Government and Politics – Essay Question

Q: Do you agree with the statement that 'all political lives end in failure', believe to have been said by David Cameron after the 2016 EU Referendum.

There is a good argument to be made that all political lives end in failure. Many, if not all post-war Prime Ministers, have had to leave due to pressure, health or election defeats. The argument really is about their legacy and their reputation as they leave; assured or tainted.

The first argument supporting the fact that all political lives end in failure is that 5 Prime Ministers have left their office due to Election defeats. Clement Attlee, Alec Douglas-Home, Harold Wilson, James Callaghan, John Major and Gordon Brown all left office because they lost a General Election. It is therefore evident that eventually the public find administrations clearly unpopular, incompetent or want a change in government and therefore is reflected by the electorate. Alec Douglas-Home was in office only for a year 1963-1964 after renouncing his title in the House of Lords, winning a House of Commons By-Election to become an MP and then becoming leader of the Conservative Party and subsequently the Prime Minister, but only to be defeated in the 1964 General Election a year later. James Callaghan (1976-1979) is another example – he lost an election because the Government lost a Confidence Motion in the House of Commons beforehand.

A second argument in that all political lives end in failure is that of resignations by Prime Ministers, amounting to 7. Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden, Harold Macmillan, Harold Wilson, Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and David Cameron. Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair are good examples of this. Margaret Thatcher was well known to be a strong Prime Minister who dealt with different crises forcefully, such as the Northern Ireland Conflict, Iranian Embassy Siege and the Miners' Strike. However, her strong style of leadership with little consideration of her Cabinet eventually led to her downfall. She had a strong opinions on Europe, causing Sir Geoffrey Howe to resign in November 1990 as he favoured more integration with Europe. His resignation speech set the course for Thatcher's exit. Michael Heseltine then challenged her leadership of the Conservative Party winning 152 votes, which was not enough to win but equally showed there was a majority favouring a change. Thatcher was persuaded not to stand for the second ballot, and was succeeded by John Major, her Chancellor of the Exchequer. Tony Blair is another example. Labour won by a landslide in 1997 with 418 seats but he was then pressured to resign in 2007 by his party choosing an early date for departure. His reputation was tainted by the War in Iraq/War on Terror after being a key ally with US President George W. Bush after the September 11th 2001 Attacks, with the proof that there were no chemical weapons in Iraq – the main reason for invasion. Equally, he also had corruption allegations when it came to the 'buying lordships' scandal, where large party donors to Labour could become a Peer in the House of Lords. Blair was well known for his domestic policies such as the Minimum Wage, new schools & hospitals and Sure Start Children's Centres. Nevertheless, he was pressured to resign by his party and did so in 2007, succeeded by Gordon Brown, his Chancellor.

Finally, Sir Anthony Eden was a particular example of political failure. Eden was forced to resign as Prime Minister due to ill health as well as, more importantly, the Suez Crisis, when the Egyptian President

nationalised a major canal used by the west regularly, and this eventually led to Eden's downfall and resignation due to his response during it's end.

There are however evidence to support the contrary, while Prime Ministers may have been defeated in elections or have had to resign their reputation may be generally intact. The first example in this is Clement Attlee. Attlee was well known for a successful government in creating the National Health Service and known for a massive expansion of the Welfare State and the passing of the Education Act. Attlee was also known to be successful due to his style of leadership with the Cabinet – it was much more mutual and he yearned to have a consensual style of governing with the Cabinet in working with them on policy and with negotiating them rather than ruling by force. Attlee's election loss may be an example of the fact that the British electorate favouring change – Atlee's government was old and running out of ideas.

Another example of this includes Winston Churchill. Churchill was in office from 1940 – 1945 and is seen as a war hero after bringing Britain through the war successfully. He was re-elected in 1951 after a period in the Opposition after the election was lost to Labour from 1945-1951 under Clement Attlee, and he governed until 1955. His resignation was due to pressure by his party, and generally due to ill health. Churchill resigned after being pressured by his party due to old age and suffering from a stroke leaving him partially paralysed on one side in June 1953 and fully recovered in November. He then resigned in 1955 and Eden took over. His reputation remained popular, as he led Britain through war and was a great speaker, but did have some controversy such as comments about Indians, as well as being an imperialist, which in modern days, may been seen as controversial. Nevertheless, Churchill still continues to be praised to this day for his premiership.

To conclude, I do believe that Prime Ministers do leave office, mostly due to political failure but that in many cases their reputation is intact, such as Clement Attlee and David Cameron – where Cameron led a relative stable coalition Government from 2010 – 2015 and was not particularly controversial or seen as a failure but did have to leave after the Brexit referendum forced him to. So generally, it could be argued it is easier for Prime Minister's to leave due to crises because of the nature of parliamentary democracy, so I do believe that, going by evidence since the war, Prime Ministers do leave due to political failure in some way, but for some their legacy remains respected and appreciated.