



Labour Heritage

Bulletin Winter 2024-2025

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Conscription and Reform of the British Penal System

Dr Frances Hurd

*A longer version of this article with
footnotes appeared in Stand To!
Journal of the Western Fron
Association, March 2024.*

When war broke out in 1914 British men opposed to conscription feared that it might be introduced, even though military service in Britain had always been voluntary (unlike other European nation). Membership of the No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF) quickly reached almost 10,000, with 6,000 from the left-wing Independent Labour Party (ILP). Quakers formed the next largest group.

Conscription was introduced in Britain by the Military Service Act on 2 March 1916, making military service obligatory for men aged 18 to 41. The government had recognised that some exemptions would be needed - for instance for men working in vital industries such as farming - but MPs led by Arnold Rowntree and Edmund Harvey argued successfully for an additional 'conscience clause', extending exemption to men who demonstrated a principled objection to military service.

Partial exemption meant doing non-combatant tasks such as stretcher-bearing, hospital portering and various manual jobs. Alternative service allowed men to undertake 'work of national importance', such as serving in a voluntary ambulance service. Absolute exemption completely absolved men from the terms of the Act.

The government seriously underestimated how many conscientious objectors (COs) would seek absolute exemption, and, if forced into the Army when they failed to obtain it, would then refuse to cooperate with any military command. These COs came to be known as 'absolutists', as their numbers mounted, it was decided to transfer them from military to civilian prisons. Many absolutists did more than one prison term as on release they were returned to Army custody, again refused to obey orders, were court-martialled, and returned to prison.

As virtually all CO records were destroyed in 1921, no data can be definitive, but about one-third of the 20,000 registered COs were absolutists. It's estimated that 655 were court-martialled twice, 521 three times, 50 five times, and three six times. While the ILP and Quakers formed a majority amongst absolutists, there were also anarchists and radical socialists, as well as other religious denominations dedicated to pacifism, such as the Seventh-Day Adventists and the International Bible Students'

Association (later renamed Jehovah's Witnesses).

From August 1916 all court-martialled COs were sent to HMP Wormwood Scrubs to be interviewed by a Central Tribunal. This would decide whether or not each man was a 'genuine' CO. If judged 'not genuine', they were returned to the army, there to begin the cycle of disobedience, court martial and imprisonment once again. The vast majority were judged to be 'genuine' and subsequently agreed to go to a Home Office work camp, perhaps because they'd found prison conditions in their first six or seven weeks more arduous than they'd expected. Men in these camps were supposed to be occupied in work of 'national importance', the most determined 'genuine' absolutists refused to go, as they believed the work camps indirectly aided the war effort.

On arrival in any civilian prison at this time, prisoners had to 'strip to the skin, abandoning every belonging, the only exception being spectacles, false teeth, or surgical appliance. In this nude condition they are examined medically'. The focus of this examination was succinctly described as 'shirt up and trousers down'. Most prisoners wore white with black arrows, but court-martial prisoners wore black with white arrows. As clothing and shoes were issued at random apart from this colour distinction, items were often too big or too small. Prison laundering was inefficient, and prisoners were often

given underwear visibly stained by urine, faeces or blood. They wore a large metal badge with their cell number, (D254 being cell 54, second floor, D Wing). Prisoners were addressed only by their number, never by name.

While the treatment of COs in military prisons was sometimes appallingly brutal, civilian prisons were designed to control prisoners through solitary confinement and enforced silence. They were forbidden to speak to each other, and allowed to say only 'yes, sir' to warders. As one CO put it, "to prison' and 'to isolate' are virtually identical terms.' The new arrival was then taken to his cell, to find 'bars on the high window; a locked door; a light over which one had no control ... [and] the faint click of the spyhole'.

Prisoners slept on the loose bare planks forming the base of their bed, only receiving a mattress after their first month. In addition, whatever their crime, they were also in solitary confinement for this month. A Scrubs chaplain claimed that this 'consequent freedom from contamination prepares the way for kindly counsel and religious instruction'. This was not how solitary confinement was perceived by prisoners. The E. Williamson Mason CO described lying awake listening to a man 'shouting in sheer terror and despair through being alone in the dark with the terrors of his mind, screaming out "Oh God, oh God, talk to me. Say anything, only for God's sake talk to me".'

Some endured solitary confinement for a much longer period. Sentences were regularly commuted, followed by a new trial and a new sentence, meaning that many served repeated periods of imprisonment which could be longer than their original sentence. It also meant that they had to endure solitary confinement several times over. Some prominent COs were deliberately targeted with long periods in solitary. Clifford Allan, chairman of the NCF, was sentenced to 112 days alone, immediately followed by a further 83 days. He later wrote of this experience:

'I think the greatest torture of enforced and perpetual silence is the never-ceasing consciousness of thinking ... you cannot stop thinking for an instant. And if you seem to, it is only to listen intently to the beating of your heart drumming in your ears'.

Food conformed to the standard laid down by a Parliamentary Committee in 1898: 'it should 'consist of the plainest food, unattractive, but good and wholesome'. Breakfast was bread and gruel (oatmeal boiled in water); lunch bread and porridge without salt or sugar; and dinner was more bread and gruel. 'So hungry were we,' the Quaker CO Stephen Hobhouse wrote, 'that I have seen many a root grabbed from the soil surreptitiously [while] at exercise'.

COs had to do 'hard labour' for ten hours a day, usually making mailbags from sacking whilst sitting on a three-legged stool. For the first month, of course, this was done in their cells: then they went to one of the prison

workshops. All communication between them was forbidden. The CO Arthur Creech Jones wrote 'you must live in complete isolation ... never laugh, hum, whistle, sing or speak in case you are punished.' However, despite the harsh penalties for disobedience, all prisoners tried to communicate with each other. If they had not done so before during exercise, when prisoners whispered to each other, or in the chapel, when they sang messages during hymns, the workshop was where men learned the techniques of prison conversation. Hobhouse explains that 'talking without detection, in a special kind of whisper ... becomes a kind of fine art, as does the swift handing of a note or other harmless item to one's neighbour'. He found this necessary resort to deceitfulness so repellent that he protested to Wormwood Scrubs's governor about the 'inhumane rule' forbidding communication between prisoners. In consequence Hobhouse spent the next four months in solitary confinement, an experience which nearly drove him insane. Most COs, however, broke the rules without hesitation.

After the first month prisoners got a mattress, a slightly improved diet with a little meat and were permitted four photographs in their cell. After eight weeks they could write and receive one short letter and have one visit per month of twenty minutes. After twelve weeks two letters and two visits were permitted. All these 'privileges' could be instantly revoked at the whim of a warder. Some COs became seriously

ill: nine died in prison and approximately sixty more subsequently.

The mass imprisonment of COs was an unforeseen result of conscription and led to both short- and long-term consequences for the English penal system. The first prison Quaker Meeting and the appointment of a Quaker Chaplain were established in Wormwood Scrubs by August 1916. Other Meetings and Quaker Chaplains were established elsewhere during the war and continue to this day. Meetings have always been open to anyone who wishes to attend, so non-Quaker prisoners could take part. They sat in a circle, thus seeing each other's faces, spoke if they felt 'moved' to, and shook hands at the end: very inspiring for isolated prisoners. In addition, Quaker chaplains noted the names of all attenders, and made sure their families knew if they were moved to another prison or the Army.

