WORKING PAPER

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Ernest Bevin: Lessons for Today

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The great historian Alan Bullock took over a thousand pages and three volumes to give his verdict on Ernest Bevin, British Foreign Secretary from 1945 to 1951. So I will preface my short remarks today with an important caveat. Please do not expect a belt-and-braces, cradle-to-grave account of the life and times of Ernie Bevin from 1881 to 1951; or a definitive judgment on every single thorny debate he was involved in, from the general strike to the question of Palestine.

I know that Professor Anne Deighton at Oxford is currently working on Bevin. There is Andrew Adonis's very good recent biography, and there are esteemed Bevin experts in the audience like my friend Gill Bennett, formerly the chief historian at the Foreign Office.

Let me also flag the work of two of my former graduate students, who have helped me formulate my own thoughts: Dr. Nick Kaderbhai, who wrote an excellent PhD on the British Left and questions of international order before 1945 (including Bevin, William Beveridge, John Maynard Keynes, and Hugh Dalton); and Dr. Andrew Ehrhardt, whose book on Foreign Office postwar planning is due out later this year and really captures a golden age of deep strategic thinking on King Charles Street, which I believe remains a model for today.

In today's remarks, I do hope to do some limited historical service in capturing the heroic if flawed elements of the Bevin story—and what you might call the essence or the ethos of his foreign policy. But I won't use my time to recount the better-known elements of that story—such as the formation of NATO or the Berlin airlift—because I want to leave some room to apply some lessons for today.

Indeed, the inspiration behind today's lecture is an essay I wrote in the New Statesman before Christmas called "The Rise of Machinepolitik." The theme of that essay was that we are in a moment in which raw power—economic power, military power, technological power, productive and purchasing power—is being exerted in international affairs with a force and an unapologetic brusqueness in a way we have not seen in generations (perhaps at any point this side of 1945).

This, I argued, is particularly hard for those with progressive sensibilities to adjust to. It is particularly jarring challenge to a worldview which has some prominent advocates in the British foreign policy debate— one that argues for the primacy of international law and the need for humility about our historical sins as a nation when stepping beyond our shores. Indeed I have engaged in some gentle back and forth on this subject with Professor Philippe Sands, who has respectfully offered an alternative reading of the international system—one stressing the resilience of a "rules-based order —in a subsequent essay in *The Spectator*.

Despite the scale of the challenges, however, I also argued in the New Statesman essay against a counsel of despair and what I call a "possum-like" approach to the world around us—that is, the habit of pretending to be dead when the predator approaches, in order that you aren't eaten alive. In my view, fortune will favor the brave in this new era. So we need Bevinite doggedness and ingenuity—and above all a sense of purpose in our foreign policy—rather than succumbing to Spenglerian angst.

Usefully, there are ample examples of similar moments in history, in which those with progressive sensibilities were shocked into a forcible reappraisal of their assumptions by the bracing winds of world affairs. Interestingly, for the considerations of those in today's British government, there are striking examples of how figures on the left—including those at the center of Labour Party history—adapted to these changes with tough-mindedness, strategic thinking, and skillful statecraft. Clement Attlee, of whom I wrote a biography before I went into No. 10 [Downing Street], and Ernest Bevin, his foreign secretary from 1945 to 1951, are two of those figures.

Indeed, Attlee has already been cited by the current prime minister [Keir Starmer] as an inspiration for the government's foreign policy at his first NATO summit, which took place a few days after the general election and which I attended as an advisor. As he told NATO allies in Washington, DC: "We must mobilize what Bevin called . . . our 'collective moral and material force'" (a phrase that I will come back to, because it is an important one).

Meanwhile, Foreign Secretary David Lammy has made Bevin one of the heroes of his concept of "progressive realism" (along with Robin Cook, Blair's first foreign secretary, who is taken to represent the progressive side of that equation). This concept is explained in a Foreign Affairs essay that appeared last year in which the foreign secretary praised Bevin for being "committed to realism, a politics based on respect for facts." The examples used to illustrate the point included his role in the acquisition of the nuclear deterrent, the stiffening of the US position on the blockade of Berlin, and the formation of NATO. Less good was the fact that Bevin—in the foreign secretary's words—"too breezily justified the wrongs of colonialism through claims that such measures were taken in the national interest."

It is a theme to which the foreign secretary returned in his Locarno speech last month [January 2025], when he praised Bevin for being able to see through the geopolitical fog that clouded the horizon after 1945. Consonant with the prime minister's evocation of Bevinite notions of "moral and material force," Bevin was praised as a "minister of action" who did not wait for the fog to clear before designing

and executing a strategy to "preserve peace by mobilising force." Again, I think this is important framing and right language. Action. Mobilization. Spiritual and material force.

