

**Labour
Heritage**



Labour Heritage

Bulletin Summer 2005

1945 Labour Government – 60 years ago

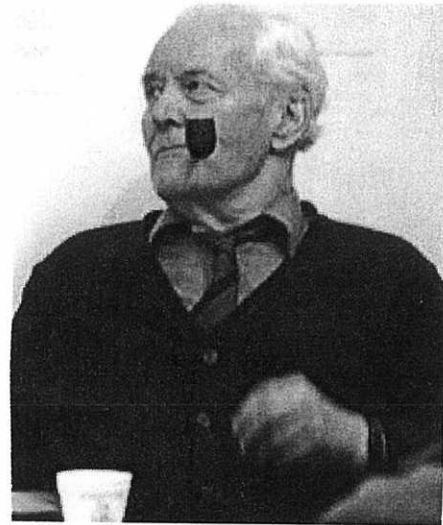
Labour Heritage AGM Saturday 12th March 2005

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-

election truce. Seats were not contested. But by 1942 this had started to change with independents challenging the Coalition Government in Wallasey, Grantham and Maldon where Tom Driberg was first elected. In 1943 the Commonwealth Party began to contest seats.

The majority of the Tory Press predicted a Tory majority, only the *News Chronicle* predicted a Labour win. Labour had considered asking for the general election to be delayed until November 1945 but that was rejected. However there were problems in drawing up an election register for July. It was reported that Churchill had been left off the electoral roll. Discussions took place on how ballot papers could be distributed to the forces, even to prisoners of war abroad.

Much of Labour's programme was formulated by wartime experience – the Beveridge Report was adopted by the Party although Beveridge never joined the Labour Party. Nationalisation became acceptable even to the Tories. The government had requisitioned trains, for instance, for moving troops. In wartime troops had received health care free of charge. But full employment was a major concern. Norman believes that the forces' vote, though important, was overestimated in determining the election result as the forces only turned out by 50%, compared to an overall turnout of 72%.

20,000 people would go to a meeting to hear Churchill but they did not vote for him. When Winchester and Stroud went to Labour there was no turning back.

Norman related how even after the Labour election majority there were still unsuccessful moves to get Clement Attlee replaced with Herbert Morrison. He also recalled how the Red Flag was

sung in Parliament when Labour MPs took up their seats. It was an exciting moment.



Members of the audience contributed their own reminiscences of 1945. Len Snow was in the Army Bureau of Current Affairs and distributed leaflets. Irene Wagner worked in war time intelligence. She joined the Commonwealth Party. Betty Snow recalls her school activities in the League of Nations Union when she had to ask politicians from all parties, including the fascists, to speak at her school. Anne Lubin recalls the Blackshirts still being active in the East End of London even after films about the concentration camps had been shown.

There was discussion on whether Labour could have won in 1939, what would have happened if the election had been postponed to a later date in 1945 and what if the Tories had won in 1945. Would the Tories have nationalised? If so, then they would have been to the left of New Labour.

The role of the trades unions in the 1945 election campaign was discussed. Members of the railway workers' union put up posters in favour of nationalisation on wagons of coal. There was an election levy on trades union members.

The impact of the election result on the colonies was also discussed and the subsequent Labour policy towards them. Labour's manifesto in 1945 had proclaimed that "we are a socialist party and proud of it". "our aim is a socialist commonwealth".



Labour Heritage officers with speakers

The Communist Party in the 1930s

The 1930s was the 'Dismal Decade', so-called because of the massive unemployment and government inertia. It was also dominated by the rise of fascism. It was mainly the latter that enrolled me in the Communist Party, for, having left Christ's Hospital in 1925, I became a clerk in the head office of the Great Western Railway at Paddington Station, a respectable person with a job for life and a salary of 10 pounds per annum.

Thirties Europe was in turmoil leading to war. In Britain I witnessed the police battling with the hunger marchers who had marched to London in their thousands. In London also the Blackshirts were given protection by the police. In Spain Franco was being armed by Hitler and Mussolini. This was helped by the Government's so-called

Non-Intervention Treaty. The Communist Party alone helped the Spanish government. It organised the British battalion of the International Brigade. This is what made me join that party.

The party decided that I should not be an open member but a sub-rosa one, working for the party line in other organizations such as the Labour Party.