The ILP activist Fenner Brockway brought about the introduction of a vegetarian diet. "I went on partial hunger strike ... It was three months before the Home Office granted a vegetarian diet ... it proved to be more tasty and varied than the regulation diet. There was a long queue of prisoners, all claiming that their consciences would not allow them to eat meat!" Prisons have continued to offer vegetarian alternatives ever since.

Brockway was transferred to Walton Prison in Liverpool, where he produced a tiny newspaper written on

toilet paper, containing news about the war and humorous material. Other COs produced newspapers in at least eight other prisons. The one fragile copy would be passed from prisoner to prisoner, whether CO or ordinary criminal. All COs tried to greet everyone they met with a smile or even words. One greeted a friend with the words "Good morning, Jack." For this he was punished with two days bread and water diet.

The Labour Research Department (LRD) had been established to provide factual information for trade unions and other bodies wanting to bring about reforms. In 1918 the LRD decided to produce a comprehensive report on the existing prison regime with suggestions for its reform, and Stephen Hobhouse was appointed editor. He began to collect research material, despite the Prison Commissioners' refusal to supply a copy of the 'Standing Orders' which listed all regulations. They also forbade staff to cooperate in any way. Nevertheless, Hobhouse obtained a copy of the 'Standing Orders', and sent out a detailed questionnaire to ex-prisoners, magistrates and prison visitors, and prison officials, promising anonymity for all replies. He received responses from all the different groups, accumulating a vast amount of information. However, by 1921 Hobhouse was overwhelmed by the task and heading for a nervous breakdown.

He was therefore joined as editor by Fenner Brockway. Despite some

friction between two very different personalities, they worked together with Brockway doing the bulk of the writing and produced 'English Prisons To-Day' in 1922. This is still the most detailed account of the operation of English prisons ever published, and is also highly readable, linking extracts from the contributors with a clear yet vivid linking narrative. It sold in thousands and attracted much attention. A month after its publication, prison governors were instructed to allow conversation between prisoners at work and between prisoners and warders, and a few months later the use of solitary confinement at the start of every prisoner's sentence was ended. The government's decision to introduce conscription had had a major and completely unanticipated impact on prison reform.

While the ban on communication and the use of solitary confinement were the policies which Hobhouse and Brockway had most urgently desired to see changed, many others (such as the abolition of capital punishment) took much longer to come, and other changes they advocated have still not been made. Much of English Prisons To-Day remains sadly relevant a hundred years after it was written. Prisoners are once again locked up for 23 hours a day; two men now share the tiny cells; and all problems are greatly exacerbated by drugs.

HMP Wormwood Scrubs.



West Fulham Fights and Beats the Appeasers : The 1938 West Fulham By-Election.

Scott Reeve

This election was fought entirely on the Tory Government's foreign policy. The starting gun was fired when Cyril Cobb, the West Fulham Tory MP, died on 8th of March 1938. The players, however, had been preparing and waiting for the gun to be fired for over a year. Cyril was struck down with a fatal illness in early 1937, for most of the time until he died, he was confined to his bed. His doctors only allowed him to get up for a few hours a day a couple of weeks before his death. West Fulham made aware of his

illness when he informed the local Tory Party in the summer of 1937 that he would be retiring at the next election.

Cyril Cobb had been the Tory MP for West Fulham since 1918 apart from a short period in 1929/1930. Labour won West Fulham in the 1929 Labour national victory but lost it in a 1930 by-Election when he won his seat back. Before the First World War he was leader of the LCC.

Appeasement was not then a word of abuse, it was the official language of Tory foreign policy. The policy was to placate and be nice to the fascist dictators of Germany and Italy and not intervene in the armed rebellion of General Franco against the democratically elected Spanish Government which was known as the Spanish civil war. This did not prevent Chamberlain turning a blind eye to the Italian armed forces directly fighting alongside Franco's rebel troops. They were only volunteers after all but as Eden said shortly before he resigned as Foreign Secretary there are 8 Italian Army Generals in Spain.

In February 1938 German Nazis took over Austria, Hitler called it annexation others called it an invasion. In these circumstances the Tory Government wanted Eden in Rome to "appease" Mussolini. This is something that Anthony Eden would not do and he resigned on the 20th of February 1938, two weeks later Cyril Cobb died.

East Fulham Tory women were meeting on March the 8th to listen to Mr Astor the prominent Tory speaker

who said, "Because they – the Labour Party – dislike Mussolini they oppose any attempt to bring appeasement in the Mediterranean." Two days later Labour held a meeting in West Fulham as part of Labour's peace week where their candidate for the forthcoming by-election spoke, as did Josiah Wedgewood MP, who said "Labour would protect democracy by justice, by the League of Nations and by international force it would ensure peace not by surrender to threats or by talks to bullies but by dealing out justice to all". Arthur Henderson also spoke at this meeting.

On March the 18th the Fulham Gazette reported Fulham Labour Council increased the rates and this was bitterly opposed by the Tories. It also reported that no writ had yet been issued for the by-election, it being suggested that the latest possible date is desired by the Tories.

The election was called a few days later, for Wednesday the 6th of April. The Tory candidate was John Busby whose campaign was strongly against intervention in the Spanish civil war so as not to plunge Europe into war: The view was that the League of Nations should be an organisation of peace, not of war. Labour fought it on a policy of standing up to the dictators, not as the government did by talking to them and by non-intervention when they invaded other countries.

Labour Party saw this election as a chance to test the public mood: To avoid war on appeasing Hitler and Mussolini and helping Franco by not

intervening in Spain or by standing up to the dictators and bullies of Europe. They allocated the local L.P a professional agent from Kennington but the local LP leadership soon took over from him. Amongst other things they issued labour poll cards to Labour promises with a short reason why it is important to give their polling number to Labour helpers at the polling station. They also issued an eve of poll leaflet. The L.P even had a suggested script for comrades knocking on doors on Election Day to get the vote out. There was no such thing as postal voting then, but Labour contacted voters who had moved out of the area who were still on the register urging them to come back to West Fulham to vote on April the 6th. Several did, some returning from as far away as the Isle of White and others from Birmingham

The number of Labour MPs speaking at election meetings was huge. Meetings were held every night in the week commencing the 28th of March with the last on the 4th and 5th of April. Most of the meetings had 3 MPs speaking at them, on the 4th the meeting had 4, including Atlee. On the Tuesday, the night before polling day, there were 5 including Stafford Cripps and Ellen Wilkinson. Meetings were held in school halls and once at a public baths.

In a letter, dated 22 March 1938 to organisations affiliated to West Fulham Labour Party the CLP leadership wrote

"There has never been a more important By-election than this one currently taking place in West Fulham.

– With Fascist aggressors destroying democratic nations and threatening our own freedom this is the time for action. - The Tories will make a stupendous effort to hold this seat. The whole of their resources will be thrown in to the campaign. “One of the Labour leaflets has survived; it is in Large Red type and reads:

Why did Mr Eden Resign?

