

Michael Foot obituary

Principled leader who held Labour together in the early 1980s, and a writer devoted to the cause of freedom

Mervyn Jones

Wed 3 Mar 2010 08.41 EST

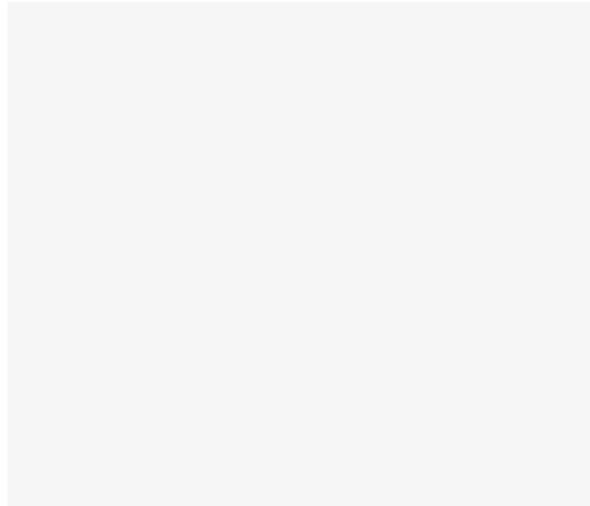


159

In a long career, [Michael Foot](#), who has died aged 96, served the Labour party as its leader in opposition from 1980 to 1983, as deputy leader, and as a cabinet minister under Harold Wilson and James Callaghan. He graced the Commons as an independent-minded backbencher, and was widely acclaimed as one of the most principled British politicians of his era. A distinguished journalist and author, he devoted his life not only to the rights and traditions of parliament, but to freedom in all its aspects.

During Wilson's first government (1964-70), Foot had been a fierce backbench critic on issues ranging from wage restraint to Vietnam and Rhodesia. However, when Labour lost power to Edward Heath's

Conservative government, Foot accepted a place on the opposition front bench and carried the burden of the fight against British entry into the European Economic Community. With Labour back in office again from February 1974 and submitting renegotiated terms to a European referendum in 1975, he campaigned for a no vote. Uniquely, cabinet ministers were allowed to campaign on opposite sides. Foot was then secretary of state for employment, and won an unexpected reputation for administrative ability. When he left the department, a civil servant paid him a memorable, backhanded compliment: "You posed a quite exceptional challenge to my powers of obstruction."



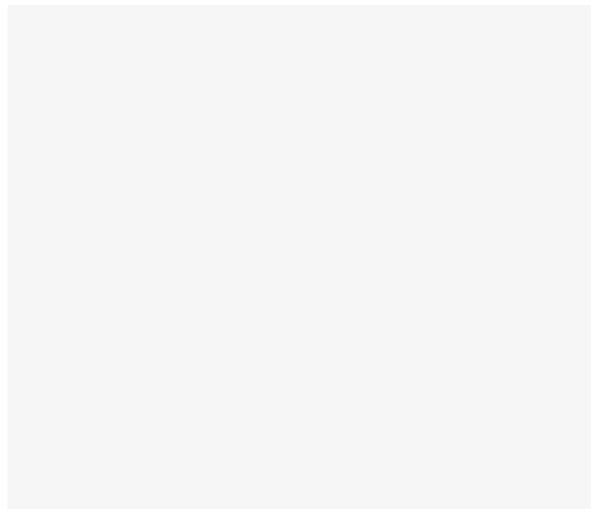
In two years, Foot restored trade union rights lost in the Tory industrial relations act of 1971, legitimised the closed shop against furious opposition from Fleet Street, created the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) and the Health and Safety Executive, and played a major role in forging the "social contract" between the government and the unions. In 1976, however, Wilson retired suddenly, Callaghan defeated Foot in the leadership contest and Foot became - though not formally - deputy prime minister, with the posts of lord president of the council and leader of the Commons.

His experience from 1976 to 1979 was in general unhappy, as was that of the government. Byelection defeats cost Labour its majority and its life was prolonged only by deals with the Liberals and other minor parties, which Foot negotiated skilfully but which alienated his erstwhile comrades on the left. Economic problems persisted, unemployment rose and the social contract broke down. Devolution for Scotland and Wales, a project for which Foot worked devotedly, foundered in referendums. After a wave of strikes, remembered as "the winter of discontent", the Tories regained power in 1979 under Margaret Thatcher.

