**Public Fatigue**

Rationing continued under the postwar government and in 1951 bacon, butter, meat and tea were still rationed. This gradually started to wear down the morale of the British public as the reality of ‘fair shares’ and emphasis on exports meant queues and scarcity. Morgan argues against this – see Historical Interpretations. The Conservatives advocated a greater degree of decontrol, which was attractive to many. There was a growing consumerism for the middle classes, just as there had been in the 1920s and Labour’s dislike of consumerism and Americanisation alienated them from the British public, argues Tiratsoo.

**Conservative Rebirth**

Lord Woolton reorganised the Conservative Party and its electoral campaign, increasing members and funds. The Conservatives capitalised on Labour’s mistakes, vehemently opposing the nationalisation of steel and road haulage, which were profitable private industries. At the same time, they played the consensus card on what they recognised were popular policies in the postwar environment and vouching to preserve the NHS and most of the nationalised industries. They pledged to build 300,000 homes a year, deliberately outstripping Labour’s figure of 200,000. This was particularly effective as there was a housing shortage 1950-51. Throughout Labour’s time in office the Conservatives were critical of continued bread rationing, issuing a pamphlet entitled ‘The Last Straw’ in 1946 on what *The Telegraph* called ‘the most hated measure ever to have been presented to the people of this country’. Lord Woolton frequently quoted from Dr Bicknell’s article on ‘dying England’ in which he claimed rationing was causing national malnutrition. The Tory 1946 Industrial Charter presented a freer market which appealed to industrialists, while the criticisms of rationing captured the votes of housewives. The Tories campaigned with the slogan, ‘Set the People Free’.

**Why did Labour lose the 1951 election?**

Labour were in a bad position for the 1951 election. Attlee had called an election in 1950 at the end of his 5 year term. Labour were re-elected but with a majority of only 5 seats. As Dalton said, ‘we have office…without power’. Labour struggled to carry on and called another election in 1951 to try and get a bigger majority. Although they actually had the biggest share of the vote (and more than in 1950) with 13.9 million compared to the Tory 13.7, the Tories won with 321 seats, whilst Labour polled 295.

**Historical Interpretation**

The Budget of April 1951, which announced plans for rearmament to help Korea, was a political and economic disaster – Morgan

‘The 1945 revolution was curiously patchy’ – Murphy

‘The frustrations of rationing were borne with demure, after all people were happy to be alive in 1945’ – Morgan

Francis argues that the ambiguity of Labour ideology provided fertile ground for party splits.

**Economic Problems**

Devaluation in 1949 was humiliating for the British public. The benefits of increased imports did not kick in until 1952, whilst the Korean War and investment in rearmament weakened the economy further. Indeed, the meat ration fell to its lowest ever point around the 1951 election. It is suggested that if Attlee had waited until 1952 to call the election then Labour would have profited from more favourable economic circumstances.

Indeed, Labour endured several crises through its term including the Convertability Crisis, the Fuel Crisis 1947 and Devaluation in 1949 and whilst they were not necessarily the fault of Labour, they undermined the government.

**Foreign Policy**

The Abadan crisis coincided with the 1951 election. Labour lost prestige when Iran nationalised the Anglo-Iranian oil company, which was the biggest oil refinery in the world and Britain’s largest overseas investment. It precipitated a balance of payments crisis.

There was also the loss of India in 1947 and the unpopular decision to plough money into the Korean War in 1950.

**Internal Divisions in the Labour Party**

When Keynes negotiated the loan of $3.75 billion from the USA in exchange for convertability, the prospect split the government. Bevin, Cripps, Dalton, Morrison and Attlee wanted to accept the deal with immediate effect, whilst Bevan and Shinwell disagreed before they were forced to accept – this weakened the party slightly.

When prescription charges had to be introduced in 1951 because of the commitment to the Korean War, Bevan resigned. This led to a division between Bevan and Gaitskell who was the Chancellor at the time. The Bevanites criticised the government for the charges along with the arms programme and falling into America’s Cold War policy. In fairness, Britain was economically indebted to America and under some obligation to follow, but this infighting weakened Labour’s electoral strength.