VIII
POSTMASTER GENERAL: 1945

I think we were all astonished by the result of the election in the autumn of 1945.[371] Never before had the Labour Party won a clear majority of seats in the House of Commons. Churchill had gone to the electorate as the victorious war leader, far superior to a mere Party Leader, to whom the people of Britain owed more than to anyone else in the competing political parties. But the war had held up the progress of social reform and economic advance, and the men coming home from the front were looking for a new deal. This had been forecast in the vision of the future adumbrated by Sir William Beveridge[372] in his famous Report on post-war society.

Those who like myself had been Labour Ministers in the wartime Coalition were not unnaturally expecting to be offered a post in the new Government. I had heard that the new Minister of Agriculture, Tom Williams,[373] who had served as a junior Minister in this Department during the war, wanted me as his spokesman in the Lords. This was the most important of the junior appointments in the Upper House, because the majority of Peers were landlords and many farmed their own land. So I was pleasantly surprised when the new Prime Minister, Mr Attlee, offered me the much more interesting and responsible appointment of Postmaster-General. As he had at one time held this office himself,[374] I felt sure that he would not have chosen me if he had not thought I would be up to the job, and this was very reassuring. At the same

[371] The result was declared on 26 July 1945 with Labour winning a landslide, gaining 393 of 640 seats.

[372] Sir William Beveridge (1879–1963), later Baron Beveridge, academic and briefly Liberal MP. Author of the 1942 report 'Social Insurance and Allied Services' (better known as the Beveridge Report), which among other things argued the need to abolish the 'five giants' of want, squalor, ignorance, idleness, and disease and has influenced the policies of all British post-war governments, but particularly those of the Labour government of 1945.

[373] *Tom Williams was a delightful person and I would have been delighted to serve under him if Attlee had not thought otherwise.* Tom Williams (1888–1967), later Lord Williams of Barnburgh, Labour MP and minister; minister of agriculture and fisheries, 1945–1951.

[374] Attlee served briefly in 1931 as postmaster general in Ramsay MacDonald's minority Labour administration.

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time, with no previous experience of industry or business, I was not a little alarmed, as the youngest of His Majesty's Ministers of Cabinet rank,[375] by the prospect of becoming the largest employer of labour in the country and the head of what was in fact a huge business concern. The office of Postmaster-General had a long and respectable ancestry. It can be traced to 1510, when Henry VIII appointed Brian Tuke[376] to be his Master of the Post, in charge of all the King's Messengers. But the modern Postmaster-General had a great deal more to do than his Tudor predecessor. He was responsible for the Postal Service, which employed over 100,000 postmen to deliver 30,000,000 letters or parcels every day, not to mention the members of the staff of branch Post Offices and Sorting Offices in all the Regions of the Post Office throughout the United Kingdom. He also ran the inland and overseas telegraph and telephone services, and was the banker to whom half the population entrusted its savings. The duties of the Postmaster-General were further increased during my term of office by the transfer of responsibility for the British Broadcasting Corporation, after the winding up of the wartime Ministry of Information. For the efficiency or inefficiency of all three services I, and my excellent Assistant Postmaster-General in the House of Commons, Mr Burke,[377] were responsible to Parliament. We were sometimes referred to as that dangerous couple, Burke & Hare (the notorious murderers).[378]

But I need not have worried. I was in fact no more than a glorified public relations officer, I suppose rather like the Chairman of the Board of Imperial Chemical Industries, or of any other great company in the private sector. The services provided by the Post Office were of course administered by the Director-General, or the professional heads of each of the separate organisations in the field of communications for which I was responsible. I well remember the dapper and elegant Sir Thomas Gardiner,[379] in his Savile Row suit, the Director-General of the Post Office, at its headquarters at St. Martins-le-Grand, coming every morning for several days to my office while he explained to me the ramifications of the Post Office and the many different duties that I was expected to perform. I sat at my huge desk and listened attentively, feeling as I did when as a University student I was imbibing a tutorial from my learned tutor.

