‘When I reached the Dorchester for my luncheon with [J. Arthur] Rank, there was a huge board (with results) in the hall. Many people were watching it, mostly with glum faces. Already Labour had gained over a hundred seats.’ So wrote the former spy, Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart of the Foreign Office in his diary for 26 July 1945 about the outcome of the General Election. ‘When I came down from Rank’s room, the faces round the board were even glummer’, Bruce Lockhart recorded. ‘Labour had now over 300 seats with over 150 more results to come. A complete majority over all other parties was therefore certain … . Labour had won a complete and, to the extent of its magnitude, a startling victory.’

‘You’ve had a revolution’, President Truman said to King George VI on meeting him at Portsmouth seven days after the Labour Party’s resounding victory. ‘Oh no! We don’t have those here’, replied the monarch, and, indeed, nothing comparable with, say, the constitutional upheavals of the seventeenth century had occurred or was at all likely. What had taken place was an electoral revolution. The 1945 Election witnessed the defeat of the Conservative and Unionist Party, which, together with its allies, had dominated British politics since the Representation of the People Act of 1918 had created a modern mass electorate. At every inter-war General Election, the Conservatives and their allies had secured more votes than their Labour or Liberal rivals, and one consequence of that electoral record was that, with the brief exceptions of the minority Labour Governments of 1924 and of 1929–31, Conservative or Conservative controlled Coalition or National Governments had been in office throughout the period. The Conservatives and their allies had won the General Election of 1935 handsomely, obtaining 53.5 per cent of the votes cast and a majority of 247 seats over all other parties in the House of Commons, a feat that
was unmatched in any later Election in the twentieth century. When the electoral truce that had operated during the Second World War was abrogated following the defeat of Nazi Germany, the Conservatives were widely expected to win the 1945 Election too, not least because they were led by Churchill, previously the Prime Minister of the victorious wartime Coalition Government. That Labour triumphed and went on to form its first majority Government was, then, a remarkable event. For, by obtaining more votes than the Conservatives, and, in part, as a result, securing a substantial Parliamentary majority, the Labour Party had confirmed the political position that the prominence of its Ministers in the work of the wartime Coalition Government from 1940 onwards had won for it. The pattern of British electoral politics had changed from one of Conservative dominance to that of a two major party system, and the General Election of 1945 had emphasized this in dramatic fashion.

As many political myths came to surround the General Election of 1945, it seems best to set out the actual facts. The numbers on the electoral register who recorded their vote is sometimes shown as 73.3 per cent of those eligible, or, when allowance is made for two-member constituencies, 72.8 per cent. The Labour Party secured 11,967,746 votes, representing 48 per cent of those cast, which resulted in it winning 393 seats. The Conservatives and their allies obtained 9,972,010 votes, representing 39.6 per cent of those cast, which meant that they won 210 seats. The Liberals attracted 2,252,430 votes, representing 9 per cent of those cast, which led to them securing 12 seats. Of the other parties, the Independent Labour Party retained its 3 seats – all in Glasgow; the Communist Party won 2 seats, retaining Western Fife and winning Mile End; the Irish Nationalists retained the two member seat of Fermanagh and Tyrone; and the Common Wealth Party retained the Chelmsford seat that it had won earlier in the year at a by-election. In addition, 17 Independents were elected. The net swing against the Conservatives and their allies compared with the outcome in 1935 was 23 per cent in Birmingham, 18 per cent in Portsmouth, Southampton and Plymouth, 17.5 per cent in London and Leeds, 14.5 per cent in Edinburgh, 14 per cent in Sheffield and Manchester with Salford, and 11.5 per cent in Bristol. The net adverse swing was 6.5 per cent in Liverpool, and 2.5 per cent in Glasgow where of their seats the Conservatives lost only Kelvingrove, and then by a mere 88 votes. In Scotland as a whole the net swing to Labour was 7 per cent, in contrast with Wales where the figure was 12 per cent. The comparable swing in the counties around London was a remarkable 18 per cent, and no less than 20 per cent in...