Converting the Labour Party?

Ideology was based entirely on the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and some others. Engels' "*Condition of the working class in 1844*" I knew already from student days at the London School of Economics. Lenin was the simplest to read with his clear cut prose in for instance "*The state and revolution*". Stalin, apparently the author of the "*History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*," was boring. Marx was the difficult one. I got through the first difficult chapter of *Capital* and the historical chapters are easy but the rest was unread. However I did grasp his central theory of dialectical materialism and his universal applications and was content with that. The theory of class and class warfare was obvious, for there was plenty of current evidence notably with the hunger marchers whom I saw entering London.

Our young chairman allotted the tasks for each member. I and a pretty eager young girl had the job of converting the Labour Party to the Party line and so we went off to join the local Labour Party branch. Chloe Davis, who lived with her husband and family in the newly built Rochester Way, was to organise a local branch of the thriving Left Book Club. Another comrade was to go to a neighbouring council estate and sell the

Party newspaper, the Daily Worker. I also took turns at this. Another was to contact the National Peace Council in London, which was just beginning to have some conference. The chairman would co-ordinate it all from the meeting room above the estate agency where he was employed.

The premises of the local Labour Party were a large hut in the front garden of a big house on Bromley Hill, announced as such by a board. The secretary, a mournful watch man, greeted us eagerly, for the branch was small and meetings rarely exceeded half a dozen. We signed on as two new members and read the constitution, noting particularly Clause 4, in line with our Party. Meetings were dull, fretting over Party business, and after several we felt that we had to do something and so I raised the issue of the Spanish Civil War and moved that the Government should leave the Non-Intervention Treaty. I had hit the right note for, to my surprise, the motion was agreed nem con. We had made a small conversion but the motion was hardly revolutionary and when we tried to push it further it was another matter. When I moved that the Government should send military aid to the Spanish Government there was a shaking of heads and I lost. We returned to the home front and I moved that the government should accede to the demands of the hunger marchers, then on their last march to London, for the abolition of the means test. We failed to get agreement. This was a surprise for by then some Labour leaders were openly in support of the marchers, but it should not have been, since the marchers were organised and led by the Communist Party to which the Labour Party was hostile.

By this time the secretary was suspicious of us for he was aware that there was a

CP branch in the town. We could do no more in the Labour Party so we switched to other work. I was allocated to the peace movement, which was growing fast and the girl was sent to help Chloe Davis with the Left Book Club and there was always Daily Worker selling.

The National Peace Council

The National Peace Council which had many social luminaries on it, including the Duchess of Atholl, was linked to the Aid Spain Campaign. The NPC employed organisers, one of whom was a public school and university type and CP member who visited us in Bromley, where prospects were thought to be favourable. The Council's main plank was that if Britain would ally with the Soviet Union and with France and the Czechoslovaks, the combination would stop Hitler in his tracks. Later historians have supported this point of view but at that time hostility in the government made it impossible to bring about.

A public meeting in the Carnegie public library showed that there was much interest in peace. The hall was full, addressed by a retired Lieutenant Commander, with me in the chair. It was a good meeting but at the close the speaker reproved me for wearing plus fours, then trendy among the young. "Always wear a formal suit at a meeting" he said.

Another meeting was not so successful. It took place in an alley off the high street and my only audience was a man and his dog.

When the war came in 1939 things were difficult for Party members for the Party changed its line from support for an anti-fascist war to opposition to an imperialist one and campaigned for a People's Peace and deep bomb-proof

shelters. And then, when Germany attacked the Soviet Union it was back to support for the war.

A railway clerk during those years, I had obtained my degree at the London School of Economics and had been promoted to the General Manager's Office at Paddington. Then my membership of the CP was discovered and I was demoted to a lesser office in the country. This was evacuated to Aldermaston and, as it was the publicity office, there was no work to do in war time.

Working in the trades unions

To protect myself against further victimisation I joined the trades union, the Railway Clerks Association, and the Home Guard. There were no other trade union members in my new office, but I was in touch with two other CP members, Fred Tonge in the Chief Accountants Office and Ben Wellman in the Chief Goods' Managers' Office, also evacuated.

We decided to gain control of the Paddington branch of the union, which had a thousand members. As there was some discontent there already, we got ourselves elected to the leadership - Fred as secretary, Ben as treasurer, me as chairman.