[375] He was 38.

[376] Sir Brian Tuke (d.1545), court official who served Henry VIII and Cardinal Wolsey.

[377] Wilfrid Burke (1889–1968), Labour MP, assistant postmaster general, 1945–1947.

[378] Spate of infamous murders that occurred in Edinburgh committed by William Burke and William Hare in 1828.

[379] Sir Thomas Gardiner (1883–1964), director general of the Post Office, 1936–1945.

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On my first morning I was slightly daunted by the attendant with his top hat and red coat, who greeted me and showed me to my new office. But I soon found that the Post Office was a very friendly place and that there was no need to be tied to my desk in London. It was far more exciting to visit the telephone exchanges and Post Offices in other parts of the country, meeting some at any rate, of those who worked there. Northern Ireland was one of the Regions into which the Post Office was divided, and it was pleasant to go there while a British Minister was still welcome everywhere in the province.

I was fortunate enough to arrive at the Post Office in 1945, when officials were already considering the issue of Victory stamps. Everyone was entirely confident that Parliament and the public generally would welcome such an issue. So I had to set about finding the best artist I could to design the new stamps. Of course I had to point out to any artist wishing to submit a sketch for consideration by the Post Office the limits within which he would have to work. The major factor was the Monarch's head, which would appear in the centre of the stamp. In those days it had not been removed to the top corner.[380] One advantage at any rate, for the design of British stamps, at that time alone in the world, was that it did not have to include the name of the country issuing the stamp. In recognition of the introduction of the penny postage by Sir Rowland Hill[381] in 1840, an invention which brought the post for the first time within reach of the ordinary wage earner, other countries who had since profited from our example had agreed to allow us to leave out the name of our country. My instructions to the designers were the first step of a process that lasted for about a year.

As soon as the artists were ready with their sketches, these were submitted to a number of important bodies for advice about their artistic merits and acceptability to the public. These expert bodies included the Post Office Advisory Council, the Council for Art and Industry, and the Royal Fine Arts Commission. In this way the designs of inferior artistic quality or lesser public appeal were weeded out, leaving the best of the artists sketches for submission to the King. It was at this stage that I received a summons to Buckingham Palace.

The common opinion that the Royal approval of the new postage stamp is a mere formality, like the approval of Acts of Parliament, is entirely erroneous. His Majesty showed a keen and expert interest in

[380] *The design of new stamps, such as the issue of victory stamps, was limited by the placing of the monarch's head in the centre. Placing it in the corner has really made modern designs possible.*

[381] Sir Rowland Hill (1795–1879), postal reformer and official.

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the various designs, and had himself to choose the sketch that was ultimately used for a new issue. The Monarch can always suggest a minor alteration, and I believe the King liked to consult the Queen about the rendering of his own head. I need hardly say that this does not affect the constitutional position, whereby the Post Master General has the entire responsibility for whatever is finally decided, and must be prepared to accept either the brickbats or the applause of the press. Having received His Majesty's decision, the path was then clear for the printing of the many millions of new stamps as were likely to be required. There must be a sufficient number to meet the first day rush of enthusiastic collectors worldwide, and to cover ordinary public demand for a reasonable period of time. As a footnote to my experience of producing a postage stamp I should perhaps add that I was extremely nervous about the correct protocol for my first meeting with the King.

I should obviously bow when entering the room, but how should I leave it? I thought that it would be rather rude to turn my back on His Majesty, and so I started to shuffle uncomfortably towards the door, wondering how soon I would collide with a piece of furniture. But His Majesty, with perfect tact, solved my predicament by turning right round and looking out of the window.

