, *Life in the Jungle*, 484).
[139] Eden, *Full Circle*, 266.
[140] Kirkup and Thornton "Elusive Position".
[141] Norton, "A Temporary Occupant of No. 10".
[142] Norton, "A Temporary Occupant of No. 10", 22.
[143] Thornton and Kirkup, "As First Secretary of State". Note, Raab was later identified by Johnson as his deputy prime minister, but not until 2021.
[144] Prime Minister's Office, " A Statement".
[145] Barnes, "What About Me?", 49
[146] Theakston and Gill, "The Postwar Premiership League"; Royal Holloway Group, "British MPs on British PMs". It is also telling that Thatcher's performance as prime minister was widely deemed to have dipped once Whitelaw was forced to retire in 1988 (see Garnett and Aitken, *Splendid! Splendid!*).

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