

The Parliamentary Labour Party Papers, 1968/69-1993/94

an introduction by Stephen Bird, Archivist, the Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester

The Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), the organisation of Labour Members of Parliament was founded in 1906, after Labour representation had increased from 2 to 30. Their situation changed very little from that date to 1968. Once they had been selected by their Constituency Labour Party (CLP) as the candidate for their first election, their security depended on the size of their majority and the whims of the electorate. The only reasons for their de-selection by the Party's National Executive Committee (NEC) were their joining another political party (openly or covertly) or their committing a criminal offence. In addition, the members of the PLP had considerable power. It was they who elected the leader, deputy leader, the Shadow Cabinet (Parliamentary Committee) and the Liaison (formerly Executive) Committee, which sat during the period of a Labour government; and it was they who, with the NEC, wrote the General Election manifestos.

The years 1968 to 1994 were the most turbulent in the PLP's history. The grass roots of the Party became very restless and challenged the MPs' hegemony. The left wing activism of the 1950s and the 1960s over nuclear disarmament, South Africa, racial discrimination, Vietnam and homelessness was to manifest itself more vigorously within the Labour Party in the 1970s and the 1980s. The bad economic situation reinforced this militancy.

In 1968 Harold Wilson had been Prime Minister for four years. The Labour majority in the House of Commons had substantially increased from 3 to 96 in the General Election of 1966. However, the Party was suffering electoral losses in local government elections and parliamentary by-elections. There was also active concern at the Party's grass roots about the government's support for the American military involvement in Vietnam and for the counter-inflationary economic policy pursued by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Roy Jenkins.

In 1969, echoing the Labour Party's long-held concern about the negative publicity on unofficial strikes, Barbara Castle, the Minister of Employment introduced her bill on industrial relations reform, called *In Place of Strife*. This naturally was strongly opposed by the trade unions. There was also strong opposition within the PLP, many of whose members were trade unionists themselves or had trade union sponsorship. Harold Wilson had to submit to union pressure as well as to opposition within the cabinet led by the Home Secretary, James Callaghan, and withdraw the bill.

In the General Election of June 1970, Harold Wilson's government was defeated. Many within the Party believed that the election defeat was due to its policies not being radical enough. The subsequent problems experienced by Edward Heath's Conservative government reinforced this belief. The Industrial Relations Act, which for the first time brought trade unions under common law, became a legal nightmare. Trade unionists ended up being imprisoned, which was never meant to happen. The miners' strike of 1972 led to a three-day working week. The government had to bow to the miners' demands. The following year the miners put in a further pay demand, which the government could not accept, and the miners went on a work-to-rule. In February 1974 Edward Heath went to the country. The result was a hung parliament with the Labour Party returning the most MPs. Labour were back in power with a

minority government; the miners' work-to-rule was called off. In October of the same year Harold Wilson called another election, and Labour was returned with a majority of three.

There was one significant event that was to have repercussions in both the main political parties. In 1973 Edward Heath signed the Treaty of Rome, making the United Kingdom a member of the European Economic Community (EEC). The Labour Party was divided over the issue. When the vote on accession to the EEC was put in parliament in 1971, 69 Labour MPs voted against the whip and with the Conservative government.

In terms of its members the Labour government of 1974 was more left-wing than any of its predecessors. The veteran left-winger, Michael Foot, became Minister of Employment; Tony Benn became Minister of Industry; and Barbara Castle, Minister of Health and Social Security. The issue of EEC membership was temporarily settled by a referendum put to the British electorate in 1975.

However, the economic situation was difficult. Inflation rose to 26 percent, and unemployment topped one and a half million. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Denis Healey was forced to go to the International Monetary Fund to bale out the British economy, which entailed cuts in public expenditure. Although the situation improved, the policies pursued by the government were not popular within the Party. Denis Healey was heavily criticised at the Party conference. The Conservatives in the meantime elected a new leader, Margaret Thatcher in January 1975. Many in the Labour Party thought they could benefit from this change of leadership. They were to be proved very wrong.

In 1976 Harold Wilson suddenly and unexpectedly resigned. The PLP undertook another election for the Party leadership and chose James Callaghan. A significant factor in this election was the support for Michael Foot, who actually got more votes than Callaghan in the first ballot. Foot was to be compensated later in the year when he won the post of deputy leadership following the resignation of the incumbent Edward Short. Under Callaghan, there were further nationalisations of the oil and aerospace industries. Bills were passed giving parliaments to Scotland and Wales, subject to referendums. In 1977 Labour lost its majority and entered a pact with the Liberals. In spite of inflation and extensive redundancies arising from the economic situation, the trade union leaders restrained their members from taking industrial action. However, there was a series of industrial disputes during the winter of 1978 and 1979. This combined with a no vote in Wales and a close yes vote in Scotland in the devolution referendums led to the government's defeat in a vote of no confidence in Parliament. In the General Election of May 1979, Labour lost 51 seats, and the Conservatives were returned to power.