The only direct contact I can remember with the BBC, was during the fuel crisis in the winter of 1947, when I was asked by the Cabinet to find out whether the Corporation could save a certain amount of electricity. This was rather a delicate matter, and could only be framed as a request, as otherwise it would look like an attempt by the Government to interfere with the sacred independence of the BBC. Sir William Haley[382] responded immediately with fine public spirit by making some domestic cuts in BBC programmes and hours of broadcasting, which saved a very large amount of precious coal. During my term of office I found myself faced with the difficult responsibility of re-appointing the Chairman and Board of Governors of the Corporation. I was much relieved to find that the Cabinet regarded this task as so important that it was taken entirely out of my hands.

Soon after my arrival at St. Martins-le-Grand I received a charming and encouraging letter from my immediate predecessor, Captain Crookshank M.P.,[383] whose universal popularity was a very useful asset. I should like to quote this letter dated August the 8th, 1945.

[382] Sir William Haley (1901–1987), newspaper editor and official; director general of the BBC, 1944–1952.

[383] Harry Crookshank (1893–1961), later Viscount Crookshank, Conservative MP and minister; postmaster general, 1943–1945 and leader of the House of Commons, 1951–1955.

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My dear Listowel,

I was profoundly touched by your kind letter of yesterday and thank you for it. I can only wish you as happy a period of office at St. Martins-le-Grand as I have had myself. Of course if I can be of any (unofficial) help to you, I am at your service 'pro bono G.P.O. [General Post Office]'.

In spite of the election and all the rest of it, I can't some how feel any different to all those members of your Party with whom one worked amicably for so long until three months ago – that I imagine is the secret of British political life!

Yours sincerely,
Harry Crookshank

It was not surprising that with his genial personality Churchill appointed him as Leader of the House of Commons in his post-war administration.[384]

One of my first duties after my appointment was to attend the launching of the 'Monarch', the largest cable ship in the world, which had just been completed in a shipyard on the east coast. It had been built and equipped to lay and repair submarine cables, in the vast cable network which connected us by telephone and telegraph to the American continent and overseas countries of the Commonwealth. There was a comfortable cabin reserved on board for the owner of the ship – the Postmaster-General. I was told by my officials that a minor repair was required for the cable between London and Copenhagen, and that the Danish Post Office would be delighted if I was to join the ship for the visit. When I asked the Prime Minister for his permission, he immediately grasped the opportunity this offered to inform the Danish public about the work of the Labour Government. So I delivered a lecture in Copenhagen about the recent improvements in our social services, including the introduction of the National Health Service. I had no other chance of 'showing the flag' elsewhere on this magnificent ship during my period of office.

I soon learned several things about the Post Office that one could only learn from the inside. I had not realised that persons as well as things can be sent through the post by express messenger, so that I could also post myself if I wished to do so. As a Post Office messenger has to accompany the goods, this is a convenient method of travel for unaccompanied children or blind persons. This facility has not always been used as it was intended. In the campaign for Women's

[384] *The tolerance and mutual respect between the parties in the last sentence of Captain Crookshank's letter has certainly diminished since the war, but still exists and makes democracy work.*

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Suffrage, two leading Suffragettes posted themselves to 10 Downing Street. On this occasion the Post Office was thwarted in achieving successful delivery, when the Prime Minister's Butler refused to accept these dangerous postal packets.

Sometimes the official heart gets the better of the official head. Many letters reach the Post Office at Christmas addressed to Santa Claus in some especially cold corner of the globe. If the letter includes the writer's name and address, the correct course is of course to 'return to sender'. But when a letter came from an obviously poor home, the hat went round among postmen or sorters, so that a doll or a teddy bear can arrive on Christmas morning with love from Santa Claus.

I spent many hours in my office when I first came to St. Martins-le-Grand on the saddest of my official duties, the signing of letters of condolence to the next of kin of every employee of the Post Office who had lost his or her life in the war, at home or abroad. 70,000 men and women from the Post Office joined the services on the outbreak of war or soon afterwards. Of these 3,800 gave their lives as soldiers, sailors or airmen, while 415 died at their posts as civilians. General Eisenhower[385] paid them a fine tribute in a letter to my predecessor, Captain Crookshank.