And so, as a biographer of Attlee and also another great foreign secretary, the Conservative Lord Castlereagh, I welcome this invocation of the past. And it provides a timely opportunity to do some further excavation of the historical record.

To frame my remarks, I think it worth drawing out three characteristics in the political life of Bevin that strike me as particularly resonant today, though not necessarily replicable.

First, Bevin's style. By which I mean his disposition, core assumptions, and approach to political struggle. Bevin's formation took place in the trade union movement. He was the general secretary of the biggest amalgamated trade union in the most industrialized country in the world, for over two decades (1922 to 1945). He was parachuted into a parliamentary seat in 1940 to serve in the cabinet, but he was not, by training or inclination, a parliamentarian.

So the Bevin of dock strikes, industrial disputes, and labor negotiations was the same Bevin who took [Anthony] Eden's seat at Potsdam in 1945 and faced down Stalin, telling him via a bemused translator that in Britain "we call a spade a spade." His style was abrasive and flecked with some unpleasant prejudices—against Jews and Catholics, for example—but his background made Bevin a unique and effective political force who took on communism, fascism, pacifism, and bourgeois liberal intellectualism in a direct and uncompromising matter. He also blew away the cobwebs in the Foreign Office and empowered its better and more dynamic side, creating an organization that thought more deeply and did more stuff.

Second, questions of substance. By which I mean some of the key interventions and decision points on which Bevin exerted his full political weight—before 1945 and afterward—including the few times when there was a difference between him and Attlee. Yes, there was a hard and unsentimental realism. But there was also far more idealism than is sometimes understood. At peak moments of enthusiasm, Bevin went so far as to entertain more utopian goals of achieving a new world order of federated states, or at least a united Europe, though he stepped back considerably from each professed goal when the crucial moment came.

But Bevin's ethic of statecraft was also consciously differentiated from what he saw as the self-conscious moralism of others on the left. Looking at the key foreign policy debates of his era, one can see this tussle playing out—between a legalistic form of progressive politics based on the conscience, personal ethics, and rights of the individual and a Bevin-Attlee-Dalton alternative that emphasised a duty to the societal collective, including—particularly at times of international competition—an unapologetic defence of the interests of the nation-state.

Third, questions of strategy. Following on from substance and style, I want to get to a broader point about grand strategy in the era of Bevin. To be clear, I do not think the circumstances that enabled Britain to pursue the grand strategy it did in the Attlee-Bevin era are easy replicable today. They came about from a unique convergence of Keynesianism, the Beveridge Report, coalition government, full employment, and mobilization for full-scale industrial great-power war.

But I do think the strategic characteristics of Bevin's approach are worthy of further distillation. And that perhaps we could learn something from the fact that Britain was able to pursue a genuine grand

strategy in this era—harnessing all the elements of national power, aligning its foreign policy to its economic strategy, and making long-term choices—a point I will return to as I close the lecture.

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First, let me turn to questions of style and substance. To set the scene, Ernest Bevin was born into poverty in 1881 in rural Somerset, just sixteen years after the death of Lord Palmerston. He never knew his father, and his mother, a servant girl, died when he was eight years old, so he went to live with his half-sister's family. He had little formal education but taught himself to read, often reading the newspaper for his family or union colleagues.

He began work the age of eight of eleven, as a laborer and then a lorry driver at the Bristol docks. In his obituary, The Times [London] described him as a "working-class John Bull," which was partly due to his manner and partly due to his thickset frame. Bevin was, for a time, a lay preacher. Yet his skill at corraling and mobilizing was steered toward a life-long commitment to trade unionism. He was an advocate of the so-called New Unionism, which was an effort to break down the differences between the different trades and skilled and unskilled labor. This was the inspiration behind the Transport and General Workers' Union, which he established by amalgamating thirty different unions into one. Bevin believed that the "salvation of the working man was to be achieved not through political revolution but through industrial organisation." Attlee summed up his philosophy nicely: "[He] never forgot that politics, whether domestic or international, are concerned with the lives of ordinary men and women."

Bevin's lifelong distaste for communism derived from his trade union background. It was the ideology but also the hyperfactionalism and harsh Leninist realpolitik that he thought so deleterious to his efforts to build up working-class solidarity. He was a ferocious opponent of any idea of a united front between Labor and the far left, even after Ramsay McDonald's betrayal and the formation of the National Government left Labour decimated.

