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[Who was the best 20th-century prime minister?](#)

If Britain's 20th-century prime ministers were lined up in an election, who would get your vote? Francis Beckett, editor of a collection of political biographies, judges Britain's leaders according to their own agendas

Who was the best British prime minister of the 20th century? After editing a series of lives of each of them, I ought to know. But it depends what you mean by “best”.

The most charismatic? Churchill and Lloyd George, go to the top of the class. The best administrators? Step forward the precise Mr Attlee, the demanding Mrs Thatcher, and the stiff and formal Mr Chamberlain. The best political managers? Pipe-smokers Stanley Baldwin and Harold Wilson take some beating for holding together unstable parties and coalitions. The most likeable? Nice people, Harold Macmillan observed, don't get to the top in politics, but if I could have dinner with just one of the 20 prime ministers, he would be my first choice, with Churchill second and Asquith third.

So let's define the criterion used here. I intend to approach the task as a sort of management consultant, judging prime ministers on their effectiveness as change managers. Did they start with a clear idea of how they wanted to change Britain, as for example Attlee and Thatcher did, and how far did they succeed in doing so?

A secondary criterion will be their effectiveness at simply managing, rather than also creating, change. Much of what happened on Harold Macmillan's watch, like the end of empire, was going to happen anyway, but Macmillan recognised the inevitability of change and managed it well and effectively.

Some prime ministers did important things in government, but never quite hacked it in the top job. I have judged them solely on their effectiveness in Number Ten. Balfour's achievements as foreign secretary, including the famous Balfour declaration, and Eden's distinguished performance in the same job in 1938 and again in the early 1950s, avail them nothing here.

Winston Spencer Churchill (1874–1965)



Sir Winston Churchill, 1956. (Photo by Carl Mydans/The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty Images/Getty Images)

Party: Conservative

Dates in Office: 1940–5, 1951–5

Vision: In his wartime government, to unite the country and mobilise all its resources to win the war, and to obtain all possible American help. In his 1951–5 government, to cement the special relationship with the USA and to bring about nuclear disarmament.

Fulfilment of vision: He won the war. It is by no means certain that, without him, the outcome would have been the same. His achievement as a peacetime prime minister is in a little more doubt, though his reputation in the USA and the admiration in which he was held by such people as President Eisenhower went a long way towards building the sort of lasting relationship he hoped for. But he did not achieve as much as he had hoped on disarmament.

Vote winner: He won the war.

Vote loser: He lost the immediate post-war election, partly by poor campaign tactics.

Overall rating: 4

Clement Richard Attlee (1883–1967)

Party: Labour

Dates in Office: 1945–51

Vision: A welfare state in which the five giants identified by the wartime Beveridge Report had been slain: want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness. A mixed economy in which natural monopolies, and industries on which we might rely in wartime, such as railways, were nationalised.

Fulfilment of vision: In July 1948 his government created what he called “the most comprehensive system of social security ever introduced into any country”. The National Health Service, national insurance, and national assistance were aimed at two of the giants, want and disease. A huge house building programme and the Education Act aimed at ignorance and squalor, and despite desperate economic conditions, he oversaw a period of virtually full employment, thus countering idleness.

Vote winner: Creation of the welfare state and the National Health Service.

Vote loser: Capitulation to Foreign Secretary Bevin’s wish to create Britain’s own nuclear arsenal.

Overall rating: 5

Robert Anthony Eden (1897–1977)

Party: Conservative

Dates in Office: 1955–7

Vision: Aggressive dictators must always be confronted, for they will take any concession as weakness. Britain is a kind of aristocrat among nations, and her leadership can deliver peace and stability to the world.