Now that the Soviet Union had been attacked, the Party line was for increasing the war effort and so we set about identifying the grievances which would lower morale.

We started a newsletter which I wrote under the pseudonym *Anteus*, the giant who maintained his strength while he kept his feet on the ground. There were two main grievances, the canteen and the train services which brought the clerks from Ealing and Acton to Aldermaston

daily, which got them up far too early and took them home too late. If these were attended to we claimed work would improve. Accordingly we held a mass meeting in the canteen. We won our case and the grievances were attended to.

These activities did not please the RCA head office in London which was peaceful, but unlike ASLEF and the NUR, it had come out in 1926 but never again. It just negotiated individual grades and in fact I had been at the receiving end when in the General Managers' Office and had prepared papers for the meetings.

The union's dislike of us was expressed at the annual general meeting in May 1942 when the chairman's address contained a sneer at the "rising tide from Paddington". To which I was happy to reply that I had hoped that he would not share the experience of King Canute.

I supposed that M15 had a file on me for soon after Germany attacked the Soviet Union I had written for the Marx Memorial Library a syllabus on Soviet railways and railwaymen for discussion in branches of the railway trade unions, printed and sold at threepence a copy. In fact I knew little about the subject, though like many Party members I thought that I knew a good deal about the Soviet Union and most of the syllabus was written by the then secretary of the Library, part of the Communist Party.

Hull

It was the Party network that kept me happy in Hull where I was sent for three months to learn the duties of an embarkation staff officer. I was put in touch with John and Margaret Palfreyman, living with their children in

the suburbs. Hull was bitterly cold, especially down at the docks which had been heavily bombed, and living as I was in private billets or digs, I spent many evenings with them in comradely discussions in the warmth and comfort of their home. At the next posting, Liverpool, the Party helped me again. I lived with Tommy and Jane in Oak Cottage near the aircraft factory where Tommy was a chief shop steward. He had received an MBE for his work in increasing production. I spent hours listening to his collection of classical music on gramophone records and getting the benefit of his Daily Worker.

Posting to India



Posted to India in April 1944 I got in touch with the Party, not the British but the Indian. Wandering around Bombay with nothing to do, I saw an announcement that the Pearl cinema would be showing Russian films. That I thought is the place to go and one Sunday morning I met several other British ranks with the same idea.

The film shows were run by the Friends of the Soviet Union similar to the one that I had known in England and organized by the CP. Going to their office in an alley off the main road,

feeling very conspicuous in uniform several times, I made friends with the people, including Sashi who kept me informed of all the forthcoming events and developments in the labour and trades union movement. One such event was an All India Congress held in the great hall of Bombay University. Hundreds of middle class people of all kinds gathered to celebrate the Soviet Union and also to claim their own independence which it is claimed would help in the war against the Japanese. The speakers included Gandhi's sister. The only English there were the soldiers in the gallery.

Soon after I was asked to talk to the Friends of the Soviet Union branch to about 30 people. I was not reported as this would have prevented my transfer to the Education Corps for which I had already applied.



I had been posted to the Army School of Education for a month's course. This was in a beautiful place. The English wing of the school was liberal in its views and its methods. Its job was to show junior officers how to run discussion on current affairs with their soldiers, to improve morale. When I became a member of the staff it was very much to my liking and of course in the Party line. During my years there the

long arm of the Party touched me only once. One of our courses was attended by a lieutenant whose views I recognized. I discussed with him whether or not I was following the Party line.

That was my last contact with the Communist Party. On being demobbed in 1946 I had to think about a job, somewhere to live and a family. Labour had won the General Election of 1945, a victory to which the Education Corps has been said to have largely contributed.

Peter Kingsford (2005)

How Vesuvius gave Chiswick its first Labour Councillor.

Labour candidates first contested two wards of the Chiswick District Council in April 1905. At the turn of the century there was considerable industry in Chiswick and a large working class population. Tom O'Brien, who stood in Chiswick Park Ward and lost by only 14 votes to Mr George Brown, said they had done well and 'would fight for their class again.'

In April 1906 Labour stood in three wards. Tom O'Brien, standing this time in Turnham Green Ward, polled only 83 votes against his opponent's 304. On the Town Hall steps O'Brien said he was defeated but not disgraced. 'I had the support of 83 intelligent voters and considering the lying statements circulated against me it was a wonder there were not three without the eight.'

