

## **Harold Wilson: A Flawed Political Genius?**

*Lord Speaker's Lecture delivered by The Lord Donoughue  
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I had observed Harold Wilson closely as a Lecturer in Politics at the LSE from 1963-74; as a Labour activist in CDS - The Campaign for Democratic Socialism - working for Hugh Gaitskell, often strongly against Wilson in Opposition; And from when I joined Wilson in late 1973 to conduct opinion polls for him with Robert Worcester who ran the opinion polling firm MORI. These were secret, privately financed polls, since the Labour Party organisation, led by Tony Benn, had abolished its own polling, because the polls showed clearly that the public and Labour voters - not the tiny minority of members - did not agree with the NEC and Benn's proposed Left wing policies. So not reconsider the policies; abolish the polling evidence.

Worcester and I were visiting Wilson that day in February 1974 to present our not very encouraging poll results, when prime minister Heath called the 'Who Governs Britain' Election. Wilson was diverted from our polls but found time to invite me to join his election campaign team. We just won and then he asked me to join his Kitchen Cabinet of Joe Haines, his Press Secretary, and Marcia Williams, his longstanding political secretary. He especially wanted me to set up a Policy Unit in Number Ten. He explained that the main lesson he had learned as Prime Minister in 1964-70 was that he must have an authoritative alternative source of policy ideas, especially economic, to fight the Treasury.

I did that and saw him most days until his resignation.

James Harold Wilson died, relatively uncelebrated, 22 years ago and had he lived would be 102 this month. He was a dominant figure in British Labour politics for some 30 years from 1947, when he became the youngest member of Attlee's post war cabinet, until his shock resignation as Prime Minister and Labour leader in March 1976.

He had, with Nye Bevan, resigned from the Attlee government shortly before its demise in 1951, disagreeing with Chancellor Gaitskell on the justified but narrow issue of the over rapid expansion of defence spending. Then he quickly climbed the familiar Left-Wing Tribune ladder to succeed to Labour's leadership on the sudden early death of Gaitskell in 1963.

He formed the 1964 Labour government after just squeaking home in the election, strengthened by a landslide victory in 1966. He won four General Elections out of the five he contested as leader, a remarkable record never equalled before or since.

He campaigned as a meritocratic moderniser, forcing the Tories to select a mirror image moderniser, in Edward Heath, though not Wilson's equal as a political leader.

Wilson was briefly then a political phenomenon, seen by some as a British John F Kennedy: adored by millions of Labour faithful, distrusted by millions of Tories. And hated by the *Daily Mail*, itself a proof of his great qualities.

But within a few years of his retirement, he was a sad figure, heading for political oblivion and the dementia he had always feared.

I will try to redress that balance, having worked closely with him in Number 10, and studied him while a lecturer at the LSE and as a Labour activist opposing him for many years before I joined him. I shall look briefly at Wilson in three of his political roles - as a Politician, as a Party Leader, and as a Prime Minister, and then just personally as a man. It is not easy to fit into 27 minutes.

## **The Politician**

As a politician, he was always consumed with the political implications of every situation, even in the plots of his favourite Agatha Christie. He was the best political operator I have ever observed.

He told me early on that he never entered a room without first establishing the best exit. That was a metaphor for his political tactics.

When in 1975 we were renegotiating our European membership, I heard him repeatedly complaining about one difficult aspect of the Common Agricultural Policy. With my Policy Unit, we spent all day seeking a solution. My wonderful Unit economists, Andrew Graham, future Master of Balliol College, and Gavyn Davies, future Master of the Universe, found a way through.

I took our brief to the study. Wilson read it, looked at me compassionately, handed the brief back, and said sadly: 'Bernard, don't you understand, I don't want the solution, I want the Grievance'.

I realised my apprenticeship in Wilsonian politics was at an early stage.