Fulfilment of vision: Seldom has a leader so comprehensively failed to deliver on his vision. Eden led Britain into war with Egypt over the Suez Canal and was quickly forced into a humiliating withdrawal by economic sanctions applied from Washington. Instead of affirming British influence in the world, as he had intended, Eden sent out a signal that British influence had diminished to almost nothing. Suez marked the moment when the country was forced to accept her insignificance. Instead of humiliating Egypt’s leader Colonel Nasser, Eden was himself humiliated, and Nasser was able to dictate terms.

Vote winner: It is hard to think of a vote winner during Eden’s brief premiership.

Vote loser: War over the Suez Canal.

Overall rating: 0

Harold Macmillan (1894–1986)



Harold Macmillan delivers a speech at Bromley fete in south London, 22 June 1963. (Photo by Les Lee/Daily Express/Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

Party: Conservative

Dates in Office: 1957–63

Vision: The welfare state is here to stay and should be maintained. The trade unions will respond to patrician benevolence, and government can deliver prosperity. It is time to wind up the British Empire. Britain can be an honest broker between the USA, Europe and the Soviet Union.

Fulfilment of vision: Macmillan rescued his party and country from the depths of humiliation after Suez. He repaired the fractured relationship with the USA, by being the first British premier to go to Washington as a visible supplicant, and was key to the negotiation of a nuclear test ban treaty. He dismantled the British Empire. He made the first British application to join the Common Market – though de Gaulle vetoed it, it laid the groundwork for Heath’s successful application a decade later. While he was prime minister, as he said, most people had never had it so good.

Vote winner: Dismantlement of Empire with a minimum of bloodshed.

Vote loser: Being turned down for membership of the Common Market.

Overall rating: 4

Sir Alec Douglas-Home (1903–95)

Party: Conservative

Dates in Office: 1963–4

Vision: The industrial masses can be won for conservatism, just as rural workers had already been won for it. Only by “simple straightforward talk to the industrial masses can we hope to defeat the Socialists”.

Fulfilment of vision: Alec Douglas-Home was the first landed aristocrat to be prime minister since Salisbury, who resigned in 1902. Providing leadership to the industrial masses was, to him, a duty which only the upper classes could fulfil. He tried his “simple, straightforward talk to the industrial masses” and it very nearly worked – he lost the 1964 election to Harold Wilson’s Labour Party by a surprisingly narrow margin.

Vote winner: Very nearly winning the 1964 election.

Vote loser: Not quite winning the 1964 election.

Overall rating: 1

James Harold Wilson (1916–95)

Party: Labour

Dates in Office: 1964–70, 1974–6

Vision: To make Labour the “natural party of government”. For Labour to run the most administratively advanced, technically competent, economically literate and socially just government Britain had seen, and create a more successful and better educated nation.

Fulfilment of vision: He brought his party, bruised and battered, but intact, into the modern era. His governments were active in improving education, creating the Open University, building schools, and moving towards a comprehensive system. It kept Britain out of the Vietnam war. But in both his governments, Wilson was blown off course by events beyond his control. The Labour Party's divisions proved too deep for Wilson to do much more than skillfully hide them while he was in charge; they opened wide after he resigned.

Vote winner: The creation of the Open University.

Vote loser: He tried, but failed, to change trade union law by consent.

Overall rating: 3

Edward Heath (1916–2005)

Party: Conservative

Dates in Office: 1970–74

Vision: To take Britain into the Common Market (now the European Union). Heath is the only prime minister since 1945 who saw Europe, rather than the USA, as Britain's most important partner.

Fulfilment of vision: He did the one big thing he wanted to do most – to take Britain into Europe – and it has never been undone. But since Heath, no British prime minister has been an equally committed European, and instead of being in the forefront of moves towards closer European integration, as Heath had hoped, Britain is more often bringing up the rear. His defeat as leader, and replacement by Margaret Thatcher, saw the end of the gentler and more European sort of Conservative Party which Heath and Macmillan stood for, and its replacement by a more sharp-toothed and Americanised model.

Vote winner: Taking Britain into the Common Market.

Vote loser: Losing the leadership, and the soul of the Conservative Party, to Thatcher.