Bevin is quoted, perhaps apocryphally, as responding to a question from King George VI on how he had acquired such a wide knowledge of public affairs, saying: "Sir, it was gathered in the hedgerows of experience." It was the dock strikes of 1911 and the concomitant role of industry and shipping in great-power politics that gave him a sense of the increasing interconnectedness of domestic and foreign policy. His introduction to American trade unionism on a visit in 1915 was also a formative experience in broadening his perspective. He became a life-long champion of the International Labour Organization.

For Bevin, global disorder was driven by the distortions of modern capitalism.

So any viable international order would have to end the scramble for raw materials, by a rational and equitable sharing of resources, supplies, and distribution between the great powers. He came to believe that the international legal structures of the League of Nations were too detached from the productive forces that underlay national power and the interwar battle to enhance national power. In contrast to what he saw as traditional diplomacy, he saw the economic and industrial dimensions of statecraft as increasingly important to foreign policy.

One might call this approach "collectivist" in its ethos. Everyone in and around the Labour movement in the interwar years shared a desire to make good on the promises of the League of Nations. But there was a tension at critical moments between those who emphasized primary responsibility to the

societal collective first—i.e., the nation-state—and those for whom ideas of universal or inalienable rights represented a higher goal and purer form of politics.

An early example is Attlee's falling out with his brother over the latter's pacificism during the First World War, which Attlee regarded as a form of "anarchic individualism." Patriotism was the glue that held society together, for Attlee. Rights were not natural or inalienable; they were dependent on the faithful rendering of duties to the collective.

But it was Bevin more than anyone else who became the symbol of Labour's toughening attitude to the world crisis over the course of the 1930s—taking on pacifism, opposing the idea of a popular front, and arguing that the threats from fascism and Communism made rearmament and mobilization an imperative.

By the autumn of 1933, Bevin and Attlee began to join forces to attack the pacificism of the Labour leader George Lansbury and figures like Stafford Cripps who had gone so far as to table a motion in favor of a general strike if the government attempted to mobilize the country for war.

This rumbling dispute was brought to a head by Italy's invasion of Abyssinia in October 1935, which presented the greatest challenge to international order since the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931. The news of the invasion reached England on the eve of the Labour Party conference. In a famous scene, Ernest Bevin rose in front of the hall and accused Lansbury of "hawking [his] conscience around from body to body" as the world about him caught fire.

For Bevin, Lansbury's mistake was to put his faith in a rickety international architecture, which was set up with great intentions after 1918 but was crumbling all around them. The best way to defend civilization was not to seek solace in a personal ethical code or cling to high legalism. It was to mobilize resources in the search for collective security. The first step was to support the government on rearming for war, embracing the demands it would place on industry and the unions.

Crucially, as the League of Nations fell apart, Bevin did not give up the project of building a new international order. The work was more important than ever before. In 1939, he joined a working group on world order at Chatham House and read H. G. Wells's 1940 book on the same theme [The New World Order]. There were immense problems with western capitalism. But—like Orwell, Wells, and the patriotic left—he was convinced of the superior merits of western civilization against those who were trying to snuff it out.

The immediate task was to pay for the war in a way that left some hope for reconstruction. In November 1939, John Maynard Keynes published two letters in The Times on "Paying for the War," which he sent directly to Attlee and Bevin. He argued for a bulk percentage of all incomes to be paid directly to the government, partly to serve the war machine and partly as compulsory savings to prepare for its aftermath, when high levels of inflation would hit.

Interestingly, the plan was greeted with some dismay in Labour circles as a potential assault on working-class living standards. Attlee made the point that the working classes had often sought a safety net through insurance schemes and holding their own property, as well as co-op shares and post office and savings bank deposits. Giving this up for a new social contract would be seen as risky. Ultimately, Keynesian economics was to become the foundation stone of the Labour government of 1945–51, but the marriage was not as straightforward as one might have presumed.

On May 14, 1940, as the public learned that Labour would come into government under Churchill, the cartoonist David Low captured the event with a famous cartoon captioned "All behind you, Winston." It depicted Churchill marching into battle with his sleeves rolled up. Alongside him marched the leading figures in the Labour Party. First by Churchill's side was Attlee; next Bevin, the new minister of labor and national service; and third was Herbert Morrison, the leader of London County Council, who became the minister of supply (as well as Peter Mandelson's grandfather).

This trio made up Labour's "big three" in the government. Their responsibility was for the home front—mobilization of manpower and industry, and preparations for national defense. They were joined by Hugh Dalton, who became minister of economic warfare, and who was also given the brief for special operations and subversion in Germany after Dalton expressed the view that such work—subterfuge and appealing to German workers to undermine the Nazi regime—"needed to be done from the left."