### **The Party Leader**

As a party leader for 13 years, Wilson was possibly without equal in Labour history, especially as he led at a difficult time when the party was divided between the old Left and the democratic socialist moderates, led actively by Roy Jenkins and Tony Crosland.

Wilson's first priority always was to keep the party united, while he modernised it and nudged it towards a more pragmatic, less ideological position.

He said to me about leading the Labour Party, that 'If you cannot ride three horses at the same time, you should not be in the circus.'

He showed his skill in healing the 1972 Labour split over Europe, when Jenkins resigned as Deputy Leader, using Tony Benn's dubious device of a promised referendum to unite not divide.

And again, in persuading the Trade Union movement to support a voluntary incomes policy in 1975. Just two examples of his unifying skill. Neither Gaitskell nor Jenkins from my wing of the party were sure to achieve that.

Although he began as a poor dull speaker, he soon developed with wit and speed of thought, to dominate Commons' Question Time and sometimes Party Conference, so keeping his MPs and most party members loyal to him.

Perhaps his most valuable leadership quality was in understanding that the Labour Movement has always contained a coalition of two distinct traditions and political personalities. (Apart from the small minority of Marxist dissidents.)

One is the liberal progressive intellectual elite, such as Cripps, Gaitskell, Foot, Miliband and perhaps Tony Benn Mark 2, which usually leads valuable reform; and second the rank and file Blue Labour, including trade unions, who do most of the street work, and who are usually more pragmatic and concerned with the problems facing ordinary working people in everyday life. Such as Bevin, Morrison, Callaghan.

Wilson, like Attlee, knew that a Labour leader must unite these two sections in coalition to win elections and form majority Labour governments. Neither section should, as it is said the Liberal elite foolishly did recently, dominate and neglect the other, this time the Blue Labour core, with dire results in the Referendum.

Wilson always listened to the liberal elite, being in some ways himself an intellectual. But he knew that the mass of working people are the heart and soul of the party, often having better instinctive political judgement than the liberal elite. He was instinctively on their side and knew that without their support he could not build a majority Labour government.

He lived a while in Hampstead but he never really left Huddersfield.

When I joined him in 1974, he said in relation to writing his speeches: 'Remember that I don't want too many of those Guardian-isms, Environmentalism, Genderism etc' - today he would have added transgenderism, Predistributionism, Climate Changeism etc, the liberal litany which rarely concerns the mass of working people.

He concluded, 'I want my speeches always to include what working people are concerned with: Jobs, pay, prices, pensions, homes, kids, schools, health.' I had no difficulty with that, having been brought upon the old Daily Herald and Mirror.

That does not mean he was not interested in liberal reform. He brought in more social reforms than any other Labour leader except Attlee. But his prime concern was improving the daily lives of working people from whatever class.

Today he would recognise that the currently exploited working people come from across both the old working and the new white-collar middle classes.

He would probably also recognise that it may be time, now that the neoliberal economic experiment with extreme free markets, globalisation and mass immigration has faltered, with extreme inequalities and social casualties, it may be time to move Labour's policies, as we did in the last election, towards the soft left. Though in Wilson's kind of modernist pragmatic way, moving forward seeking the Common Good. Not back to outdated Marxist Statist ideology.

He was a tolerant soul and would never have accepted the dogmatic intolerance of our far Hard Left, worst of all in our universities, abandoning the great tolerant traditions of the Enlightenment.

Harold Wilson was a remarkable party leader. Today, faced by the weakest and most divided Conservative government in my lifetime, He would surely be 20% ahead in the polls.

### **Prime Minister**

As Prime Minister for 8 years, he has been much criticised for allegedly achieving too little, certainly less than promised in his days in Opposition. But he certainly achieved much.

In foreign policy, he successfully pursued our withdrawal from Empire and East of Suez and shrewdly refused to join America in the Vietnam war. He also made our first bid to join the EEC - though himself no Europhile, nor really much of an internationalist, with the Scilly Islands sometimes seeming the limit of his global reach.