He saw that Chamberlain’s Policy leads to War but with no friends left to help us!

Eden and Labour want to prevent War by a chain of peaceful nations so strong that the bullies of Europe dare not risk further aggression

Vote for Summerskill

Real-----not make-believe—Peace and Security.

There was also a leaflet circulating with no indication of which organisation issued it other than Printed and Published by St Clements Press. The title of the leaflet is ‘Where are We? Some recent statements about Foreign Policy Made by Conservatives in Parliament.’

Then it quoted from Tories, including Eden and Churchill, attacking the policy of their own Government.

Fulham Liberals decided not to put up a candidate but together with the local League of Nations Association decided to ask the two candidates loaded questions on foreign policy issues. They also organised a hustings for

April the 4th. This turned out to be a very lively debate indeed with a lot of audience participation.

In her Election address Edith Summerskill she allowed herself a passage which predicted the message of Labour’s 1945 election campaign.

“There must be no more underfed children: No more people of any age reduced to misery by unemployment. There must be no more poverty in the midst of plenty.

The nation must control the nations land, its money, power and credit, its huge coal power and the transport industries. Food Supplies must be reorganised and prices kept low. The unemployed must be properly maintained”

On election day there was a rush to the polls after 6pm even though the polls had been open since 7am and were due to close at 9pm.

The result of the by-election was that Labour won by a majority of 1,421 overturning a Tory majority of over 3,500.

Edith Summerskill gave the following message to the Fulham Gazette on Thursday, the day after the election:

“West Fulham has spoken for England. Let Mr Chamberlain take the warning he must either make way for a new Government or reverse his policy”

The Daily Herald prophesied “West Fulham is the inspiring beginning of the Great National Movement that will

end by driving the National Government from office”

Edith made a triumphant entry into the commons on Monday the 11th of April. Labour members cheered and shouted, pointing their fingers at Chamberlain, ‘resign, resign’. They had to wait 25 months for Chamberlain to resign and by then France was about to be crushed and there was a real danger of Britain being turned into a NAZI Puppet State.

But let Edith have the last words. On Sunday the 10th of April speaking at an anti-fascist rally of 50,000 in Hyde Park she said: “The finest thing about West Fulham was that the people stood firm and did not respond to the Government’s call for unity in the face of so-called national peril. The Government tried to panic the people and appealed to them to think in terms of unity. West Fulham knew that the only unity the government recognised was unity with the dictators and Clevedon set.”

“Does this stupid man, Chamberlain, with his Party of yes men around him, believe that Hitler and Mussolini will say “we must be kind to that country where such nice people as Neville Chamberlain and Nancy Astor live.”

The Daily Herald. 1910 – 1964

John Grigg

Older members will remember the Daily Herald, the only daily paper that supported the Labour Party apart from the Mirror.

In December 1910 London composers were on strike demanding a 48-hour week. Not surprisingly the composers were able to produce a strike sheet named The World that after a month was renamed the Daily Herald. Circulation grew and at its peak reached 25,000 copies per day. It ceased publishing when the strike ended in April 1911.

There was clearly a market for a left-wing daily newspaper and several Labour Party leaders, including George Lansbury, launched an appeal for funds. George Bernard Shaw was an early donator with £300. The paper reappeared after 12 months in April 1911. The first editor was Charles Lapworth. The cartoonist was Will Dyson and his cartoons attracted such attention that the Hearst Press tried to lure him away. A special fund was raised to keep him at the Herald and he was paid £20 a week.

Ken Coates writes ‘It set off... as a co-operative Labour daily, staunchly unofficial and rebellious, a veritable hell raiser.’ The Herald’s politics were broadly syndicalist arguing for a socialist revolution based on workers’ self-organisation in trade unions. It supported the suffragette movement

and anti-colonial struggles, particularly in Ireland.

There had been two general elections in 1910 dominated by the constitutional issue of restricting the power of the House of Lords. This was supported, of course, by the Labour Party. The party's manifestos included complete adult suffrage and much social reform but made no specific reference to socialism. There was also an electoral pact with the Liberals enabling one or other to stand down in some constituencies in order to defeat the Conservatives. Not surprisingly the Labour Party was somewhat uneasy with the uncompromising socialism advocated by the Daily Herald and the party launched its own newspaper, the Daily Citizen, in October 1912. It was the official organ of the Labour Party.

Both papers ran into financial difficulties and the Citizen closed for good in 1915. In 1913 the Herald was forced into liquidation, but Lansbury and Lapworth formed a new company guaranteed by wealthy friends of Lansbury including H. D. Harden, a founder of the New Statesman and Lady Muriel de la Warr. Two board members were dissatisfied with Lapworth as editor and Lansbury took over. He stayed as editor for the next nine years.

The paper continued its relentless socialist approach and by the beginning of the 1914-18 war daily sales of 150,000 were achieved, but its anti-war stance resulted in a slump in sales and the paper went weekly during the war. It campaigned against

conscription and supported conscience objectors. It welcomed the 1917 Russian revolutions. Daily publication resumed in 1919 and the paper campaigned against British intervention in the Russian civil war. Due to its Socialist stance it failed to attract much commercial advertising and was constantly in financial difficulties. It increased its price from 1d to 2d - twice as much as comparable newspapers. Predictably circulation fell and it was unable to continue as an independent left daily, Lansbury withdrew, and the paper was handed over to the TUC in 1922.

On more than one occasion there were insinuations that it had been subject to Bolshevik influence. There is a report that 'David Lloyd George and his government' claimed that George Lansbury was in the pay of the Bolsheviks. Lansbury published the complete list of donors, and the accusation was withdrawn. There are other instances on Wikipedia. One is that in 1921 British Intelligence intercepted a telegramme to Lenin from Lev Kamenev, a member of the Russian delegation visiting London to negotiate an Anglo-Soviet Trade Agreement, saying that he had paid £40,000 to the Daily Herald. On a later occasion one of the paper's journalists is said to be the leader of a Soviet spy ring. How much of this is what is now known as fake news?

In 1922 the paper was owned by and was the official organ of the TUC. It broadly supported the Labour Movement although Ramsey

MacDonald, as prime minister of the first Labour government in 1926 complained that it did not give the party enough support. He described the paper; 'instead of being a great Party organ giving us spirit and uplift, it is a miserable cantankerous, narrow minded and pettifogging propaganda sheet.' The editor, Hamilton Fyfe, replied saying 'The Herald is the organ, not of your government, not of a party. But of the Labour Movement. In the Movement there are many currents of opinion.'

In 1930 the TUC sold a 51% share of the Herald to Odhams Press the publisher of the Sunday People. There were certainly financial considerations in the move and Odhams were interested in using the Herald's printing press. Odhams had expertise in promoting a newspaper. A promotion campaign resulted in the Herald becoming the world's best-selling newspaper with a circulation of two million mainly amongst the working classes. Politically it remained a paper supporting the Labour Movement. At the 1931 election, when Ramsey MacDonald had deserted the Labour Party (the great betrayal) and was running as prime minister of a National Government, the Herald vigorously denounced MacDonald, and strongly urged voters to vote Labour. The paper condemned the 'infamous stunts' that claimed Labour would confiscate people's nation savings. Labour was virtually wiped out at the polls winning only 46 seats against 554 won by National Government supporters.