The Labour candidates had been subjected to a vicious campaign against

them by the local press and by Tom O'Brien's opponent Councillor Henry Eydman, who had the backing of the Chiswick Ratepayers Association. One of the charges that O'Brien had to deny was that that he favoured the sacking of older council labourers who worked on the Chiswick roads.

A few months later Councillor Brown's seat in Chiswick Park Ward was declared vacant because he had not attended a meeting for 6 months. He had been away in Naples and his return was delayed when Vesuvius erupted. The by-election was arranged for July 3rd.

In April William Evans had stood as a Labour candidate in the Chiswick Grove Park Ward but had broken with the Labour Party and stood as an independent in the by-election. The Labour Party was barely a few months old so this was perhaps the first ever defection. Although the Ratepayers Association backed a farrier called Watson Wrightson the situation became confused when the Association's Chairman and Secretary appeared on a platform supporting William Evans. Meanwhile O'Brien was addressing open-air meetings. The *Chiswick Times* said O'Brien's chances of winning were reduced by the 'absolutely revolting' language he used at a meeting on Turnham Green (so revolting, apparently, that they did not report what he said).

O'Brien, had an elaborate election address, favouring concerts for the people, seeking council powers to supply bread, milk and coal by the council at a price to cover costs only, and the provision of a meal a day to underfed

school children. 'Naturally,' said the *Chiswick Times*, 'there is no pledge to economy'.

Local Newspaper reports said that workingmen voters were likely to back a Labour candidate but not one who held such extreme Socialist views and it was widely expected that O'Brien would come bottom of the poll. Polling station: Mission Hall, Fraser St. Polling was brisk in the evening at the Mission Hall in Fraser Street and a few conveyances were in use, one parading the streets and the driver calling out 'any more for O'Brien?'

A large crowd awaited the result outside the Town Hall. There was great surprise - and what the *Chiswick Times* said marked the dawning of a new era - when the result was announced.

Thomas O'Brien (labourer)
5 Brackley Terrace 327

Watson Stephen Wrightston (farrier)
76 Dale Road 177

William Henry Evans (bricklayer)
123 Dukes Road 91

The outcome was greeted with loud cheers accompanied by groans and booing, and O'Brien was carried shoulder high to a nearby van from which he thanked the crowd for securing his return. He would ventilate 'all their grievances' on the council and work for their interests 'until the death'. They should not rest until they had secured the whole of the representation in Chiswick Park and Old Chiswick wards.

Thus it was that a volcanic eruption in Italy caused Chiswick to have its first Labour Councillor.

John Grigg

Women Labour MPs

Labour Heritage member Larry Illes lectures on the theme of radical women in British labour history and he sent us some details about a couple of women who became Labour MPs in the 1920s.

Dr Ethel Bentham



DR. ETHEL BENTHAM
Labour M.P. for East Islington
since 1929, whose death is
announced at the age of 70.

Ethel Bentham was elected as MP for Islington East in 1929. She was the first medical woman to become an MP. Born to Quaker parents she was brought up in Dublin and went on to study medicine at the London School of Medicine for

Women. Her first practice was in partnership in Newcastle. Here she was also active in the women's suffrage movement and she became a candidate for the city council. She moved back to London where she was elected to Kensington Council. During her 13 years as a councillor in Kensington she was responsible for opening a clinic for mothers and babies. She was elected to the Labour Party National Executive Committee in 1919 and became an MP in 1929.

Amongst her crusades were the conditions of shop assistants, particularly in the tobacco trade where they often worked 54-60 hours a week. She also took up women's rights issues such as equality in divorce and property rights of British women who married foreign men. Her other concern was mental health and the lunacy laws. As an activist in women's Labour politics she had been a member of the Womens Labour League and was on its national committee from 1910-1917 and also the Fabian Women's Group. The *Labour Leader* gave her coverage and that is how she came to the attention of the membership of the Labour Party.

Dorothy Jewson

Dorothy Jewson was born in Norwich and went to study in Cambridge where she joined the Independent Labour Party and the Women's Social and Political Union. When she returned to Norwich in 1912 she stood for the Norwich Board of Guardians and conducted an enquiry into the Poor Law locally and the levels of relief received. As a pacifist during World War 1 due to her Quaker convictions she ran a training centre for unemployed girls.