Callaghan retired in 1980. In the last leadership election confined to MPs - the party was preparing to switch to an electoral college - Foot narrowly

defeated Denis Healey. Many friends and admirers thought him ill-advised to seek the leadership, which indeed brought him no laurels. But the ultimate judgment may well be that he performed the vital service of holding his party together when it was dangerously polarised between Healey and Tony Benn.

He had little chance of further successes. Rejecting his pleas, 25 Labour MPs joined the new Social Democratic party. Also rejecting Foot's pleas, Benn stood against Healey for the deputy leadership, plunging the party into a damaging struggle. As the first Labour leader lacking majority support in the national executive committee, which was dominated by Benn's allies, Foot was deprived of authority. The activities of the Militant Tendency caused constant trouble. Then, in 1982, Thatcher's triumph in the Falklands war ensured her political supremacy.



For Foot, the election campaign of 1983 was a disaster. He was hobbled by visible disagreements in Labour's ranks, outflanked by the SDP-Liberal alliance, brutally attacked and ridiculed by the press, and disadvantaged by his age (he was almost 70) and his difficulty in adapting to modern television techniques. At 28%, Labour's share of the poll was the lowest since the 1920s. Foot immediately gave up his party leadership, to be succeeded by Neil Kinnock.

Michael Mackintosh Foot - Mackintosh was his Scottish mother's maiden name - was the fifth of seven children of the phenomenal Isaac Foot, a solicitor by profession, collector of 50,000 valuable books, lord mayor of Plymouth, Liberal MP for two short spells and an ardent Methodist and temperance campaigner. Michael was born at the family home, 1 Lipson Terrace, Plymouth. As the house overlooks Freedom Fields, the site of a civil war battle in which the defenders of the parliamentary cause defeated a royalist attack, it was a fitting birthplace for a man committed to liberty.

reaction and evil. At various times, Beaverbrook paid Foot an inflated salary, sent unexpected cheques, invited him for holidays at his villa on the French Riviera, lent him a cottage on his estate in Surrey, and rescued Tribune when a libel suit threatened it with extinction.

Foot was on the Beaverbrook payroll when war came. From the Commons press gallery, he listened to the debate that drove Neville Chamberlain from Downing Street. With Winston Churchill in power, Beaverbrook switched from his support for appeasement to defiance of the Nazi threat, voiced in eloquent Standard leaders written by Foot.

Those leaders were as erudite as they were eloquent, quoting within two months from Pericles, Cato, the Bible, Shakespeare, Milton, Edward Gibbon, Louis Saint-Just, Walt Whitman, Giuseppe Mazzini and Joseph Conrad (the "always facing it" passage in Typhoon, deployed again by Foot in a party conference speech in 1975).

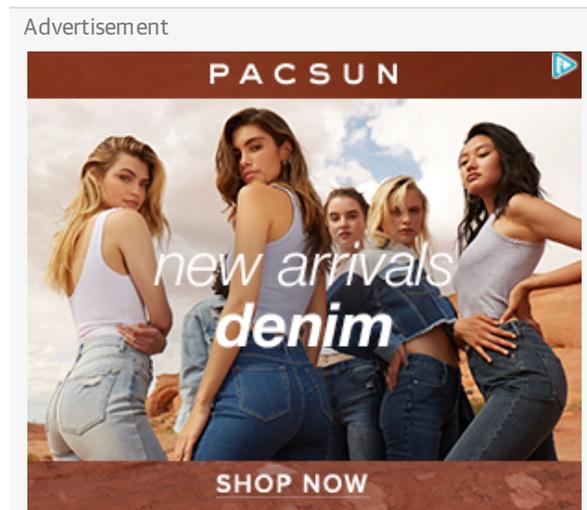
But it was also time to denounce the politicians who had landed Britain in this peril. Foot and two other Beaverbrook journalists, concealed by the pseudonym "Cato", wrote a 40,000-word book, *Guilty Men*, over a weekend in 1940. They also sold it from a stall in Farringdon Road, central London, when bookshops refused to stock it. The ultimate sale was an astonishing 200,000.

In 1942, Foot became acting editor of the Standard but left it two years later, realising that he and Beaverbrook would be antagonists in postwar politics, and began a column in the Daily Herald. In 1945, upsetting expert forecasts as thoroughly as the Labour party did at national level, he became MP for the Devonport division of Plymouth. The campaign occasioned his first meeting with [Jill Craigie](#), the documentary film-maker, who was making a film about the rebuilding of heavily bombed Plymouth. They were married four years later.

