

BOWDEN, HERBERT WILLIAM, BARON AYLESTONE (1905-1994), politician ▾

Name: Herbert William Bowden
Date of birth: 1905
Date of death: 1994
Gender: Male
Occupation: politician
Area of activity: Politics, Government and Political Movements
Author: David Lewis Jones

'Bert' Bowden was born in Cardiff on 20 January 1905, the eldest of the eleven children of Herbert Henwood Bowden, a baker of 16 Taff Embankment, and his wife, Henrietta Gould. He attended a primary school and took night classes while working as a shop assistant. After the failure of his tobacconist business, he moved in 1933 to Leicester where he worked as a radio salesman.

At an early age, Bowden joined the Independent Labour Party. In Leicester, Bowden became a member of the Labour Party when the ILP broke with the Labour Party over the Spanish Civil War. He was active in local politics and served as a member of the city council 1938-1945 and enjoyed a term as President of the Leicester City Labour Party. When the war came in September 1939, Bowden became a military policeman before he joined the administrative and special duties branch of the Royal Air Force as a sergeant in May 1943, achieving the rank of a Flying Officer later in the same year. He was adopted as Labour candidate for the Leicester South constituency at the 1945 general election and narrowly defeated the Conservative member. After constituency boundary changes in 1948, Bowden's seat became Leicester South-West where he gained comfortable majorities until he left the House of Commons.

Bowden did not possess the qualities to become a major and influential politician but he did have considerable administrative abilities. His career in government began in 1947 when he was appointed Parliamentary Private Secretary to Wilfred Paling, the Postmaster General. Two years later, he was promoted to be an assistant government whip and rose, within a year, to the rank of a government whip. Bowden's success in the Whips' office is reflected in his appointment as Deputy Chief Whip when the Labour party entered opposition in 1951. In the Coronation honours list on 1 June 1953, he was appointed C.B.E. for political and public services.

As the deputy, it was likely that Bowden would eventually succeed the Opposition Chief Whip, William Whiteley, who had served for over forty years as a whip, both in opposition and in government. Neither Whiteley nor Clement Attlee, the Leader of the Labour Party, was anxious to retire. After a series of manoeuvres by George Wigg, Whiteley decided to stand down in June 1955 and Bowden was the only candidate for the office of Opposition Chief Whip.

Pressure for Attlee to retire increased and Bowden asked him, at the Party's annual conference, to decide about the future. In his usual taciturn manner, Attlee did not respond to Bowden's request but told him, a fortnight later, that he had decided to resign and that Bowden should organise the election of a new leader. Bowden remained studiously neutral during the leadership election towards the end of 1955, but he was relieved when Hugh Gaitskell emerged as the clear winner, obtaining more votes than **Aneurin Bevan** and Herbert Morrison combined. Bowden was close to Gaitskell during the seven years that the latter led the Labour Party and he described the news of Gaitskell's death as the worst moment of his political life.

For the second time, Bowden had to arrange the election of a new leader for the Labour Party and he emphasised to the other members of the opposition whips' office that they should all remain neutral. Ironically, Bowden broke this rule when he assured Wilson, confidentially, of his support. Naturally, Wilson made some use of this confidential assurance. While Bowden had been part of Gaitskell's inner circle, he was close to Wilson but not part of the inner circle. Bowden served as Opposition Chief Whip until the Labour victory at the 1964 general election. During Bowden's time as a whip, Attlee introduced a shadow cabinet to lead for the opposition and Bowden began the publication of a regular bulletin, *This Week*, which was a confidential report on current affairs, intended to assist Labour politicians in their attacks on government policy. His greatest service was to keep the Party united.

In Wilson's first government, Bowden was made Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons. He had the administrative ability to guide the government's business through the House of Commons but he was a stickler for the rules and he was not an innovator. It is not surprising that Wilson, reacting to pressure from young Members for changes in the way that the House arranged its business, replaced him with Richard Crossman in the summer of 1966. Bowden became Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs on 11 August 1966; the Queen told the Prime Minister, according to a confidential conversation between Wilson and Crossman, 'how delighted she was that that kind of non-political man was in the job'. As Lord President, Bowden had met the Queen frequently at the Privy Council.