It was during the following eighteen years of opposition that the Labour Party underwent the most profound change in its history. The 1979 defeat was followed by a series of conferences that were to affect the PLP's role within the Party. After the 1979 annual conference, every MP had to face re-selection by his or her CLP. At a special conference in 1981 it was agreed that the leader and deputy leader of the Party would be elected by a combination of trade unions, CLPs and MPs. Before that policy could be put into effect, Callaghan resigned and the MPs elected Michael Foot. Under the new system Tony Benn challenged Denis Healey for the deputy leadership, but was very narrowly defeated at the annual conference.

Also in 1981, Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams, William Rodgers and David Owen left the Labour Party and formed the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which attracted another 27 MPs. Shortly thereafter the SDP made an alliance with the Liberal Party, resulting in significant successes in local and national by-elections. Shirley Williams, who had been defeated in 1979, and Roy Jenkins, who had left Parliament to become the President of the European Commission in 1975, were both returned to Parliament as SDP MPs.

In 1979, whilst leaving the Party's constitution unchanged, the Party conference decided that the NEC alone should write the manifesto. This led to a series of left-wing programmes, which included unilateral nuclear disarmament and withdrawal from the EEC. Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government was not popular. By 1981, unemployment had begun to mount again; and the Tories suffered as much as the Labour Party from the emergence of the SDP. However, in 1982 the defeat of the Argentines in the Falklands War guaranteed the Conservatives an increased majority in the General Election in June 1983. The PLP membership fell from 268 to 209.

Not long after the 1983 General Election Michael Foot resigned as Party leader. The electoral college elected Neil Kinnock as leader and Roy Hattersley as deputy. At the Party conference of that year, it was agreed that re-selection of a sitting MP would only take place when a CLP asked for it. The NEC and the PLP agreed to co-operate in formulating policies for Election Manifestos. Policies began to change. Among the first to go were withdrawal from the EEC and opposition to the sale of council houses. Efforts were made to improve the Party's image, particularly after the appointment of Peter Mandelson as its Press Officer.

The most significant event during the 1983 Parliament was the miners' strike of 1984-85. Not only did it symbolise the clash between the free-market ideas of Margaret Thatcher and old, confrontational trade unionism personified by the miners' leader, Arthur Scargill, but its defeat marked the end of the militant trade unionism that caused so much concern within the Labour Party. The Conservative government passed new legislation, requiring ballots for strikes and union officers. And this in turn affected the long traditional role the unions played within the Party itself.

In June 1987, Mrs Thatcher called a third General Election. In spite of a good campaign, the Labour Party gained only 20 additional seats. In the light of this, Neil Kinnock set up policy reviews. The Party was already moving towards more moderate policies, which included making no high-spending commitments and stressing limited taxation. Even nuclear disarmament was abandoned. At the 1985 annual conference, Kinnock had made a powerful speech against the Trotskyist Militant Tendency, which controlled the youth section of the Party. Steps were taken to expel these members, including its four MPs. The concept of "New Realism" emerged. The Left tried to make a fight back. In 1988 Tony Benn made a bid for the leadership, with Eric Heffer as his deputy. They were soundly beaten.

In 1990 after a challenge from Michael Heseltine, Margaret Thatcher suddenly resigned. The Conservative MPs elected John Major, who got rid of Mrs Thatcher's albatross, the Poll Tax. There had been hopes that Labour would be returned at the next General Election. When it was called in April 1992, however, Labour only had a net gain of 42 seats. Neil Kinnock resigned as leader. The Party elected John Smith, Kinnock's shadow chancellor.

Smith set about continuing the policy changes started by Kinnock. He accompanied these with reforms within the Party. In 1993 some CLPs were instructed to have all women short-lists. The biggest change however that year was the adoption of one member one vote for parliamentary selection, the NEC and the election of the leader and deputy leader.

In 1994 John Smith suddenly died of a heart attack. There were two contenders for the leadership. Both were young intakes of 1983. Their names were Gordon Brown and Tony Blair. Gordon Brown withdrew, enabling Tony Blair to become leader; and a new era began for the Labour Party and its MPs.

The minutes of the PLP reflect all these changes. The Labour MPs had lost power and regained some of it. The other source of influence within the Party, the trade unions, who once wielded their might with great effect, were no longer the power they were. The ordinary Party member in theory had more influence than in 1968, but in practice this power was questionable.

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