On entering the Ministry of Labour in 1940, Bevin drafted a memo on the diplomatic service reform to Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden. He complained about the neglect of social questions in British foreign policy. Diplomatic cables too often ignored "what the working people are thinking and feeling in the various countries…. Only extreme movements become of interest because they menace the existing order of society."

A few months later, Bevin gave a speech to the Lancashire unions identifying the opportunity for social reconstruction that was emerging. Cooperation between government, employers, and workers—and an open debate on how best to organize industry for the short and the long term—was, in his view, the "antithesis of the totalitarian state."

Domestic and international reconstruction were two sides of the same coin, as captured in Labour's dramatic contribution to Article Five of the Atlantic Charter in 1941. Late at night, as cables came in from Newfoundland, Attlee and Bevin inserted their own edits, calling for the "fullest collaboration" on "improving labour standards, abolishing unemployment and want, [and] securing economic advancement and social security for all people." This was accepted by the American team (with one revision—the removal of "abolishing unemployment"), partly because it chimed with Roosevelt's New Deal agenda.

But there were tensions with other forces in the Labour Party who grew impatient at the deferral of an election and the continuation of the coalition even after it was clear the war would be won. In foreign policy terms, the first test was the fate of postwar Greece. As members of the war cabinet, Attlee and Bevin had been anxious not to allow Greece to fall to Communism, to the extent of propping up a military junta. If Labour was to win office, Bevin warned in late 1944, it could not carry out policy on the basis of "emotionalism." Foreign policy could not be reduced to matters of black and white, or right and wrong.

When he became foreign secretary in 1945, against expectations, the Daily Herald presented Bevin as the ideal heir to Churchillian robustness in diplomacy. Within days of the election, he and Attlee returned to Potsdam. On arrival, Bevin declared, "I'm not going to let Britain be barged about." To the discomfort of the American secretary of state Jimmy Byrnes, he took the fight to Stalin, even though a lot had already been agreed upon beforehand. One of the features of the early Cold War was that Bevin's robustness against Stalinism outstripped that of his American counterpart.

Given the time remaining, it is not possible to go into any great depth on all the challenges he faced as foreign secretary. But it is worth pausing for a moment on the critical year of 1947 to demonstrate the extent to which almost every issue—the US postwar loan, nuclear sharing, Indian independence, the Mandate for Palestine, the future of Greece, the Marshall Plan, and the Truman doctrine—was interconnected.

In this context, Bevin's advocacy for an independent nuclear deterrent—which Attlee shared but the Treasury strongly opposed—was partly about achieving a level of independence from the United States, given Britain's debtor status and near bankruptcy. As he said, following his latest argument with Byrnes, "I don't want any other Foreign Secretary of this country to be talked to or at by a Secretary of State in the United States as I have just had in my discussions with Mr. Byrnes. We've got to have this thing over here whatever it costs," he said of the bomb, and: "We've got to have the bloody Union Jack on top of it."

In January 1947, then, he and Attlee engineered a secret cabinet subcommittee to push the plan through. But then followed the biggest dispute between the prime minister and his foreign secretary in their time in government. Attlee believed that the costs of the bomb could be justified and covered by the fact that it would allow quicker demobilization, including a huge drawdown from the Middle East. But Bevin and the military chiefs firmly rejected a proposal to draw down 200,000 troops in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean.

By this time, Bevin had decisively given up on the idea that Britain could be a Third Force in world affairs—using the Commonwealth and perhaps even the vestiges of the French Empire as a balancer between the Soviet Union and America. Alignment with Washington was the key to strategic solvency. However, this bet on America required Britain to continue to demonstrate its independent value wherever it could. A full-scale withdrawal from the Suez Canal and other areas would cause the US to "write us off," Bevin warned.

Meanwhile, he was able to point to other successes in January 1947, which gave the prime minister confidence in his foreign secretary's overall strategy. Above all, he was making progress in his attempts to persuade the Americans to help shoulder the burden in the Eastern Mediterranean—particularly in Greece and Turkey, where thousands of British troops were garrisoned and which were both coming under Soviet pressure.

Significantly, Bevin found a willing partner in George Marshall, the US secretary of state who, in January 1947, replaced Byrnes. In a June 1947 speech at Harvard University, Marshall spoke of an urgent need to assist Europe in its economic recovery. Bevin, seizing the opportunity, became a champion of what became known as the Marshall Plan. As Attlee later commented, "I don't believe that Marshall, when he made his speech, had any idea it would be taken up as Bevin took it up."