Domestically, his least success was in the economic field where, ironically, his greatest expertise lay. Though there he faced intractable problems with mediocre British management and sometimes destructive trade unions. On the unions, he at least pointed the way forward with Barbara Castle in their

proposed reforms in 1968-9. But they were defeated by internal party and union obstruction.

He continued full support for the NHS, and through Crosland and Shirley Williams launched the long and essential process of comprehensive schooling, though against his own grammar school instincts.

Most important of all was the social revolution his government achieved in 1964-70, wiping away the dire inheritance of Puritan Victorian Britain, through a remarkable raft of reforms: Abolishing the death penalty, removing the primitive laws relating to homosexuality, abortion, divorce and censorship, and liberalising racial and gender discrimination. Thus, making Britain a modern civilised society.

He did not lead these reforms. That was done by Roy Jenkins as a great Home Secretary. But he ensured the majorities, the parliamentary time, and that Jenkins had key junior minister support from those such as Alice Bacon - Blue Labour daughter of a miner signalling to socially-conservative trade unionists that this was the Labour way forward.

It went a bit against Wilson's own non-conformist instincts but he knew it was correct for modern Britain.

## **Wilson The Man**

Personally, Wilson was a fascinating character to observe. Highly complex. Unravelling his many psychological layers was like peeling an onion.

In appearance, Harold was of medium height, always smartly dressed. His face was soft, nothing sharp or aggressive about him. He was not very brave, and avoided confrontations, leaving that to his hard men, Joe Haines and Marcia Falkender. His accent was softly North Country, more so when addressing trade unionists or party rank and file.

With his good manners and quiet humour, he always made people feel at ease, whatever their party, race or gender. He appointed more women to ministerial office than any prime minister before or for long after - on deserved ability, not on token genderism

Through decades of Top Office, he remained without any side or sense of grandness. He always instinctively opened the beer bottles to serve his staff.

Wilson's approach to politics is best understood through his upbringing :- Northern, middle-class and middle-brow, non-conformist, grammar school meritocratic. He remained commendably English Provincial in the best sense of the words.

He was never seduced by the glitter of the Metropolitan establishment, into which he moved but never, like some colleagues, became a paid-up member. For him it was Gilbert and Sullivan not Bach and Benjamin Britten. And beef with HP sauce, not lobster thermidor.

Always driven by the non-conformist work ethic, respectability, thrift, belief in improvement through education and so always doing your homework.

He was never a theoretical Socialist in any ideological Marxist sense. So the Left accused him of lacking principles - by which they meant lacking their dogmatic prejudices.

His democratic socialism was a pragmatic mix of: Concern for the Underdog; dislike of ostentatious excesses by the rich; and attachment to Wartime planning to solve economic problems.

He disliked all dogma, whether of the Right or the Left, which he called 'theology'. He was not religious in any spiritual sense. But the Christian Chapel tradition of good works inspired his early politics, as with other fine Labour leaders such as Jim Callaghan.

I thought he was, and in many ways remained, a good Boy Scout. I felt that the Labour Manifesto was for Harold an adult version of the Scouts Code, to be learned by heart and obeyed.

It was hard not to like him most of the time, which meant political colleagues usually forgave him his mistakes. He himself was remarkably forgiving of those who attacked or betrayed him - except of course the Press.

He became difficult, almost unpleasant, only when his political secretary was attacking him. This made him edgy, with black rings round his eyes, and he reached for the brandy bottle. He was never depressed by the great problems of State, which he absorbed lightly and usually even enjoyed. But by the attacks closer to home, which he seemed unable to dismiss.

His political failings were said to include that he was too short-termist. Based on his accurate saying that a week is a long time in politics. He told me this meant most headlines were over within a week - If not, a PM must take them seriously. Anyway, much politics is decided in the short term. If a leader doesn't get the short term right, he may not have a long term.