The sport and women's columns had always been a part of the publication and Roy Greenslade has suggested that there was a constant struggle within the editorial staff between those favouring more political content and those favouring a wider popular appeal.

At the 1935 election the paper ran a series of articles by Labour's leaders. Labour made a recovery and gained over 100 seats but was still a small minority in the House of Commons.

The next election was due in 1940 but the Second World War delayed it until 1945. Prewar the paper had 20 pages but government wartime restrictions to save paper reduced it to just four pages. News in the Herald was dominated by war reports though articles by Labour leaders continued. Labour won by a landslide in 1945. The paper supported the new government and reported by-elections. There were 52 by-elections during the 1945-50 parliament and Labour held all the seats it won in 1945.

After the war the Herald's sales declined although it still had the highest working-class readership of any paper. In 1961 Odhams was taken over by the International Publishing Corporation and in 1964 the paper was relaunched with great publicity as The Sun. This was not a success and circulation continued to decline. In 1969 it was sold to Rupert Murdoch's News Limited. Initially the paper continued its support for the Labour Party but the change came in 1979 when The Sun endorsed Margaret Thatcher's

Conservative Party. From then on it was downhill as far as Labour was concerned. In April 1992 The Sun was convinced it was responsible for the Conservative victory with the famous headline,

'IT'S THE SUN THAT WON IT'

So, what started as an independent Socialist paper in 1910, and then became the voice of the Labour Movement, ended up being a right-wing tabloid. Yet during the 1930's it had the highest circulation in the world.



Attlee Accepts Premiership: Now Forming Government

LABOUR IN POWER

New Cabinet Will Be Named At Week-end

It Was Premier Attlee Talking

POTSDAM PLANS

By ERNEST JAY, Political Correspondent
In a car driven by his wife, Mr. Clement Attlee went to Buckingham Palace last night and accepted the King's invitation to form a Labour Government.

Five minutes earlier, at 7.25, Mr. Churchill left the Palace after tendering his resignation which, in fact, meant the resignation of the caretaker Government.

A small crowd saw the new and former Premier arrive. Mr. Churchill, smoking a pipe and sitting in his car, gave the Labour V-sign as he drove in for the last time as Prime Minister. The crowd greeted Mr. Attlee with a great cheer.

It is not expected that the details of the new Labour Government, headed by a Minister or six more or other parties, will be announced before the week-end, and the incoming Ministers will be sworn in before the new House of Commons.

Vast Amount Of Talent

Specialists are plentiful in the new Ministry and naturally without hesitation, those up to a task have last night, and even so inherent the had been prepared.

At Mr. Attlee's principal colleagues in the Cabinet Government have been recruited—Herbert Morrison, Government Secretary, Dalton and Cripps—leaders with whom the former Labour Parliamentary Party.

In addition, he has a vast amount of talent among the new members, and when I see him last night he was confident that he would be able to produce a Cabinet Government ready to tackle the problems that he faced with the utmost vigour.

Mr. Attlee's chief advisers in the new Government of course will begin, making a number of important decisions during the week in looking for the best way of getting things done.

I am sure that this Government will set the pace in the new Parliament and in the new House of Commons, and will contribute to the peace and stability of the country.

Labour's victory requires detached and almost impartial judgement. The country will, in Mr. Attlee's words, "continue a new era of peace and stability, but throughout Europe and the world."

It is a measure of hope and leadership in the liberated and progressive countries. It is an indication that Britain stands to be in the van of progress.

Slaughter Of Ministers

The arrangement has been made for the return of the British delegates to the Big Three Conference at Potsdam, but I understand that Mr. Churchill will be invited to accompany Mr. Attlee, who will become Britain's chief representative.

Previously, with a view to the new Government, it is thought that the new Labour Ministers will be sworn in on the 28th of July.

As the results came out the large number of Ministers would have to be named. The first Ministerial list to be announced was that of Mr. Herbert Morrison, for whom Mr. Attlee has been chosen.

Other Ministers named were Mr. Ernest Bevin, for whom Mr. Attlee has been chosen, Mr. Herbert Morrison, for whom Mr. Attlee has been chosen, Mr. Ernest Bevin, for whom Mr. Attlee has been chosen.

All The Results in Detail with Last Election Figures Given On Page Four

Continued on Page Four

Continued on Page Four

Continued on Page Four



MR ATTLEE shown last night in the Palace last night when he was invited by the King to form a new Government

London Bonfire Dances

By W. A. E. JONES, "Herald" Reporter, LONDON, England

BONFIRES are burning in the streets of London. It is the story of the night again of VE-night—the celebration by the rank and file of Britain for the victory of the Labour Party.

At 10.15 on the night, when London was still in the grip of the blackout, the streets were lit up by the glow of the bonfires. The people were dancing and singing and shouting with joy. The streets were filled with a sense of triumph and hope.

FULL ELECTION FIGURES AT A GLANCE

Table with columns: PARTIES, SEATS (No. Of Candidates, No. Won, At The Polls, Seats Lost, Seats Gained), NETT, TOTAL VOTES POLLED, VOTES PER CENT. Rows include Tories, Labour, Liberal, National, Lib. National, ILP, Communist, Common Wealth, and Others.

* Independent, Welsh Nat., Scots Nat., Irish Nat., Democrats. In the lower total of candidates are 11 representing the Unopposed Party.

Regrets Of Churchill

MR CHURCHILL has said that he regrets the decision to form a Labour Government.

He said that he had no regrets about the decision to form a Labour Government, but he did regret the decision to form a Labour Government.

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WORLD ACCLAIMS

Closer Ties With Soviet

World opinion is turning towards the Soviet Union as a result of the Labour Government's victory.

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STOP PRESS CAN'T FIND JAPS

Search for Japanese planes continues in the Pacific.

Search for Japanese planes continues in the Pacific.

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Search for Japanese planes continues in the Pacific.

Advertisement for Guinness featuring the text 'You've earned your Guinness - it'll do you good' and an image of a glass of Guinness.

Women and the Labour Party

Barbara Humphries

The centenary of women's (limited) suffrage in 1918 saw a debate, and some party-political competition on which main party in the UK had contributed most for women. The criticism for Labour was that the Party had not yet had a woman leader, except for two caretakers – Margaret Beckett and Harriet Harman (both lasted longer in office than Liz Truss). The Tories have now had three women leaders and the Liberals one. Currently the PLP has the largest number of women MPs, over 50% of its total. So here are some historical details about Labour and women.

The Vote

In 1913 the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) organised a pilgrimage for women's suffrage, due to the Liberal Prime Minister, Asquith, had done a u-turn and was no longer supporting women having the vote. The only party that supported women's suffrage at this time was the Labour Party, so the NUWSS reluctantly relinquished its non party political stance in elections. The Labour Party was in favour of universal suffrage with all men and women over 21 having the vote.

