

Brief History of the Labour Party

The Labour Party's experience of government has been sporadic for much of its 118 year history, though it has dominated the British left since the early 1920s.

Roots:

The origins of the Labour Party lie in the 19th century. Britain had acquired a substantial working-class electorate with the passage of the second Parliamentary Reform Act (1867), which enfranchised a portion of urban male working class, and this enlarged further in 1884 with the passing of the Representation of the People Act. Prior to 1900, the mass of enfranchised labourers had not been represented by a party.

During the 1890s, the political alliance between the trade unions and the Liberal Party gradually eroded and the unions expressed a greater desire to achieve political representation. Since the 1860s, the unions set up national bodies to secure entry into Parliament for 'labour' representatives including the Labour Representation League (1869) and Labour Electoral Association (1886), though these never obtained substantial backing.

By the 1890s an identifiable socialist movement had been established in Great Britain as evidenced by the growth of organisations including the Fabian Society and Social Democratic Federation. In 1893 a new socialist party was established: the Independent Labour Party (ILP), though its leaders accepted the need for a 'labour alliance'; a coalition between socialists and trade unionists. However, low membership and poor electoral results saw the Trade Union Congress decide in 1899 to set up another body for the purpose of promoting the representation of labour.

1900-1918 - Creation and Early Years:

The Labour Representation Committee (LRC) formed in 1900 to promote a distinct Labour group in Parliament, representing affiliated trade unions, socialist societies and co-

operatives. The Co-operative Societies UK, Marxist Social Democratic Federation, ILP and Fabian Society were invited to the founding conference at London's Memorial Hall in February, with only the Co-operative Union rejecting the invitation.

Although the party was initially weak in membership and support, the Taff Vale judgement (1901) placed the right to strike in jeopardy and acted as a stimulus to bring the unions together to defend themselves. Membership of the LRC increased from 350,000 at the beginning of 1901 to 861,000 (847,000 supplied by unions) by the end of 1902 and the number of industrial bodies attached to the party rose from 65 to 127.

The 1906 general election saw 30 members of the LRC elected to Parliament - the elected members assumed the title of 'Labour Party'. Policy was determined by the Labour Party through the annual conference and its executive authority, the National Executive Committee. Instead of an official party leader, there was an annually elected chairman of the parliamentary party (Keir Hardie being its first) and ideologically, the party was less coherent and not defined by a socialist programme.

During this early period there were clear factions within the party, culminating in a major divide over the First World War between pacifists including Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald (Prime Minister 1924, 1929-1931) and pro-war members including Ben Tillett and Will Thorne.

1918-1945 – Progress, Collapse and Progress:

In the 1918 General Election a large number of the Labour leaders lost their seats including leaders of the anti-war movement such as MacDonald. At the Labour Conference that year they decided to make a statement of objectives, adopting a new constitution drafted by Sidney Webb and a first party programme. This would enable Labour to become a national party, with

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the means to compete for the support of a mass electorate in all types of constituency. The new Constitution presented the case for a minimum standard of life for all, for full employment, public ownership (Clause IV) and greater equality.

This was successful in parliamentary terms with the Labour vote in parliamentary elections expanding steadily throughout the first half of the inter-war years; the party replaced the Liberals as the second party and Ramsay MacDonald enjoyed a brief stint as Prime Minister in 1924. The party received 22.2% of the vote in 1918, 29.5% in 1922, 30.5% in 1923, 33% in 1924 and 37.1% in 1929. By the end of the decade, the Labour party controlled 16 of the 80 principal boroughs in England and Wales, excepting London.

In the 1929 general election Labour claimed power as a minority government but struggled to resolve the problem of growing unemployment attributable to the Great Depression. Ironically they rejected Keynesian ideas as too radical, instead approving several public-works projects and cutting unemployment benefit by £13 million. At the 1931 general election, only 46 Labour members returned to Parliament whilst Ramsay MacDonald formed a National Government with the Conservative Party and Liberals, prompting the Labour Party National Executive to expel all members of the Government including MacDonald and Snowden.

After being criticised by several leading members of the party for his inability to confront fascist regimes including Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy, George Lansbury (leader 1932-1935) resigned and was replaced by Clement Attlee. In 1940 the Labour Party joined the coalition government headed by Churchill, where Attlee assumed the role of Deputy Prime Minister, Herbert Morrison Home Secretary, Stafford Cripps Lord Privy Seal and Ernest Bevin Minister of Labour.