In 1916 she came to London as an organiser for the National Federation of Women Workers. One of her campaigns was for better housing and its impact on family life.



She became MP for Norwich in 1924. During this time she produced a book on poverty in Norwich, and had difficulty in finding a publisher. Although an MP for a very short time she remained a councillor in Norwich. She was also President of the Worker's Birth Control Group at a time when this was a controversial issue in the labour movement.

"Hammer of the Left" by John Golding, Politics, 2003.

1983 was the worst year in the Labour Party's history. In the General Election of that year, it came within one percentage point of being the third party. Some might dispute that claim and say 1931. In 1931 the Party faced a

combined onslaught of Conservatives, Liberals and Labour defectors and survived. It maintained the Party's integrity. In 1983, on the other hand, Labour faced separate parties of the Conservatives and a combination of Liberals and Labour defectors (a larger number and better organised than in 1931), not to mention the Nationalists in Wales and Scotland. Altogether there were four disparate forces throughout the country and yet it was slaughtered at the polls.

At the time however it was widely believed in the Party that we were on the point of a revolution. The various grass roots campaigns for compulsory re-selection of MPs and a widened franchise for the election of the leader would mean the masses would rise and Socialism would prevail and comrade Tony Benn would lead them into the promised land.

Various books have been written since then. *The Rise and Fall of the Labour Left* by Patrick Seyd. *Four Years in the Death of the Labour Party* by Austin Mitchell to name but two. The latest addition to this bibliography is the late John Golding's *Hammer of the Left*. This book is distinctive because the author was at the heart of the Labour Party during the years 1979 to 1983, not in the shadow cabinet (as they were gradually sidelined) or the Parliamentary Labour Party (as they were despised by the left-wing party activists), but as a very busy member of the National Executive Committee, which was to be given continual prominence as it was considered to be the sole focal point for policy making (even though this went against the Party's constitution).

The author pulls no punches. He does not like Tony Benn, even though he had been an admirer of Anthony Wedgwood Benn. He does not dislike Eric Heffer, but finds his wild behaviour very difficult. Nor indeed does he have kind words for Denis Healey, who foolishly made enemies of the trade unions. He also has no time for the defectors. He was on the point of working with Shirley Williams to expel both the Militant and the Social Democratic Alliance (the forerunner of the SDP), when the latter did a sudden volte face.

The thrust of the book covers the period 1978 to 1983. The first chapter covers the rise of the left from the 1960s to the first date. The plotting was well under way before the election of 1979 and the subsequent defeat was put down to by the left as Labour having too moderate policies in the manifesto, not the "winter of discontent".

Golding naturally views the move to the left in the Labour Party during those years with cynical prejudice. He also recounts how the right gradually won back power after Healey's narrow victory over Benn in the deputy leadership battle. He is quite open with the role the right played in opposing them, particularly in the way they managed to stop Benn from being selected for the safer seat of Bristol South.

However the left still managed to control conference in 1982, even if they had suffered setbacks on the NEC elections. Golding was narrowly elected Chair of the Home Policy Committee. He took the view however not to change the radical policies which had been drafted by the Labour Party Research

Department, as the Labour Party was going to lose the election anyway.

The subsequent events after the 1983 defeat in many ways was galling. Some of Benn's closest allies, such as the Director of Research, Geoff Bish turned against him. It took us another fourteen years to get back to power. As a Fabian reformist, who used to consider myself on the Party's extreme right, I now find myself sitting uncomfortably on the left and I have not changed my views or policies. Yet some of those conference speakers of the 1980s proclaiming the new Jerusalem are now in the government. I suppose I am Old Labour but of the Roy Hattersley mould. I only wish some people would admit they were wrong all those years ago.

The book starts with a brief autobiography of Golding. He was at Keele University with my friend Ray Challinor. They were on opposite wings in the University's Labour Club. Both of them told me stories about each other. Their versions tallied, but from different perspectives. In the same way, I think most readers will not be able to challenge the evidence in the book, but may take a different view on it. I myself found the book very amusing.

Stephen Bird

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AT WITHAM LABOUR HALL

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full details available later

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