This stand was not acceptable to the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), under the leadership of Emmeline Pankhurst, who was prepared to accept a 'Ladies' Bill' by which women would gain the same

voting rights as men, as a first step forward. This would have excluded millions of both working class men and women so was not supported by members of the Labour Party. That was except for a few MPs such as Keir Hardie and George Lansbury. Lansbury even resigned his parliamentary seat and called a by-election on the women's suffrage issue, only to lose his seat in Parliament. The WPSU, dubbed 'suffragettes' by the press, stepped up their campaign of militancy, setting fire to property, chaining themselves to railings and attacking Liberal politicians. The NUWSS continued with more peaceful tactics such as demonstrations and petitioning.

The 1918 Representation of the People Act was passed by the wartime Coalition government, which included Liberal, Tory and Labour ministers. It increased the electorate from seven to twenty-one million, half of which were women. For the first time all men over

21 got the vote, but only women over 30 with some property qualifications. This was in recognition of the role that women had played on the home front during World War 1 and the campaign of the women's suffrage movement. Both the WSPU and the NUWSS had called off their campaigns during the war and supported the war effort. Sylvia Pankhurst's East London Federation of Suffragettes, however continued its campaign for the vote and to alleviate poverty in London's East End.

A bill to extend the ballot to women over 21 was introduced by the first minority Labour government in 1924. When the government fell this bill was lost. The Labour Party Women's Section campaigned for the women's vote, publishing a pamphlet entitled Give the Young Women the Vote. Tory Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, in defiance of his own MPs pushed through the Equal Franchise Act in 1928 which finally enfranchised all women over 21. This was implemented in time for the 1929 General Election, which took place with women being the majority of the electorate in most parliamentary divisions.

Members of Parliament

There were very few women MPs in the interwar years. The first elected woman MP was Constance Markowitz, but she did not take up her seat in Parliament as she was a member of the Irish nationalist party, Sinn Fein. The first woman to take up her seat was a Tory, Lady Nancy Astor. She was followed by a three Labour MPs, Margaret Bondfield, a shop worker Ellen Wilkinson, a trades union official and Susan Lawrence. Margaret Bondfield was the first woman cabinet minister, serving under Ramsay MacDonald's premiership 1929-1931. Ellen Wilkinson campaigned on unemployment leading the Jarrow march in 1936 from her constituency of Jarrow. She went to Spain as a supporter of the Spanish Republic. She worked with Herbert Morrison in World War 2, calling for the setting up of underground air-raid shelters. Then

she went on to become Minister for Education in Attlee's government in 1945. In 1945 Leah Manning was elected for Epping, and campaigned for the retention of day nurseries and free school milk in peacetime. Lucy Middleton, elected for Plymouth, played a role in the reconstruction of that city.

Post World War 2 though, the percentage of women MPs and ministers did not change dramatically. Barbara Castle was elected for Blackburn. She was Minister for Transport in Harold Wilson's government. Controversially she was responsible for making seat belts compulsory in cars, and for trades union reform, (In Place of Strife), legislation which she had to withdraw. Shirley Williams as Minister for Education was to introduce comprehensive education. By 1974 there were only 27 women MPs in Parliament and the gender composition of the Commons did not change much until the Blair government of 1997. Thatcher presided over cabinets of men.

Local councillors

More women however were elected as councillors and Poor Law Guardians, even before they had the vote for parliamentary elections. During World 1 Food Control Committees were set up and after the war Child Welfare committees. Due to a top-down approach to Labour history, many of these women were unsung heroines, working to improve the lives of women they represented. In the local elections

of 1919 Labour made a breakthrough. Some of the most famous councillors included Minnie Lansbury who went to prison with other Labour councillors in Poplar for refusing to pay a rate to the London County Council (LCC), and Ada Salter, a councillor who made a major difference to the quality of life in her home borough of Bermondsey. Women councillors could take up issues of concern to women such as housing, infant and maternal welfare, and education.

Labour Party Women's Sections (LPWS)

The LPWS was founded in 1918, replacing the Women's Labour League. As a party based on trades unionists Labour had to overcome the lack of women in its ranks. This changed in 1918 as individual membership was introduced for the first time. The LPWS took root in hundreds of constituencies, mobilising women in general elections and led by Dr. Marion Phillips, a formidable organiser. Women provided the activist backbone to the party in electioneering, canvassing and holding public meetings for women voters in the streets. The LPWS published a monthly journal entitled Labour Woman and a pamphlet entitled The Working Women's Home. Many women did not work after marriage and childbirth, so meetings were held in the afternoon and children and babies were welcomed. The journal contained recipes as well as politics. Political speeches were intermixed with social events like whist drives and

tea parties. Women could also attend all member meetings and a women's conference took place annually. By the end of the 1930s women were over half the membership of the party numbering over 200,000. As working-class women marched to the polls, hand in hand with their children in the election of 1923, Labour's women's organisation was the envy of other political parties. During World War 2 women held the party together as many men joined the army. At the end of the war the party published a pamphlet entitled Your Home Planned by Labour which included contributions from the LPWS. Participation and support did not dwindle for them after five years of Attlee's government.

However, by the 1950's membership of the LPWS fell. By the 1960s more women worked, and this was acknowledged by Labour Woman as it published articles on why women liked their jobs. It was no longer possible though for women to meet in the afternoon, and many came to question the usefulness of the women's sections. Also, despite rising prices, Labour was considered to be losing votes amongst working class women. At elections the party still appealed to women as housewives. Women's sections were revived again in the 1980s but they were more focussed on gender balances on party committees rather on winning the Labour vote amongst women.

Between the women's suffrage movement and the Women's Liberation Movement, the LPWS has

not achieved the attention of these, but it has a place in history, as women in the words of Marion Phillips sought an escape from the invisibility and drudgery of their lives. Alongside the LPWS was The Women's Co-operative Guild, which at its peak reached 87,000 members but fell to a few thousand by the 1980s. Some say that there was a link between this decline and a fall in the Labour vote amongst women.

Trades union organisations like the Women's Trades Union League and National Federation of Women Workers were responsible for organising women workers in the laundries, factories and even domestic service into the trades union movement. Many women worked in sweated trades in a casualised workforce. While they organised in the workplace, Labour representatives in Parliament and local councils pressed for reforms which would improve the lives of women, such as wages boards and health insurance. Equal pay for women was brought in by the Labour government in the 1970s, and so was an Equal Opportunities Act. The role of the trades unions in getting this act implemented was critical as in the Trico strike for equal pay in 1976. (See earlier editions of the Labour Heritage Bulletin.)

Labour Heritage has publicised the lives of Labour women in its bulletin and there have been book reviews in this area of women politicians and activists. There are too many to list individually so I would urge readers to

see the bulletin contents page on the Labour Heritage web site www.labour-heritage.co.uk

The 2024 General Election saw an all time record for the election of women MPs - 40% of the new House of Commons. The largest number of these are on the Labour side and women make up nearly half of Labour's cabinet.

Bursary update – The Compass Project

Thank you for supporting the Compass Project. Your grant of £3,000 for the 23/24 academic year has empowered our forced migrant community, helping them to access and thrive at university.