1945-1951: The Attlee Government:

After the Second World War, the Labour Party returned to power under Attlee and introduced a number of important reforms, including the creation of the National Health Service, the nationalisation of major industries (coal, rail, road haulage, energy, iron and steel), a large increase in council housing and two social insurance initiatives. These policies were reflective of the 'post-war consensus', a period where both the Labour and Conservative parties pursued a gradual reform programme constituted by a commitment to the welfare state, full employment, Keynesian demand management, trade-union conciliation, mixed economy and a redistribution of resources to the working class.

However, the government had its challenges, namely balancing its (working class) constituent demands with the imperatives of the UK economy. For example, in 1947, the government responded to the sterling convertibility crisis by imposing cuts on the housing programme, reducing food rations and agreeing a 'voluntary' wage freeze with trade unions.

The Attlee government was voted out of office in 1951 and the Labour Party would remain out of office until 1964, during which the party would undergo a clear programmatic ('revisionist') shift, including moderating its commitment to the welfare state and Keynesian demand management and abandoning its commitment to nationalization. This move was owed chiefly to Tony Crosland, who published the influential 1956 book 'The Future of Socialism' which argued Labour should abandon its commitment to public ownership in favour of improving public services.

1964-1970: The First Wilson Government:

Under Wilson, the Labour Party was elected on a platform of scientific and technological advance, achieved through the 'socialist' commitment to economic planning and state

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ownership. Policies introduced included the abolition of capital punishment, legalisation of abortion, promotion of contraception including the 'pill', the decriminalisation of homosexuality, the Race Relations Act (1965) which prohibited racial discrimination, 'red-brick' universities, the Open University and the comprehensive education system.

However, in response to the 1964 convertibility crisis which reduced growth projections making the National Plan unattainable, Labour introduced a number of deflationary measures including action to delay public sector investment projects and tightening of purchase controls, further voluntary wage restraint, reductions in public expenditure of £500 million and the adoption of a statutory incomes policy. This created tension between Labour and its working-class constituency, prompting bitter industrial disputes with the major trade unions including the National Union of Seamen (1966) and tripling the number of days lost to strike. Under the Wilson government, the foundations for anti-trade union legislation were introduced, albeit unsuccessfully. Barbara Castle introduced a White Paper 'In place of strife' in 1966, which called for the regulation of unions and was widely feared to hamper the bargaining power of labour in Britain.

After its removal from office in the 1970 general election, the Labour Party adopted a left-leaning platform through re-emphasizing its commitment to some of the core benefits of the post-war consensus. This included the reversing the Conservative Party's anti-union legislation adopted in 1971, nationalising failing industries and adopting a progressive wage policy ('the Social Contract').

1974-1979: The Second Wilson and Callaghan Governments

The Wilson/Callaghan governments introduced a number of policies beneficial to Labour's core working class constituency, including food

subsidies, pension increases and repealing the Industrial Relations Act (1971). However, several economic crises, deteriorating growth performance and inflation created pressures to introduce austerity policies including £1 billion spending cuts in 1975 followed by further £1 billion cuts in 1976 and the adoption of a loan package from the IMF and a 5% incomes policy norm. These measures led to the 'Winter of Discontent' where the number of days lost to strike increased from 1 million to 4.5 million (1978-1979) - and a heavy election defeat in 1979.

1997-2007: Tony Blair:

After Callaghan's loss in the 1979 general election to Margaret Thatcher, the Labour Party suffered a further three general election defeats, leaving them out of power for almost two decades.

At the heart of Labour's electoral malaise was its inability to rid itself of the toxic legacy of the Winter of Discontent. When Tony Blair was elected leader of the Labour Party in 1994, he sought to distance the party from its traditional socialist roots. He advocated a 'Third Way': a form of socialism based on social justice that operates alongside capitalism and acknowledges the realities of globalisation. He referred to the party as 'New Labour', emphasising the break from the past.

Blair's New Labour swept to power in 1997, ending 18 years of Conservative government. Labour achieved a 10% swing, winning 418 seats, the most won by any Labour government and the highest proportion of seats held by any party since the Second World War. He went on to win a second landslide victory in 2001 and a third General Election with a much reduced majority in 2005.

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During his time in power, Blair's government passed the National Minimum Wage Act, the Human Rights Act and the Freedom of Information Act and began the process of devolution to Scotland and Wales. Blair was also involved in negotiations which led to the Good Friday Agreement.

Over the same period, New Labour was responsible for a large increase in public expenditure, a fact which eventually lost Labour the faith of the general public as Labour's profligacy became associated with the painful effects of the 2008 financial crisis.