The day after the speech, Bevin assembled his advisors in the Foreign Office to shift British grand strategy up a few gears. British leadership in Western Europe was to provide a funnel through which American military and economic power could be used to balance against the Soviets. Bevin began to advocate what he called a "Western Union," "a sort of spiritual federation of the West." The building blocks were put into place with the Treaty of Dunkirk in March 1947 between Britain and France, the Treaty of Brussels in March 1948, and eventually the North Atlantic Treaty in April 1949.

As I said at the outset, there are a number of subjects on which Bevin's record is far more problematic, unimpressive and indeed flawed—such as the events leading up the end of the British Mandate in in May 1948. British policy was thrown sideways by Truman, but it failed on many of its own counts. One was a failure to fully absorb the geopolitical impact of the Holocaust. The second was the way in which the government scuttled and shuttled its responsibilities over to the UN. Ultimately there were so many competing strains on policy—from the potential damage to the US relationship at the most critical moment to the fear of providing an opportunity for the Soviet Union—that they lost strategic control as well as moral authority.

On the handling of Indian independence, there is too much to be said to even attempt a judgment here. Given the social and national forces at hand, the room for maneuver was even more reduced. Partition was a hurried, chaotic, and deeply problematic process. The death toll and levels of violence that followed far outstripped those which followed in the Middle East. But looking at the parliamentary debates, memoirs, and the views of contemporaries, it is striking that—on the decision-making process and the question of moral authority—Bevin and Attlee were deemed to have come out better than they did on Israel-Palestine.

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Time is drawing to a close. So let me finish with an attempt to distill the grand strategic lessons of Bevin's overall approach.

First, it was a foreign policy that had, as its center of gravity, the pursuit of the security, economic, and social interests of the British people. Notions of international law and universal human rights were deemed important and desirable, but the first order of business was the remaking of the wartime and postwar social contract in Britain itself. The period of economic strife after 1918—and the failure to deliver on promises made to those who had fought in the war—was the defining experience for Bevin's generation. The ultimate success of the government in all areas of policy would be judged against what people had in their pockets, over their heads, or on their dinner table.

Second, it was a foreign policy that began by identifying and then designing plans to counter the driving forces of anarchy and disorder. Some of these driving forces were structural and, in Bevin's mind, represented the nadir of the international capitalist system he had been born into in late Victorian Britain. He saw international competition as being fueled by monopolies, the hoarding of resources, and the forcible acquisition of territory to feed these needs. Properly functioning international institutions were needed to arbitrate this. But some of the drivers of anarchy and disorder were political, national, ideological, and imperial—the way that other nations or leaders behaved or acted.

So there was to be no apologia for Communism, and he had immense impatience with those who dilly-dallied over rearmament, or who had a purist view that salvation would come from international law.

Third, it was a foreign policy with strategic purpose and vision. Bevin was no simple materialist. He was a former lay preacher who evoked the "spiritual dimension" of foreign policy. He looked upward. He built things designed to last. At the peak of enthusiasm, he would conjure up images of world federation in which resources would be shared equally across the globe. But equally he recognised that a new international order could not be achieved by the force of reason alone. To be sustainable, it would need a balance of power and the collective summoning of productive forces to provide the necessary

foundations, onto which the legal superstructure would be built. And though it was not his ideal, the nation-state remained the organizing entity around which a foreign policy had to be constructed.

Finally, this combination of substance, style and strategy gave Bevin's foreign policy a unique dynamism and energy: one by which Britain, which was much weakened by 1945, could shape events rather than simply being shaped by them.

This I would characterise as an activist, creative, imaginative posture in foreign policy—to do things, build things, move first, take risks, deter before things get worse, demonstrate your power to allies as well as adversaries, and take a stand when needed. Some of this Bevin had gleaned through a lifetime at the coalface of industrialism or through his experience in the mobilization of manpower. As foreign secretary, it manifested itself as an ability to summon and channel all the elements of national power—from productive force to science to diplomatic ingenuity, indeed to the nuclear bomb—in the pursuit of national or allied goals.

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Today, we sometimes paint a picture of the order built out of the Second World War as some sort of high ground reached in the arc towards natural justice, from which we dare not fall off the other side. But this would be to miss a major lesson of the construction of that order in the first place—that it required blood, sweat, tears, imagination, personality, decisiveness, productive power, hard power, and, as I put it in my opening remarks, the mobilization of material and spiritual force.

Looking around the world today, we might pause on what this story tells. From defense production to energy to AI, it is in the hands of those nations that are able to harness productive force toward a higher purpose—and to do as part of a collective effort—that the next world order will be shaped.