Bowden's twelve months as Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs were marred by the continuing crisis over Southern Rhodesia. He travelled to Southern Rhodesia three times in futile attempts to reach an agreement with Ian Smith over the future of the territory. He attended the talks on *H.M.S. Tiger* with Harold Wilson and Elwyn Jones, the Attorney General. During these negotiations, Wilson overshadowed Bowden.

In the late spring of 1967, Bowden indicated to Wilson that he wished to retire from political office and that he would depart at a time suitable for the Prime Minister. During a meeting of the Cabinet, Wilson offered Bowden the chairmanship of the BBC but Bowden did not respond in a positive manner. Charles Hill, the Chairman of the Independent Television Authority, was nearing the end of his term of office and Wilson decided that Hill, a firm and decisive man, should go to the BBC and Bowden should become Chairman of the IBA. While Bowden was staying in Penarth during August 1967, he was called to Penarth Police Station where he took a secure telephone call from Wilson at the coastguard's station in the Scilly Isles. Bowden was offered and accepted the post of Chairman of the Independent Broadcasting Authority. There was speculation that Wilson arranged these appointments in order that Hill might bring restraint to the BBC. There is no doubt that Bowden wanted to go to the Independent Broadcasting Authority because he had dealt with both authorities while Opposition Chief Whip and Leader of the House of Commons and he believed that he would have better and easier relations with the officials at the Independent Broadcasting Authority. On accepting this office, Bowden resigned his seat in the House of Commons and was created a life peer as Baron Aylestone, of Aylestone in the city of Leicester.

Lord Aylestone was well suited to the Independent Television Authority. His taste can be described as middlebrow and he liked the popular entertainment provided by the commercial television companies. He was a natural ITV viewer. Aylestone had made many friends but few enemies in politics and he continued in this way in the world of television. He had the additional gift of being good at conducting meetings and in implementing agreed briefs. Wilson did not bring pressure on him at the IBA but kept in touch through lunch time calls to inform Aylestone how pleased he was with the way things were going and then mentioned one or two points.

Aylestone had great common sense; when the Authority received a complaint that a chocolate advertisement had erotic overtones, he commented that if people wished to make a chocolate bar commercial into a blue movie, then that was their problem not the Authority's. On the other hand, he was critical when current affairs programmes interviewed representatives of the Irish Republican Army. Lord Aylestone was a success as Chairman of the Independent Broadcasting Authority; the Conservative government under Edward Heath extended his term of office for eighteen months. He was awarded the Companion of Honour and presented with the Gold Medal of the Royal Television Society for his work at the Independent Broadcasting Authority.

In July 1976, Lord Aylestone was cited as a co-respondent when Joseph Clayton, his next-door neighbour, divorced his wife, Vera Clayton. Neither Lord Aylestone nor Mrs Clayton defended this petition and Lord Aylestone was ordered to pay costs. The case achieved wide publicity and Lord Aylestone retired from public life for a time. He caused some surprise when he joined the Social Democrat Party in 1981 and held the post of leader of the Social Democrat peers for twelve months. Between 1984 and 1992, he acted as one of the deputy speakers in the House of Lords. When he retired from this office, he announced that he was joining the Liberal Democrat Party.

Bert Bowden had a military bearing and he was of average height, with a small and neat moustache; a man of few words, he had been nicknamed the 'Sergeant Major' by the Labour backbenchers in the House of Commons. He was widely admired as a fair-minded man. He married Louisa Grace Brown (23 December 1900 - 1992), the daughter of William Brown, a dock rigger of Cardiff, on 4 April 1928. They had one daughter. On 7 May 1993, he married Vera Ivy 'Vicki' Clayton, daughter of Donald Smith, engineer. Lord Aylestone died at Worthing Hospital on 30 April 1994.

Author

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