



# CLEMENT ATTLEE

BORN 1883  
DIED 1967

ADM IT 1904; CALL 1906;  
PC 1935;  
PRIME MINISTER 1945-51



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MEMBERS PROFILES

## PROFILE

Clement Attlee was born on 3 January 1883 in Putney, the seventh of eight children. His father, Henry Attlee, was a solicitor and senior partner in the firm of Druces and Attlee, whose offices were in the Middle Temple. After being home-schooled, Attlee was educated at the preparatory school Northaw Place and then Haileybury College, both in Hertfordshire. At Haileybury, which had a strong military ethos, Attlee became an enthusiastic member of the Volunteer Rifle Corps. After leaving Haileybury in 1901 Attlee went on to University College, Oxford, where he studied Modern History. He specialised in Italian and Renaissance history and graduated in 1904 with a second-class degree.

After leaving Oxford Attlee followed in his father's footsteps and entered the legal profession, although without any great enthusiasm for it. He had been admitted to the Inner Temple on 30 January 1904, and in the autumn of that year entered the Lincoln's Inn chambers of Sir Philip Gregory. His father's connections meant he had already dined at the Inner Temple; he was called to the Bar in March 1906.

In October 1905, Attlee accompanied his brother Laurence to the Haileybury Club, a club in Stepney, East London for working-class boys, run by former Haileybury College pupils. It was connected to the Territorial Army, and volunteers were expected to become non-commissioned officers. Attlee, deeply loyal to his old school and fond of the military, was impressed and soon became a regular visitor. On 13 March 1906 he became a second lieutenant in the Territorial Army's 1st Cadet Battalion and was soon at the club almost every evening. In March 1907 he became its resident manager, living in the club and receiving an annual salary of £50, although continuing to practise as a barrister. Later that year he joined the Fabian Society and for the first time declared himself a socialist. In order to gain a greater understanding of trade unions, he joined the National Union of Clerks. In early 1908, he joined the Stepney branch of the Independent Labour Party, shortly becoming its secretary.

Attlee's father, Henry, died on 19 November 1908; with greater financial freedom as a result of the money he inherited, Attlee was able to leave the legal profession, formally withdrawing in 1909. He stood (unsuccessfully) as the ILP candidate in the Stepney borough election and became more active in national political campaigns. By the time war broke out in 1914, Attlee was deeply involved in London left-wing politics.

During the First World War, Attlee served in the Army: he became a captain in 1915 and a major in 1917 and saw action at Gallipoli and in Mesopotamia and France. After the war, he left the army and continued to rise through the Labour Party's ranks. He became MP for Limehouse in November 1922, a seat which he held until February 1950. He served as under-secretary of state for war in the Labour government of 1924 and as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in 1930 and 1931 under the second Labour government. In the 1931 election, Attlee was one of the few Labour MPs to retain his seat; consequently, he took more and more of a leading role in the party throughout the decade. During leader George Lansbury's illness from December 1933 to June 1934, he acted as deputy leader, and was elected the following year to the national executive committee. After Lansbury's resignation in October 1935, Attlee was elected leader of the party; he remained in this position for twenty years.

Attlee served as Deputy Prime Minister and Dominions Secretary in the coalition government during the Second World War, after initially being appointed Lord Privy Seal in May 1940. He was the chairman of the Food and Home Policy Committees and also sat on the Defence Committee and the Lord President's Committee, and served in the War Cabinet. One of his main achievements was reforming and streamlining the machinery of government, making the system of committees more efficient. During the war he became close to Ernest Bevin, whose loyalty greatly strengthened Attlee's position in the party. In the post-war 1945 election, Labour achieved a landslide victory and Attlee became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

Socialism was at the core of Attlee's government; his Cabinet included seven ex-miners and fifteen ministers had been to state schools. It is perhaps best remembered for creating the cradle-to-grave Welfare State: the introduction of the NHS meant that for the first time treatment was offered free of charge at the point of use to all. The passage of the National Insurance Act meant that workers became eligible for a wide range of benefits; thousands of council houses were built, and many industries were nationalised. Internationally, Attlee was a keen supporter of the United Nations and committed to the process of decolonisation; he orchestrated the granting of independence to India and Pakistan in 1947. He was also instrumental in Britain's development of the atomic bomb.

Attlee stepped down as party leader after Labour's October 1951 election defeat. In December 1955 he was elevated to the peerage as Earl Attlee and Viscount Prestwood and entered the House of Lords. He was made an honorary Bencher of the Inner Temple in 1946 and appointed Knight of the Garter in 1956.

Attlee married Violet Millar on 10 January 1922. They had three daughters and a son: Janet, Felicity, Alison and Martin. Violet died in 1964; Attlee died of pneumonia on 8 October 1967 in Westminster Hospital, having lived in a flat in King's Bench Walk until shortly before his death. His funeral was held in the Temple Church.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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