- In 2023, the UK Home Office reported that over 128,000 people were waiting for an outcome on their initial claim for asylum.
- While waiting, people are unable to work and receive a meagre daily stipend of £6.77.
- Additionally, they cannot access Student Finance and are charged international fees if they wish to study, locking the majority of forced migrants out of higher education in the UK.
- In 2019, the UN estimated that just 7% of the world's forced migrants can access university study, compared to the global average of 42%.

The Compass Project provides holistic support - from financial, peer

mentoring to help finding accommodation - and encourages an inclusive and positive transition into university and beyond. Through an annual application process, which is promoted through workshops, community events and peer-to-peer advocacy, ten new students join the programme each year. Applications are open to any age or academic experience.

Thanks to the generosity of organisations like Labour Heritage, we can be part of changing this. We hope you enjoy learning more about the impact of your gift and the stories of the deserving students who have been supported through your generosity.

124 asylum seekers have been supported to access a degree-level programme through fee-waiver and Sanctuary Scholarship since 2016.

Over 100 forced migrants have connected with Birkbeck through targeted community outreach programmes in London in 2024.

38 community partners support Compass each year, providing wellbeing, housing and travel support.

Of our 23/24 Compass Project cohort, all continuing students passed their exams and are entering their next year of study.

- For our new 24/25 intake, we had over 100 amazing applicants.
- Of the successful ten, our 24/25 cohort includes activists,

entrepreneurs and several students interested in public policy.

- Our academic community at Birkbeck has continued to support the Compass Project. Over 30 academics volunteered to be an academic mentor for Compass Scholars, meaning each scholar has been paired with someone studying in their specific area of interest.

- Our 24/25 cohort also participated in a Prep Programme (pre-sessional academic skills and English language course) before beginning their studies in October “Financial hardship and the cost-of-living crisis continue to be the most serious challenges facing students from forced migrant backgrounds. The £3,000 sanctuary bursary, at the centre of the Compass Project, continues to make a significant difference to our Compass Scholars. It’s a privilege to be able to see first-hand the relief and opportunities your gift provides students. Thank you again for supporting the Compass Project.”

Isabelle Habib, Access Manager and Sanctuary Lead, The Compass Project

Stephen Swingler MP – An Appreciation

Richard Gorton

Nearly sixty years after his death, little remains of Stephen Swingler’s reputation; but in his day he was a significant figure in left-wing politics. As a junior minister in Harold Wilson’s government, Swingler had the ability to

join the cabinet. Some years after Swingler's death in 1969, evidence came to light which suggested that he had been targeted by MI5 and kept out of high office.

Stephen Thomas Swingler was born on 2nd March 1915 into a middle class, professional family. His father was rector of Cranbrook, Kent, and his mother was the niece of an archbishop. Swingler attended Stowe School, a public school with a strong Christian ethos. From Stowe, Swingler went to New College, Oxford, graduating in 1936 with a BA degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics. After graduation, Swingler joined the Workers' Education Association as a lecturer. It was during this period that Swingler wrote 'An Outline of Political Thought Since the French Revolution', which was published by the Left Book Club in 1939. He was firmly set on a political career. During the war, Swingler held a commission in the Royal Armoured Corps.

Swingler was swept into parliament in 1945 by Labour's landslide election victory. He represented the Stafford constituency. His election in 1945 marked the beginning of a political association with Staffordshire which lasted throughout Swingler's life. Swingler's Conservative opponent in 1945 was Peter Thorneycroft, a Tory grandee who went on to serve as Chancellor of Exchequer in Harold Macmillan's government.

Two events during the 1945 parliament confirmed Swingler's credentials as a left-wing MP. The first was his

membership of the Keep Left group, which included Richard Crossman, Michael Foot, and Ian Mikardo. Keep Left published a manifesto in 1947 which argued for socialist policies at home and a foreign policy which was independent of both the USA and the Soviet Union. Keep Left critics of the Attlee government's foreign policy made little headway. Ernest Bevin, the Foreign Secretary, used his speech to the 1947 Labour Party Conference to accuse the Keep Left group of 'stabbing him in the back'. The communist takeover of Czechoslovakia and the Russian blockade of Berlin persuaded several Keep Left members to moderate their criticism of Labour's foreign policy. Crossman and Foot both supported the Marshall Plan and the formation of NATO.

In April 1948, Swingler was among the Labour MPs who signed a telegram in support of Pietro Nenni, the leader of the pro-communist wing of the Italian socialist party. Labour's NEC demanded the signatories observe party policy or face exclusion from the party. Swingler was one of the twenty-one MPs who accepted the NEC's directive.

Between 1947 and 1951, Stephen Swingler was associated with three left-wing groups within the Labour Party. While Swingler took part in meetings of the Keep Left parliamentary group, it was clear that the group never recovered from Bevin's robust defence of British foreign policy. One of the weaknesses

of the Keep Left group was that it was largely an association of parliamentarians and had little presence in constituency parties or trades union branches. The Socialist Fellowship, however, was launched as an association of 'Labour Party members pledged to work for an early attainment of a Socialist society'. In his study *Bevanism Labour's High Tide*, Mark Jenkins described the Socialist Fellowship as: 'the first serious postwar attempt to bring together MPs, trades unions leaders and rank and file party members into organized association within each other for the purpose of conducting left wing campaigns and conferences within the Labour Party'.

While the Fellowship's domestic programme was not particularly militant: higher subsidies for food and clothing, linking benefits and pensions to the cost of living and an end to the freeze on pay increases, its opposition to conscription and Britain's involvement in the Korean War ensured that the Socialist Fellowship clashed with both Labour's parliamentary leadership and the Party's NEC. In April 1951, the NEC responded to the Fellowship's programme by placing it on the list of proscribed organisations.

During the late 1940's and early 1950's, Swingler contributed to both *Labour Monthly*, a journal managed by the CPGB and *Socialist Outlook*, a left-wing paper which had Trotskyists on its editorial board. *Socialist Outlook* managed to avoid proscription until

1954, when it joined the list of papers and groups banned by the NEC.

Following boundary changes, Swingler's Stafford constituency became a safe conservative seat. In the February 1950 general election, Swingler lost to his Conservative opponent, Sir Hugh Fraser, by over 5000 votes. Swingler's political fortunes revived when John Mack, the Labour MP for the neighbouring constituency of Newcastle-under-Lyme, announced his retirement from parliament. With the support of the North Staffordshire miners, Swingler won the parliamentary nomination and in October 1951 was elected to the House of Commons by a majority of over 8,000 votes. Newcastle-under-Lyme provided Swingler with a secure political base. He was elected to parliament as the Borough's MP on five occasions and enjoyed healthy majorities. Swingler was regarded as a conscientious member of parliament, who, at a time when many MPs spent little time in their constituencies, regularly visited the Borough, held surgeries, spoke at local party meetings, and helped during local elections.

