The smack of infirm government

Within a week of becoming Prime Minister in April 1955, Sir Anthony Eden announced that a General Election would be held in the following month. As the Conservative Government had maintained full employment and the Welfare State, and as the economy seemed to be characterized by boom conditions, a Tory Election victory was always the most likely outcome. Just to make certain, many later thought, or as an act of economic policy mismanagement, which seems more likely, Butler’s Budget in April 1955 included a sixpence reduction in the standard rate of income tax. At the Election in May 1955, the Conservatives’ overall majority in the House of Commons increased from 17 to 58,1 only just short of the 60-seat margin anticipated by Woolton as Party Chairman.2 Eden pronounced the outcome ‘better than I had dared hope’.3 The Conservatives obtained 49.7 per cent of the poll,4 which was the highest percentage obtained by any political party or alliance of them since 1935, and it was to be neither equalled nor bettered during the rest of the twentieth century. During the Election campaign, the Austrian Treaty was signed by the USA, the Soviet Union, France, and Britain leading to the withdrawal of foreign troops from Austria, and that country’s unification, independence, and neutralization, for which Eden had been negotiating for years.5 The Geneva Summit Conference in July 1955 gave Eden an opportunity to star on the world stage, even if, as might be expected on the Acheson principle, little was achieved. All told, Eden’s Prime Ministership could hardly have got off to a better start than it did in its early weeks. Yet, a mere 20 months later, in January 1957, in the wake of the Suez adventure, Eden felt compelled to resign.
The decline in the authority of both Eden and the Government he led was swift even before the Suez crisis. Attlee’s explanation was that Eden had an unenviable task in following Churchill as Prime Minister, and that Eden lacked experience of running a team. Further, as Churchill had earlier observed, Eden had ‘no experience at all of home affairs. He has always done the Foreign Office, and done it well. But I don’t know how he will get on with all the home stuff.’ Strictly speaking, Eden had Ministerial experience at the Dominions Office and the War Office, but both had been for a matter of months, which meant that Eden’s political career had been overwhelmingly concerned with foreign affairs. Eden continued to intervene, much to the irritation of Macmillan, the actual Foreign Secretary down to December 1955. ‘He kept on sending me little notes, sometimes twenty a day, ringing up all the time’, Macmillan recalled. ‘He really should have been both PM and Foreign Secretary.’ Eden preferred to appoint the compliant Selwyn Lloyd as Macmillan’s successor. Though it was foreign affairs, the area of his expertise that brought Eden down, there was no doubting his unsureness of touch outside that sphere, especially when it came to economic policy. ‘Get rid of Butler’, Woolton had advised Eden on the latter’s first day as Prime Minister, and Butler should have gone for his own sake in May 1955 instead of, as it turned out, making way for Macmillan as Chancellor of the Exchequer in December 1955, to become Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Commons. Staying on as Chancellor meant that Butler had to introduce restrictive economic measures made necessary by the nature of the boom that, as it turned out, the April 1955 Budget had fuelled, and by a run on sterling consequent on rumours that ROBOT was to be revived, speculation added to by Butler’s continued presence at the Treasury. The raising of indirect taxes in the ‘pots and pans’ Budget of December 1955 proved to be a damaging way to leave. That Eden himself had no ideas of any value about economic policy was evident both from his Bradford Speech of January 1956, and from the minutes he wrote to Macmillan as Chancellor. As for Macmillan himself, one economist of the private detective genre was being indulgent in suggesting that Macmillan had come to the Treasury 20 years too late. Macmillan’s solitary Budget in April 1956 was memorable only for the introduction of Premium Bonds, and for eventual improvements in economic statistics, the existing ones being often ‘too late to be useful’ making them like ‘looking up a train in last year’s Bradshaw’. Meanwhile, with the Butler boom brought to a halt, the economy stagnated. Macmillan was to give the Prime Minister and his colleagues such poor