

**Labour
Heritage**



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1945 Labour Government – 60 years ago

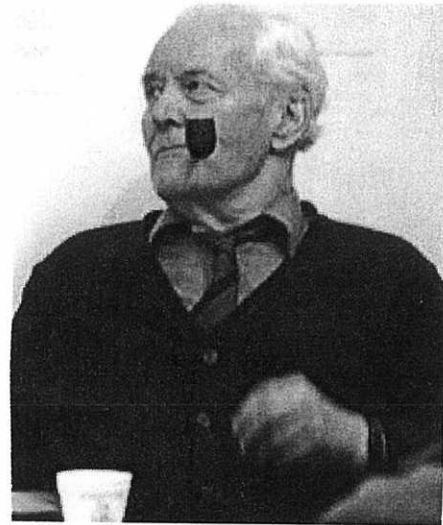
Labour Heritage AGM Saturday 12th March 2005

The theme of the Labour Heritage AGM this year, held in the Fenner Brockway Room at Conway Hall, was the 60th anniversary of the 1945 Labour election victory. It was attended by over 50 people. Stan Newens, Chair of Labour Heritage welcomed the audience and spoke of the excitement generated by Labour's landslide in 1945. He personally was working in a pea-field in Epping when the local results came in and everyone had cheered when it was learned that Labour had won Epping. Even the church bells were rung.

Tony Benn remembers the 1945 Labour Government

The first speaker was Tony Benn, the longest ever serving Labour MP who stood down at the 2001 general election. He gave his impressions of 1945. He came from a political background as his father had served in the Ramsay MacDonald Labour Government of 1929/31. As a ten year old he had distributed election leaflets in 1935. He recalled Oswald Moseley and the fight

against fascism in the 1930s. This, he said, had been a separate fight from World War 2. The Tory Press did not see the War and the fight against fascism as the same thing – the Times obituary of Hitler in 1945 did not even mention his anti-semitism and persecution of the Jews!



Going on to the impact of the War on the election result, he pointed out that there had been full employment in wartime. People remembering the 1930s were asking why this could not be achieved in peace time as well. Tony was in the armed forces where he said they had plenty of time to talk and think about politics. Away from the moments of danger being in the armed forces could be very boring. There was a lot of

respect for Churchill as a war-leader, and it was considered to be inconceivable that he could be defeated, but it was the pre-war Tory Party that people were voting against. Churchill launched a dirty campaign against Labour claiming that a Labour Government would introduce the Gestapo. This was remarkable when Clement Attlee had been his deputy wartime leader!

The 1945 election result showed that you could win even in the most unfavourable circumstances. The 1930s had been grim – but if the Party could survive Ramsay Macdonald then it could survive New Labour. The 1945 government inherited a country which was bankrupt but its first action was to treble widows' pensions. The National Health Service was brought in – all completely free at first. However Michael Foot and Nye Bevan were to face expulsion from the Party by 1951 for their opposition to official party policy. This showed that Old Labour was not always tolerant. However Labour remained popular and gained more votes in 1951 than in 1945.

Norman Howard assesses 1945 and its significance

The other main speaker was Norman Howard who had joined the Labour League of Youth in 1945. Since then he has been a Labour election agent, councillor and assistant trades union secretary and is now doing research into the 1945 Labour Government.

It was the age of public meetings – he recalled 5,000 turning out to hear Stafford Cripps. There was no TV in those days. Labour candidates were still in the forces and addressed several meetings a day in their army uniforms – often the only clothes they had. He

recalled one candidate with his leg in plaster. But people could listen to the arguments and make up their own minds. Constituency parties were not prepared at all for a campaign. Jim Callaghan recalled being elected in Cardiff with a 10,000 majority. But he had only just arrived back from the Far East and in those days it had taken him 2 weeks to get back. He said that there was one car and one bicycle for the whole constituency.



There were no opinion polls but a Labour victory was not expected. Ernest Bevin was even preparing for a post-election holiday. When the results came in he had to abandon the idea and get to Potsdam as Foreign Secretary

After the 1935 election defeat Labour had started making gains at every bye-election between 1936-1938. It was often debated that had there been a general election scheduled in 1939, Labour would have quite likely won. However the War cut across this and Labour joined a wartime coalition government, contributing 18 ministers. The Party withered during the War as people younger than 30 were conscripted. And there was a by-