During the 1950's Swingler's constituency party was well to the left of the national Labour Party. CLP minutes record votes in favour of nuclear disarmament and a national campaign for socialism. Swingler was in tune with the left-wing mood of the constituency party. It should come as no surprise that when Swingler returned to parliament in 1951, he

joined the Bevanite group of Labour MPs. Swingler spoke at 'Brains Trust' meetings held in constituencies across the country. The Bevanites used the brains trust format to counter allegations that the group was in effect a party within a party. At their Belsize home, Stephen and Ann Swingler hosted meetings of Labour MPs who backed Aneurin Bevan. While leading Bevanites may have been elected on to the NEC, they couldn't seize control of the Labour Party. After 1955, the Bevanites, who had never been a particularly cohesive group, began to fracture; Nye Bevan and Harold Wilson became prominent members of Hugh Gaitskell's shadow cabinet, Richard Crossman reached an agreement with Gaitskell and became the party's chief spokesman on welfare and pensions reform, Michael Foot, Tom Driberg and John Freeman were out of parliament.

The loss of two general elections encouraged the growth of revisionism in the Labour Party. It was argued that the Party must come to terms with a mixed economy, dilute its commitment to public ownership and not adopt an independent socialist foreign policy. Swingler challenged what he saw as the Party's move to the right by launching Victory for Socialism in 1958. Stephen Swingler used an article in Tribune to announce the formation of Victory for Socialism. He wrote:

'The purpose of the organization was to invigorate the whole body of the labour movement and sweep forward

to a Victory for Socialism through the Labour Party'.

Unlike the Bevanite group, Victory for Socialism sought to bring together left-wing activists in constituency parties and union branches. It narrowly survived proscription and was one of the principal voices of the left until 1964, when Victory for Socialism as a campaigning body was dissolved.

Throughout the late 1950's and early 1960's Swingler was a persistent and outspoken critic of Labour's parliamentary leadership. He particularly clashed with Hugh Gaitskell over disarmament. Swingler supported CND and took part in the 1958 march to Aldermaston. He was one of only seven Labour MPs, who refused to back Gaitskell in a confidence vote called in June 1960. It is unlikely that Swingler expected or would have accepted a post in a government led by Hugh Gaitskell. Swingler was brought in from the cold by his old Bevanite colleague, Harold Wilson. Swingler became a member of the team who managed Wilson's successful bid for the leadership of the Labour Party in February 1963. Labour's narrow general election win in October 1964 brought Swingler into Whitehall. He became a parliamentary secretary in the Department of Transport. Swingler quickly adjusted to life as a minister. In her diary, Barbara Castle, who headed the Department during Swingler's term as a junior minister, recorded her appreciation of his skill as a parliamentary performer and described him as 'an invaluable

ally in my coming struggles in the Ministry'. Castle showed her appreciation of Swingler by persuading Harold Wilson to promote Swingler to Minister of State.

During the Spring of 1968, Harold Wilson offered Barbara Castle the job of leading on employment, prices, and productivity. She would become First Secretary in Wilson's Cabinet. Castle hesitated. She was reluctant to leave the Department of Transport before the Transport Bill, a complex and lengthy piece of legislation, had accomplished its parliamentary stages. Castle lobbied hard for Swingler to take her place as Minister of Transport with a seat in Cabinet. Castle believed that the Bill would be put at risk if it was handed to an inexperienced minister. According to Barbara Castle, Wilson replied referred to 'security' and mentioned that 'Stephen had been doing some very stupid things.' A day or so later Barbara Castle tried again to persuade Wilson to replace her with Stephen Swingler. On this occasion Harold Wilson was more forthcoming. He explained that Swingler had been 'dabbling in Eastern Europe too much'.

Stephen Swingler never joined Wilson's cabinet. Was his promotion blocked by the security services? Was he seen as a security risk? There is every reason to believe Stephen Swingler was a 'person of interest' to the intelligence services. During the early years of the Cold War, Swingler's support for the Keep Left group, his belief that British foreign policy should not be tied to the USA, and the fact

that his elder brother Randall was a member of the Communist Party and literary editor of the Daily Worker, would have been enough to label him a security risk. Suspicion surrounding Swingler must have been heightened by his inclusion on a list of alleged 'fellow travellers' and 'crypto-communists' compiled by the author George Orwell in May 1949. Orwell had been approached by his friend Celia Kirwan, who was acting on behalf of the International Research Department, an agency established by the Foreign Office to counter soviet propaganda.

A decade or so later, the Labour Party was divided over the question of unilateral nuclear disarmament. Swingler firmly supported unilateral disarmament and wanted Britain to abandon its nuclear deterrent. Labour's leader, Hugh Gaitskell opposed the policy and worked to reverse the 1960 Party Conference vote in favour of unilateralism. At the height of the crisis, Labour's Deputy Leader, George Brown, approached the journalist, Chapman Pincher, who was known to have strong links with the intelligence services. Brown asked Pincher to relay a request to MI5, he wanted the intelligence services to release its files on several left-wing MPs. Labour leaders would then use this material to purge the parliamentary party. Among the MPs cited by Brown was Stephen Swingler. In fact, MI5 did not co-operate. The Head of MI5, Sir Roger Hollis, did not want the intelligence services to be drawn into what he saw as a political

squabble. Hollis may have feared that to comply with Brown's request could risk exposing informants within the labour movement. It must be stressed that no evidence has surfaced to suggest that Swingler was ever on the payroll of an Eastern Europe government or supplied confidential information to agencies beyond the Iron Curtain. His political profile was such that he became a 'person of interest' to the security services.

Did MI5 block Swingler's appointment to the Cabinet in 1968? While it's not possible to give a definite answer, Harold Wilson's biographer, Ben Pimlott may provide an explanation. Pimlott recounts that when Harold Wilson was about to make a ministerial appointment, he would ask the security service if it held any files on the prospective minister. As Wilson didn't appoint Swingler to the Cabinet, the dossier on Swingler provided by MI5 must have played some part in Wilson's decision. Pimlott concluded that allegations against Swingler were groundless and Wilson 'gave too much credence to information and advice received through secret channels.

Harold Wilson may have denied Swingler a Cabinet place, but in October 1968 he moved Swingler to the new 'super' ministry of Health and Social Security. Swingler was put in charge of social security. His ministerial boss was the mercurial intellectual, Richard Crossman. We can only speculate whether this partnership would have been fruitful. During the early weeks of 1969,

Swingler fell ill. While undergoing treatment for pneumonia, Swingler suffered a fatal heart attack.

These days, if Stephen Swingler is remembered, it's likely to be as a 'second tier' minister and a left-wing critic of successive Labour leaders. He deserves greater recognition. Swingler was a skilled parliamentarian, and a highly competent minister who took complex and controversial legislation through parliament. Swingler believed in the parliamentary route to socialism and was convinced that in Britain socialism could be delivered through the ballot box. His career should raise questions about the influence and accountability of the security services, particularly the capacity of MI5 to block ministerial appointments.

Steven Swingler.



Book review

Keeping the Red Flag Flying: The Labour Party in Opposition since 1922, Mark Garnett, Gavin Hyman, Richard Johnson, Polity, 2024

Dianne Hayter

Even though I'm older than most readers (1964 didn't register with me), I'd only twice seen Labour defeating a government before this year, the centenary of first Labour Government.

