

Japan's unconditional surrender on 15 August 1945 coincided with the state opening of a new parliament following the Labour government's election just three weeks before. **Lord Lexden** looks back on a day when patriotic pride dovetailed with a promise of national renewal

Japan's unconditional surrender was announced on 15 August 1945. In one of history's most famous understatements, Emperor Hirohito told his people that "the war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage".

Clement Attlee's government, formed after Labour's landslide election victory the previous month, had been in office for under three weeks. The dramatic news from the far east reached the new prime minister in a rather haphazard fashion. During the evening of 14 August, Jock

Colville – Winston Churchill's private secretary, who had stayed on temporarily to help his successor – "saw on the tape-machine at No 10 that Japan had surrendered. I brought the news into the Cabinet room where Attlee was closeted with Lord Louis Mountbatten [later Earl Mountbatten of Burma] who was professing Labour sympathies".

To Colville's amusement, Mountbatten, the left's new recruit and a byword for vanity, later told everyone that it was he who had broken the news to a grateful Attlee.

At midnight, the prime minister

announced the terms of Japan's surrender on the radio. "The last of our enemies is laid low. Peace has once again come to the world." VJ Day had begun.

The thoughts of many grateful people in London turned at once to Churchill, who was living temporarily in a block of flats, Westminster Gardens (where 34 years later the bomb that was to kill Airey Neave would be placed under his car for subsequent detonation as he left the House of Commons). Early on VJ Day a crowd gathered "to see Papa and cheer him", as Mrs Churchill wrote to her daughter Mary. A little later "he got mobbed

in Whitehall by a frenzied crowd".

At 11am Churchill was in his place in the House of Commons, which met that day in St Stephen's Hall, normally a thoroughfare from the St Stephen's entrance to Central Lobby and beyond. The Commons Speaker, Douglas Clifton Brown, told the assembled members of "a strange coincidence. Curiously enough, the last

A tale of two speeches

15 August 1945 A young admirer tries her hardest to break away past a soldier's rifle, and reach the Royal Coach, as the King and Queen drove towards the House of Lords for the opening of Parliament

time the House sat in St Stephen's Hall was on 15 August, 111 years ago exactly".

The cause on that occasion was the fire that destroyed most of the Palace of Westminster. On VJ Day, the Commons needed a temporary refuge because the chamber of the House of Lords, where they had been meeting since the destruction of their own chamber in the Blitz, was required for another purpose.

The day had been chosen for the state opening of the new parliament, elected in July. The ceremony, severely curtailed during the years of war, was "restored to something of its pristine splendour by the revival of a carriage procession", as George VI's private secretary, Alan "Tommy" Lascelles, noted in his diary.

"For the first time in history," wrote George VI's official biographer, John Wheeler-Bennett, "two speeches from the throne were prepared, and signed by the sovereign for the opening of parliament" because it had been impossible to know exactly when Japan would surrender. "One version of the speech alluded to the surrender, the other omitted any reference to it." Lascelles had "a nervous moment lest Bill Jowitt, now lord chancellor, should produce the wrong speech out of his embroidered bag".

The scene in the Upper Chamber was recorded with characteristic panache by the gay Tory MP, Chips Channon, in his diary. "It was crowded with peers and peeresses. The ambassadors, all wearing extraordinary

hats, sat on the right with the duchesses. Mme Massigli, the French [ambassador's wife], wore a white tea tray."

No ermine was on display. "The many new socialists looked dazed and dazzled, and I was sorry for their sake that the peers were not in robes."

It was a dress-down occasion. "The king [was] in an admiral's uniform and with his cap on. The queen, in aquamarine blue, though dignified and gracious, was dwarfed by her mistress of the robes, the Duchess of Northumberland, who looked far the more regal of the two. The crown was carried on a cushion."

Would the king be able to control his stammer? Though troubled by it much less severely than in his youth, it was always the subject of some worry when he spoke in public. Channon praised him. "His voice was clear, and he spoke better than usual, and was more impressive. But they say that the word Berlin had been substituted for Potsdam [scene of the recent final conference of the allied powers], which he could not have articulated."

Lascelles called it "a dull speech" which put it firmly in the tradition of such declarations over the centuries. It gave prominence to the charter of the newly established United Nations which parliament was told that it would shortly be asked to ratify in order "to maintain peace in accordance with justice and respect for human rights".

In home affairs the theme of the



speech was fundamental national reconstruction. The new Labour government would fulfil the commitments that all parties had given during the war, and repeated during the recent election campaign, to the William Beveridge proposals for full employment, a comprehensive social insurance system and a national health service.

Labour's own plans for the "extension of public ownership" (including the Bank of England), housing, planning and more generous trade union laws were presented as additional contributions to national renewal.

Looking back on the ceremony, Channon reflected that "the Labour people were subdued and impressed and everybody behaved in an exemplary manner".

For his part, the king did even better later in the day when he broadcast to radio listeners at home and abroad. It went particularly well. "Everybody commended it," Lascelles recorded, "and agrees that he has never spoken so fluently and forcefully."

During the afternoon of VJ Day, the king had the less arduous duty of receiving a delegation of ministers and service chiefs at Buckingham Palace, led by Attlee. Churchill was asked to join them but "said he wouldn't come unless he could bring with him those of his former colleagues who served in the War Cabinet", as Lascelles noted.



It was the only instance of party-political difficulty during the day. "He came alone, half an hour after the others had gone." The king said later, "I wish he could have been given a proper reception by the people", by which he meant an appearance on the Buckingham Palace balcony.

The Commons reassembled, back in the Lords chamber once more, at 4pm when Attlee repeated the Japanese terms of surrender "for I feel that it is fit and proper that they should be for ever on record in the annals of this ancient and honourable House". The prime minister then moved that "this House do now attend at the Church of St Margaret, Westminster, to give humble and reverent thanks to almighty God on the victorious conclusion of the war".

Nothing marred the scene, which Channon recorded in his diary. "The

Speaker, in full robes, led us through a good-natured crowd of cheering citizens. He was followed by Winston, who had a tremendous reception, and who walked with Anthony Eden, Attlee and Herbert Morrison."

After a short service in which the

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Speaker's chaplain "moved the congregation to thanksgiving and dedication", the bells of St Margaret's were rung "in celebration of victory". The chaplain, fearful that the now dominant party of the left might be indifferent to religion, was delighted that "the Labour majority turned out in force and the church was full", as he recorded in his diary.

The last business of the House on this historic day began at 5.18pm. Attlee

moved an address to the king "on the achievement of final victory". The new Labour prime minister used his speech to extol the blessings of constitutional monarchy in Britain in language glowing with patriotic pride. "It is the glory of our domestic constitution that the will of

the people operates and that changes which, in other countries, are often effected through civil strife and bloodshed, here in this island proceed by the peaceful method of the ballot box."

Churchill himself could hardly have put it better. The former prime minister added a few characteristically extravagant comments, proclaiming that "a brighter radiance illumines the imperial crown than any which our annals record". No one else spoke. It was on a note of complete harmony between the two formidable political leaders that the House adjourned at 5.35pm. 🇬🇧