Blair also suffered from his adherence to the foreign policy of George W Bush as he followed the US into wars in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. Iraq in particular caused huge problems for Blair in the latter years of his Government and he was accused of misleading Parliament about the case for invasion.

By 2006 as his approval ratings sank and pressure from his MPs mounted in the wake of the Iraq war, Blair was under increasing pressure to relinquish leadership. On 7 September 2006 Blair announced his intention step down as leader within a year and, on 27 June 2007, Blair tendered his resignation.

2007-2010: Gordon Brown:

Gordon Brown succeeded Blair, having served as Chancellor of the Exchequer for the duration of Blair's government. His premiership experienced an initial bounce in poll ratings, but this was soon marred by the onset of the 2008 recession. Brown's financial policies during his time as Chancellor were widely blamed for the severity of the crisis and the Labour party was punished at the polls in 2010 as a result. They lost 91 seats, leaving David Cameron's Conservatives as the largest party in a hung Parliament.

2010-2015: Ed Miliband

Ed Miliband won a controversial leadership election, taking 50.65% of the vote after fourth preference votes were counted and beating his brother, David Miliband, by 1.3%. Ed won the leadership largely owing to the support of trade unions and affiliated organisations, and trailed his brother in in the MP /MEP and constituency Labour party sections.

Ed Miliband led his party into the 2015 general election with the polls predicting a tight race. However, this was not to be, and Labour experienced a net loss of 26 seats, most notably losing all of their seats in Scotland. Labour's spectacular collapse in Scotland likely owes to their campaigning alongside the Conservatives during the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum.

At the time of the 2015 election, Miliband's policy platform was criticised for being too left-wing and many pundits expected the party to shift to the right after his defeat.

The Labour Party today:

The 2015 Labour leadership election took place under new rules proposed in February 2014. Under the system which elected Ed Miliband, the Labour leadership vote comprised of three electoral colleges – MPs and MEPs; unions and affiliated organisations; and Labour party members – each with an equal weighting. The 2015 leadership election was the first to operate a 'one member one vote' system, which drastically increased the influence of the Labour membership.

The left winger Jeremy Corbyn made a ballot of four MPs, narrowly securing the requisite number of nominations. After opinion polls showed that Corbyn could win the election, a number of high profile party members decried

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him as being unelectable and urged party members to vote for someone else. Despite these efforts, Corbyn comfortably won the race, taking 59.5% of the votes in the first round. His success owes largely to the one member one vote system and an influx of new party members who joined the party to support him.

Corbyn has since moved the party's platform significantly to the left, something that conventional logic suggested should be electoral suicide. Nevertheless, Corbyn continued to poll well within his party. He led the Labour party through the EU referendum and attracted criticism for his lukewarm support for staying in the EU, the position favoured by the majority of his party and one that he had historically and consistently opposed.

Corbyn's radical departure from the centre ground meant he had already alienated a large number of the party's moderate MPs. The no vote at the EU referendum proved to be the trigger for a party revolt. Encouraged by Corbyn's poor national performance in the polls and his perceived weaknesses as leader during the EU referendum, Owen Smith challenged Corbyn to a leadership election in July 2016. Corbyn comfortably saw off this challenge, securing 61.8% of the vote and essentially winning the debate on the future direction of the Labour party.

With Corbyn languishing in the polls, the Prime Minister, Theresa May, called a snap election to try to win a larger majority to make it easier to get Brexit legislation through the Commons. The media widely panned Corbyn's chances and early opinion polls suggested that the Conservatives could coast to a landslide victory. However, a combination of poor campaigning from May and her team and greater exposure for Corbyn's Labour

party led to the poll gap narrowing significantly as election day approached. Corbyn's Labour defied expectations (and seat predictions from almost every major polling company) to win 30 seats, leaving the Conservatives the largest party in a hung parliament.

Since Corbyn's unexpected success in the 2017 General Election, the party has been struggling to develop a coherent policy position on Brexit which threatens to alienate the group of voters most central to Corbyn's success – young voters. However, the party has to balance young people's remain inclinations against the strong leave vote in Labour's traditional heartlands and the leader's ambivalence on the issue.

Labour has also found itself mired in scandal. Accusations of anti-Semitic behaviour from not only Labour's followers but high-profile figures such as Ken Livingstone and Corbyn himself have gone unaddressed and largely unacknowledged by Labour's leadership. At a time when Labour should be leading the national debate as the Conservative party flounders over internal divisions, the anti-Semitism scandal threatens to derail the party.

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