Overall rating: 4

James Callaghan (1912–2005)



Prime Minister James Callaghan, 6 September 1978. (Photo by Evening Standard/Getty Images)

Party: Labour

Dates in Office: 1976–9

Vision: The trade unions and the Labour Party together form the labour movement, and they should remain united. A Labour government will make a substantial improvement in the lives, and the level of the education, of ordinary people.

Fulfilment of vision: There was not a lot of time for fulfilling visions in the Callaghan premiership. The day he took office, Labour's wafer-thin majority vanished entirely. Gold and dollar reserves were disappearing fast, and the divisions in the Labour Party were opening up alarmingly. His premiership ended with the Winter of Discontent, a winter of public sector strikes which paved the way for Margaret Thatcher to tear down most of the things Callaghan had gone into politics to create.

Vote winner: Governed for three years with no overall parliamentary majority.

Vote loser: If he had called an election in 1978, he might well have won.

Overall rating: 2

Margaret Hilda Thatcher (1925–2013)

Party: Conservative

Dates in Office: 1979–90

Vision: There is almost nothing the state can do which private business cannot do better, and the frontiers of the state must be pushed back. Britain's key ally lies across the Atlantic, not in Europe. Strong trade unions hold up progress.

- [Are we still living in Thatcher's Britain?](#)
- [What is the nature of Margaret Thatcher's legacy?](#)

Fulfilment of vision: Margaret Thatcher took one sort of society, and turned it into another sort of society. She broke the Attlee settlement which had lasted more than 30 years, largely by force of will. Today few people under 40 remember a time when trade unions were a real force in the land; when the public sector controlled large swathes of the economy; when local councils controlled education and other local services; when benefits were considered rights of citizenship. The defeat and destruction of the once-powerful National Union of Mineworkers was a key moment in the history of the last half decade.

Vote winner: The trade unions were powerful in 1979, and impotent by 1990.

Vote loser: The poll tax, which caused her downfall.

Overall rating: 5

John Major (1943–)

Party: Conservative

Dates in Office: 1990–97

Vision: A consensual style of government – a return to real cabinet government after the top-down Thatcher style – and a country that is “at ease with itself”. A classless society, opportunity for all, and a grammar school in every town.

Fulfilment of vision: Nothing quite worked for Major after the dreadful economic crisis of Black Wednesday, when Britain was forced out of the Exchange Rate Mechanism. The economy was in trouble and the Conservative Party in turmoil. The attempt to create a more consensual style of leadership made things worse, since his party no longer had a leader it feared. Constant parliamentary rebellions from Conservative MPs, often though not always over attitudes to Europe, undermined his authority and prevented him from moving far in any particular direction.

Vote winner: Won the 1992 election against all the odds, when Thatcher would probably have lost.

Vote loser: Spending £10 billion, 40 per cent of Britain's reserves, failing to buy sterling out of trouble.

Overall rating: 1

Tony Blair (1953–)



Tony Blair arriving in Downing Street after his 1997 election victory. (Photo by Jeff Overs/BBC News & Current Affairs via Getty Images)

Party: Labour

Dates in Office: 1997–2007

Vision: You can modernise the Labour Party by aligning Labour's values with capitalist methods. There is little the public sector can do which the private sector cannot do better. Britain's key ally is the USA, and the two countries, if united, can do great good in the world.

Fulfilment of vision: Blair made a lot of progress in his chosen direction right up to the time of the Iraq War. The private sector has now been brought even into the running of schools and hospitals, and since the Conservatives agree with it, this will probably be a relatively permanent change. The unpopularity of the Iraq War, and the fact that the reasons given afterwards for going to war were not those given at the time, undermined Blair's ability to implement his vision, probably permanently.

Vote winner: The biggest ever Labour majority, and re-election twice.

Vote loser: The war in Iraq – an unpopular and unsuccessful war.

Overall rating: 3