He certainly boasted too much as he aged, especially about his prodigal memory. But that reflected his deep fear of inheriting dementia. He once asked me to write out for him a 3-line speech welcoming the French President to lunch. He explained 'I am always afraid of going blank.'

But his biggest failing, affecting many aspects of his public life, agreed by most working close to him, was to control his relationship with his political secretary, Marcia Williams, later Baroness Falkender - a title chosen apparently to reflect Marcia's claimed royal (if illegitimate) descent from King Edward VII.

This failure was never analysed in the two main biographies of him, the poor official one by Ziegler, nor in the better one by Pimlott. Curiously, neither seemed aware that Marcia offered to help Mrs Thatcher to defeat Callaghan's Government in 1979, as Charles Moore confirms in his authoritative biography of Thatcher. Not what Jim would call 'loyal'.

I don't have time nor inclination to deal with that Marcia issue fully here. But I have described it in detail in my published daily *Diaries* and have analysed it in my memoir, *Heat of the Kitchen*. Joe Haines has also written extensively on it, demonstrating how often we saw the Prime Minister distracted by, and even frightened of her.

In his last 1974-6 administration, Wilson was clearly tired and lacking political appetite. He told me, 'For the same old problems I have only the same old solutions.'



But he kept the respect of his cabinet colleagues and skilfully secured a 67% - 33% majority in the 1975 Referendum to remain in Europe, making none of the mistakes Cameron made 40 years later. On the morning after the result, he told me that, although never a Eurofanatic, he voted to Remain because 'pulling out of Europe would put the wrong people in power in Britain, like Benn and Enoch Powell.'

Like many of his considered judgements, it stands the test of time.

He enjoyed resigning in March 1976, without warning or any advance leaks. In those days, close staff were loyal and did not leak to the press. He loved it that the newspapers did not know. He hated many journalists, but was fascinated by newspapers, and often hurt by them.

Once sitting in his Commons room, he lifted the vicious *Daily Mail*, splashing another vitriolic attack on him, and said: 'Bernard, if today I went to the Commons terrace, climbed down and walked like Jesus Christ on the surface of the Thames to St Thomas's Hospital, the *Mail* would have a nasty front page, headed simply 'Wilson cannot swim.'

Beneath the bravado, he was sensitive, vulnerable and wounded.

Contrary to press rumours, he did not suddenly resign to run away from impending scandal. His departure was long intended and meticulously planned. When I joined him to form the Number 10 Policy Unit in march 1974, he said I would need 2 years leave from the LSE as he would resign as PM at Easter 1976 - when he would be 60, and as he had promised his family. The detailed timetable for his day of departure was devised in 1975 by his Principle Private Secretary, Ken Stowe, and his Press Secretary Joe Haines, and locked away in the Number 10 safe.

But sadly, his surprise story was spoiled when the *Sunday Times* carried the details of his proposed Resignation Honours List. It contained some dubious characters, many the friends of Marcia who had helped finance her Political Office.

Joe Haines saw an early version of the list, in her writing on her lavender writing paper, and anxiously told me 'it contains many of the people Scotland Yard most wishes to interview'.

When I discussed the press rumpus with Harold, he complained, accurately but pathetically, 'I don't know why the press are blaming me for the resignation list - I barely know half the people on it'.

Harold Wilson's impressive career ended sadly in sleaze in 1976 and his reputation sank for years afterwards. Blair and New Labour had little time for his memory - nor, seemingly, for Wilson's political generation, not appreciating that but for their endeavours there might not have been a democratic Labour party remaining for the bright New boys to modernise.

But more recently I sense a shift in the reputational wind. People speaking to me recall that Wilson brilliantly held the party together and won four elections out of five. That his four governments introduced the social reforms which modernised and civilised our British society. That despite his failings, most people who knew and worked with Harold Wilson liked him, even if not all greatly respected him.

The Future may come to respect his remarkable achievements, too.

**Bernard Donoghue**  
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