

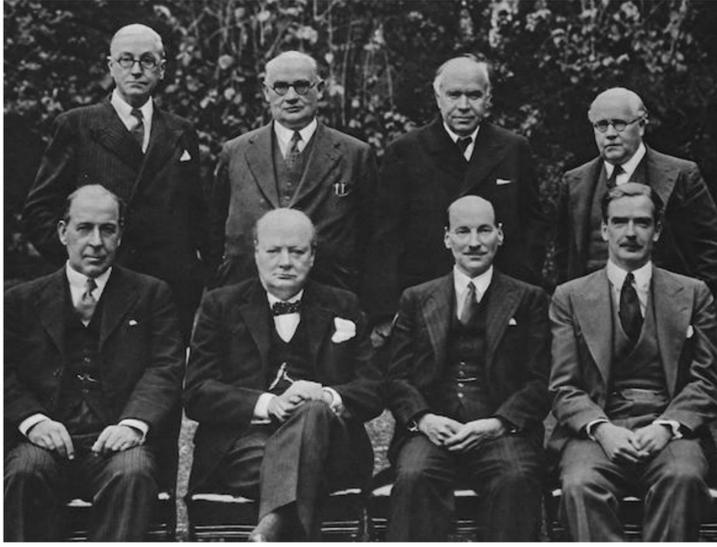


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A coalition government is not the answer

Cross-party government worked in wartime—but this is not a war. Those clamouring for coalition should remember that

by David Owen / April 4, 2020 / Leave a comment



The war cabinet, 1941. Photo: John Short/Zuma Press/PA Images

I am opposed to a coalition government.

Labour under Attlee opposed a coalition when the war started in 1939, believing the time was not right under Chamberlain, and no one knew how long what became known as the “phoney war “ would last. In May 1940 we did literally face our darkest hour. This was the time for a coalition. A cross-party movement of MPs had been building up to remove Chamberlain and many of them, but by no means all, wanted Churchill. He made it clear we were in for a long struggle over many years. This short compression of history—which I described in a book called *Cabinet’s Finest Hour* (Haus Publishing)—leads me to conclude that there are virtually no meaningful comparisons today with the First and Second World wars.

I doubt it is even wise to use the expression “war” to fight this virus. You use military might to fight wars, helped by science. You use science in many of its dimensions, not just medical, to control and possibly eradicate coronavirus, as we did to eradicate smallpox. The military can help with logistical support.

As soon as Boris Johnson comes out of isolation, he should invite the newly-elected Labour Leader into No 10 and welcome him to all Cobra meetings attended by the three heads of the devolved governments, and to other meetings where as leader of the official opposition he should be present. Some Cobra meetings are not going to be suitable because of genuine differences over facts among its participants, some of whom are officials not just ministers. In addition, the leader of the opposition should be encouraged to talk to any scientists they wish who are influencing government policy whether in or, as many scientists are, out of government, and discussion should also include the heads of all the emergency services.

The biggest area in which the coronavirus is different is that we will get a vaccine, and here I write as a lapsed doctor of medicine and as a neuroscientist who was more recently on the board for 15 years of Abbott Laboratories, a large company in Chicago. Academic and commercial scientists are now sharing information with unprecedented speed. A vaccine will control coronavirus and it may even be eradicated.

Some will argue that like war, there is today a common ingredient—fear. Perhaps. But the fear of coronavirus has many different ingredients: for example we still do not know enough about this virus and how long immunity will last. I do fear its potential over the short period ahead until we deploy a vaccine worldwide. When I was minister of health in the mid 1970s we had our first ever case of Ebola. I felt fear as one of the very few people involved in decision-making. Expert medics superbly contained the virus which now, years later, we have a vaccine for and must eradicate. But I feared an epidemic inside Britain then, and had sleepless nights telling no one else.

Yet I aged one-six never felt fear during the war from 1939-45. The reason was that my mother never ever believed we would lose the war—incredible as that sounds, knowing what I now know. We slept in shelters to avoid being damaged by the bombs: in my case in the early part of the war in Plymouth and Newport in particular. As a young child, my father was away as doctor in the RAMC and I did not recognise him when he returned after the war. The lesson I learn from this is that parents and grandparents today, even though they may be afraid (and understandably) should try to radiate confidence that coronavirus will soon be over. For that is true—it will soon peak and a vaccine could be with us within 18 months, hopefully earlier.

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