

Labour Heritage

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Barbara Castle

Barbara Castle, who died on 3rd May this year, aged 90, was one of three children of Frank Betts, a tax inspector, and his wife, Annie Rebecca. Her father was a great book collector, who taught himself Latin, Greek and Spanish, and encouraged his children to value and pursue learning. As a stalwart member of the Independent Labour Party in Bradford, and editor of their paper, the Bradford Pioneer, he also influenced Barbara's development as a socialist.

After attending and becoming Head Girl at Bradford Girls' Grammar School, Barbara won a scholarship to St. Hugh's College, Oxford, where she obtained a third class honours degree in Philosophy, Political and Economics.

When she left Oxford, having been active in the Labour Club, she wrote for a local newspaper and became a sales demonstrator in Manchester. Coming to London, she formed an association with the socialist journalist, William Mellor, with whom she had a long lasting love affair until his death in 1942. Through him, she was associated with the group that founded Tribune, including Michael Foot.

Elected to St. Pancras Borough Council in 1937 and a member of the London Metropolitan Water Board (1940-43) she became the Editor of Town and County Councillor (1936-40). Thereafter she worked as an employee of the Ministry of Food and a journalist. In 1944 she married Ted Castle who, as night editor of the Daily Mirror, had used her articles.

Selected as Labour candidate for Blackburn, she entered Parliament in 1945 and remained a member until 1979. She was a very active campaigner on many issues, but particularly against colonialism. Elected to the NEC of the Labour Party as a Bevanite in 1950, she served until 1979, taking her turn to chair the Party. She took office successively as Minister for Overseas Development (1964/5), of Transport (1965/8) and of Employment (1968/70). In the last mentioned post she introduced 'In Place of Strife' for trade union reform, which she was eventually forced to drop.

When Labour returned to office in 1974, she was Secretary of State for Health and Social Security (1974/6), in which capacity she introduced SERPS to give workers a second pension and sought to abolish paybeds in the NHS.

After being dropped by Jim Callaghan when he became Prime Minister in 1979, Barbara left the House of Commons and entered the European Parliament, where she led the British Labour Group until 1985. Leaving in 1989, she became a Life Peer and continued to campaign, above all, for pensioners – up to her death. She never diluted her socialist convictions.

A labour historian

Barbara's recreations were walking and poetry, and she was deeply conscious of our heritage in Britain and the Labour Party. She helped restore canals and inland waterways in her 1968 Transport Act. The 'Castle Diaries' which she published constitute an important source for the history of Labour in government (1964/70) and (1974/76). She also wrote 'Sylvia and Christabel Pankhurst', for

which I was able to provide material, and we had discussions on Labour's history. In 1994 I shared a platform at Hammersmith with her and Bill Morris of the Transport and General Workers' Union, to celebrate the centenary of William Morris. She was to have been a speaker at a Labour Heritage event to mark the Labour Party's centenary, which had unfortunately to be cancelled. Barbara will rightly be remembered for her outstanding contributions to Labour's achievements in government and for her untiring campaigns against apartheid and imperialism, for pensioners and the NHS. Among other ways in which she made her mark, she should also be remembered as a writer and a historian who played her part in recording and encouraging research into Labour's past.

Stan Newens June 2002

FOOTNOTE FOR BARBARA CASTLE OBITUARY



In an obituary appreciation of Barbara Castle in the July-August issue of *Chartist*, Labour Heritage member Larry Iles, highlighted that in her last years she 'was an outspoken fighter against 'ageist' poor social security benefits on every occasion she could seize a microphone (despite deafness and several physical collapses) almost till the end of her days.'

'She was an irrepressible leftist, and a modernising feminist.'

'Castle is now being mourned by many to whom her life was a shining example – not so much because of her earlier activities but because she never took a graceful exit!'

'She was one of the earliest western white 'radicals' on the global race relations issues, and in realising the poverty issue was still unaddressed she showed enormous anti-neo-colonialist guts.'

Larry works in the United States, and is heavily engaged in writing to a variety of journals and newspapers on historical subjects and current affairs

Larry is hoping to give a talk on Mary Agnes Hamilton, Labour MP for Blackburn 1929-31, at a Conference in March 2003 in the United States. Hamilton was a socialist, novelist, biographer, broadcaster, diplomat and Governor of the BBC. She died in the 1960s.

Dic Penderyn Memorial Service 2002

Over recent years a tradition has been established in Aberavon, South Wales, to organize an annual meeting, on or about 13th August, at the graveside of Richard Lewis, alias Dic Penderyn, who was hanged on that day in 1831 for his