I quote:

> The building of the necessary forces for the operations had involved the construction of a network of communications radiating from points of vital importance in the United Kingdom. The greater part of the work has been undertaken by Engineers and Staff of the General Post Office. It is my great pleasure, on behalf of the Expeditionary Force, to pass on my sincere appreciation for their contribution of the long hours they have worked and the co-operation they have given toward our success.
>
> Signed: Dwight Eisenhower

This of course was in reference to the Normandy landings.

One of the most important functions of the Postmaster-General had always been the issue of postage stamps. This was a matter of concern not only to the philatelist but to stamp dealers all over the world, and also to the Government, which earns substantial revenue from the sale of postage stamps. It is hard to decide how often to make a new issue, and this difficult and important decision rested with the Postmaster-General. Before the last war it was customary for a new permanent issue to appear at the beginning of every

[385] General Dwight 'Ike' Eisenhower (1890–1969), supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, 1943–1945, and later Republican President of the United States of America, 1953–1961.

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reign with the head of the new Monarch engraved on each denomination. These permanent issues, starting from the famous Victorian 'Penny Black',[386] have been supplemented, since the Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1923, by a number of special issues to commemorate events of outstanding significance in our national life. Since the last war, there has been a larger number of special issues that at any time since the introduction of the postage stamp, and they have continued to multiply, so that the original purpose of special issues has been to a large extent diluted by the interests of the Treasury.[387] We are now more like some foreign countries who have always regarded stamps as no more than a revenue-producing commodity, and are constantly putting new designs into circulation.

Too often the fate of Ministers, just as they have got the hang of how a new Department works, has been to find themselves transferred to another Department they know absolutely nothing about. This is exactly what happened to me. I must admit that when Mr Attlee asked me, in the spring of 1947, to leave the Post Office for the India Office, I parted with a pang of regret from a great public service and complex business undertaking, which after a year and a half of intensive study I felt I had just about begun to understand. I was sorry to say goodbye to the senior officials who had given so much time and effort to the education of a pupil now about to leave them. I would also miss my regular talks with the Leaders, Mr Geddes[388] and Mr Edwards,[389] of the two great Trade Unions, the Union of Post Office Workers and the Post Office Engineering Union, whose co-operation and support had made it possible to avoid any industrial strike. To these, and many others at all levels of the Post Office, I shall always be grateful for their kindness.

I still enjoy a pleasant reminder of my happy days at the Post Office whenever a new issue of postage stamps comes along, and my postman brings me a First Day Cover with an example of each new postage stamp in mint condition. As neither I, nor any member of my family collects stamps, I have kept these examples of each new issue long enough to give them better value, when I have sold them to give the proceeds to charity. But I suppose it was natural for the Prime Minister, looking for a successor in the House of Lords to

[386] Issued in 1840.

[387] *There has been a very large increase in the number of 'special issues' of postage stamps since my day and the Treasury has defeated the Post Office.*

[388] Charles Geddes (1897–1983), later Lord Geddes of Epsom, trade unionist, general secretary of the Union of Post Office Workers, 1944–1956.

[389] John Edwards (1904–1959), trade unionist and Labour MP, general secretary of the Post Office Engineering Union, 1938–1947.

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Lord Pethick-Lawrence,[390] to choose me, with my experience of India as a Minister in the wartime Coalition to fill this gap in his Cabinet.[391] I remembered the advice of a very old friend, Sir Gilbert Laithwaite,[392] in the Civil Service: 'In politics you should never ask for anything and never refuse.'

[390] Frederick Pethick-Lawrence (1871–1961), later Baron Pethick-Lawrence, Labour MP and peer, secretary of State for India, 1945–1947.

[391] *I only found out later from Mountbatten that I was his choice.*

[392] Sir Gilbert Laithwaite (1894–1986), civil servant and diplomat; private secretary to the viceroy, 1936–1943; deputy under-secretary of state for Burma, 1945–1947 and for India, 1947; and permanent under-Secretary for Commonwealth Relations, 1955–1959.

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