However, I vividly remember Labour's longest period in Opposition 1979-1997 which experienced the worst example of what Opposition can do to a party. A destructive, self-immolation episode which helps explain the lowest number of MPs in 1983 since 1935. Unsurprisingly, given it had done so much to trash its record in government, when "History .. (was) weaponised for factional effect". Harder to explain why Miliband disparaged the 1997-2010 Government especially as he then failed to produce an alternative Labour offer.

There's some unfortunate timing in this book, as it went to press just before the 2024 election ended another long period of Opposition, when the authors could have assessed the impact of the post 2019 period, given their aim of identifying lessons from Opposition, of which Labour experienced for a third of its existence.

Clearly, I hope this book and any lessons will NOT be needed by Labour

for many a year (indeed perhaps we should ban it from Conservative conference book stall in case they learn from it).

Given Labour was in Opposition for most of the century covered, it's worth asking whether it was "particularly proficient in the art of opposition". The authors reckon it wasn't effective after 2010. Going further back, they consider it failed to exploit any potential through a mixture of poor choice of Leaders, including Foot and Corbyn (and being more reluctant than Conservatives to oust a loser), lack of policy renewal, internal dissent and a reluctance to learn lessons from the past.

Through many years of opposition between 1922 and 2022, perennial issues loomed; defence, foreign affairs (including relations with the Soviet Union), Europe (divisive both on entry, 1971, and exit, from 2016); and the economy, dealing with organisational issues (structures, policy, philosophy and electability arguably the whole purpose of a political party). Electability, and the electorate failed to be centre stage more than once and were sometimes in conflict with the other issues.

The sequential chapters describe various fractious periods between the party and the leadership who were evidently unrestrained by the demands of government.

There was one occasion, however, where Labour in Opposition played a decisive – indeed global – role, when

in May 1940, the NEC in Bournemouth agreed to Labour entering government, on the proviso it was not under Chamberlain, making this the only time Labour in Opposition toppled a sitting PM.

Interestingly, Labour provided the Official Opposition to the 1940-45 government despite Labour Ministers serving in it. The “unprecedented” circumstances, according to the Speaker, of there being no party in Opposition “from which an alternative government could be formed”, required changes to the usual custom whereby the Opposition Front Bench comprised a selection of ex-Ministers. Instead, the PLP elected an Administrative Committee to form the Opposition Front Bench, first under acting chairman Hastings Lees-Smith, then Frederick Pethick-Lawrence, and finally Arthur Greenwood after he left government.

For much of the period covered, the party had a low membership in safe seats, an issue first tackled by Wilson and then others – though in the case of Ed Miliband with rather disastrous results when he opened up decision making to £3 supporters.

On party structure there’s been a continuous evolution as to who holds the pen on policy, with struggles ranging between the Leadership, PLP, NEC and members, and a collection of bodies waxing and waning over time: National Joint Council; National Council of Labour; NEC composition; Clause 5; TULV; TUC/PLP/NEC Liaison Committee and the National

Policy Forum. In addition to fuelling internal struggles, each attempted to “fight the last war” in policy and organisation. In 1934/35 the “reformers” platform, according to Durbin, represented “a defeat for the Left” with later fissions over appeasement and rearmament in October 1937, through unilateralism, Europe, wage control or internal democracy. Each of these seeped attention from electoral priorities and led to factional groups (XYZ Club, Solidarity, Tribune, Campaign Group etc). Such battles meant the core election machine failed miserably.

2019 saw the worst result since 1935 in number of seats, largely self-inflicted due to the unpopular Leader, an internal Brexit war, the Parliamentary stalemate and especially the Second Referendum Pledge which was electorally catastrophic in Leave seats.

2024 was very different. With the exception of 1964, long periods of opposition have been followed by large majorities. 1997 saw 418 Labour MPs elected (25 more than in 1945) and an overall majority of 179, and this year 411 Labour MPs (up 209 on 2019) and an overall majority of 172.

Did Labour win these, or were they elections the Tories lost? The book suggests Oppositions are only “good” insofar as governments are “bad” with tired, divided governing parties (the press occasionally playing a walk-on role). So, Blair and Starmer were particularly lucky, the latter taking over a party which had faced five conservative PMs between 2016 and

2022, including the hapless Teresa May and the disastrous Boris Johnson and Liz Truss.

Your reviewer thinks it takes more than luck, poor Conservative Leaders, and a fair wind to triumph at the polls. The electorate has to feel safe and trust the incoming party and have confidence that their interests and concerns will be heard. Whether Attlee, Wilson, Blair or Starmer led the party, unless people can look at them and know their measure, crosses won't appear on ballot papers.

What the book shows is that too often the choice of Leader, the trashing of Labour's record, internal disputes or questions over security have prevented these all-too-long periods of Opposition from being as constructive as would have been good for the party, and indeed for the country.

Letters

Trevor Hopper

Particularly interesting in the last bulletin was Jean Griffin's account of her standing as the Labour candidate in Streatham in 1974. I was brought up in Streatham and turned 18 in '73 hence voted for her twice in 74. I'll confess I did not remember her name and Streatham was a solid Tory area in those days one of few in inner London that was. The National Front used to call in White Man's last stand on leaflets due to proximity to Brixton. I was so pleased when it became Labour with a Black MP.

Jonathon Wood

I was shocked and saddened when I learned of the death of Sean Creighton from the Summer Bulletin.

He had been active in Labour Heritage and labour movement historiography for such a long time that it is difficult to adjust to his passing. His enterprise, History and Social Action Publications, published my biographical portrait of Plymouth's first black councillor, William Miller, and this was only possible because of Sean's diligence and expertise. His demise is a major loss for the study of radical and labour history in Britain.

Letters and articles can be sent to;

LabourHeritage45@btinternet.com

For more information about Labour Heritage including access to previous bulletins, go to the website at: www.labour-heritage.com

Labour Heritage Books for Sale

A Tale to Tell. Autobiography of Syd Bidwell MP for Southall 1966 – 1992. Edited by John Bidwell. Foreword by Stan Newens.

Morgan Phillips. Labour Party Secretary 1944 – 1962. Biography edited by Morgan D. Phillips. Foreword by Stan Newens

Morgan Jones. Man of Conscience. MP for Caerphilly 1921 – 1939. Biography by Sir Wayne David. Foreword by Hilary Benn.

Labour in the East. Essays of Labour History in Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex. Introduced by John Gyford.

All Quiet in the Western Suburbs. By John Grigg. Hundreds of letters from World War One Soldiers and Sailors published in West London local newspapers.

The Star Album. Published in 1906. Facsimiles of 48 postcards of 1906 MPS – ‘Pioneers of British Labour.’ Postcards have photographs and brief biographies on the reverse.

Books can be ordered from Labour Heritage, 11 Aylmer Road, London W12 9LG or labourheritage45@btinternet.com.

Pay whatever you wish but £4 would cover postage and package. Cheques payable to Labour Heritage or to our bank account Labour Heritage at Unity Trust Bank 608301 account number 20149763