Foot returned to Tribune as editor (1948-52, and again 1955-60) and was soon strongly critical, in its columns and in Commons speeches, of Ernest Bevin's foreign policy. With Richard Crossman and Ian Mikardo, he had produced the 1947 pamphlet *Keep Left* and started the Keep Left group of backbenchers. But, after holding Devonport in contests with Randolph Churchill in 1950 and 1951, he lost it in 1955 to Joan Vickers. When the result was announced, he said to Jill: "Now I can write that book."

The book in question - Foot's fifth, but his first non-topical work - was *The Pen and the Sword*, a study of an episode in the life of Jonathan Swift. Foot always straddled the literary and political worlds, and in this period away from Westminster, he thought seriously of concentrating on the former. That year, 1957, he was drawn into passionate controversy over nuclear disarmament. Bevan's repudiation of unilateralism at the party conference

that year made Foot its outstanding champion. He was a founder of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and a regular Aldermaston marcher.



Bevan died in 1960, after urging Foot to return to the Commons and telling him: "Perhaps you needn't look further than Ebbw Vale." Foot was selected for the byelection there and won it, at the height of the battle between CND and Hugh Gaitskell, the party leader, on a unilateralist platform. After taking his seat, he was deprived of the whip for voting against the defence estimates, but it was restored when Gaitskell died in 1963 and Wilson became leader.

After stepping down as party leader, Foot stayed in the Commons until 1992. Although some of his Ebbw Vale constituents had blamed him for the closure of their steelworks in 1975 (when, unfortunately, he was secretary of state for employment), he had been a greatly loved as well as an assiduous constituency MP. He kept, and continued to visit, an old cottage in Tredegar where he had held his surgeries for 31 years.

Foot was happy in his marriage to a beautiful and gifted woman (though they regretted the lack of children), in a wealth of friendships, and in an extraordinary range of interests. As a writer, he had three major works to his credit: *The Pen and the Sword*, his two-volume biography of Bevan (1962 and 1973), and *The Politics of Paradise* (1988), an impressively scholarly book on Byron. In this sphere, he never retired. He spent three years delving into the life of HG Wells, whom he had read enthusiastically in his youth and met in the 1940s. The result was *The History of Mr Wells* (1995). A book on the nuclear arms race - *Dr Strangelove, I Presume* - warning of conflict between India and Pakistan, appeared in 1999. His last book was *The Uncollected Michael Foot* (2003).

As a young man, Foot was plagued by asthma and eczema. He almost lost his life in a car accident in 1963, which left him with his characteristic, lopsided walk. In 1976, after an attack of shingles, he lost the sight of one

eye. Yet he was essentially, as Jill liked to say, "as tough as old boots". She died in 1999.

Neil Kinnock writes: Michael was a supreme parliamentary democrat who used his great gifts as an inspiring speaker and writer to urge peace, security, prosperity and opportunity for humanity and punishment for bigots and bullies of every kind.

His bravery and generosity were unsurpassed. He used both to ensure that the Labour party survived as a political force when self-indulgent factionalism could have doomed it to irrelevance.

He was a resolute humanist with profound faith in the ability of "free men and women using free institutions" to secure irreversible advances in standards of living and liberty for every country and community.

He was a friend to all who strove against want and injustice, an inveterate enemy of exploitation and greed. He was ferocious and funny, principled but never precious, courteous but never deferential, provocative but never vindictive, creative but never abstract. "Describe the challenges by all means," he said, "but don't confuse analysis with action. The one must lead to the other if it is to be useful to people."

His passions stretched from his adored wife to Plymouth Argyle, through poets and polemicists of every romantic and rousing kind, and from Mozart to the bouncy melodies of the 1930s - although he was a lousy dancer and a truly appalling singer.

Michael gave love and earned love as few politicians do in any age. He was wonderful company, a marvellous comrade, a magnificent man, a great socialist and libertarian. The only tribute that he would want, the only memorial that would do him justice, is enduring application of his values in the cause of progress.

Let us give him that.

● Michael Mackintosh Foot, politician, journalist and author, born 23 July 1913; died 3 March 2010

● [Mervyn Jones](#) died on 23 February 2010

Since you're here...

... we have a small favour to ask. More people are reading the Guardian than ever but advertising revenues across the media are falling fast. And unlike many news organisations, we haven't put up a paywall - we want to keep our journalism as open as we can. So you can see why we need to ask for your help. The Guardian's independent, investigative journalism takes a lot

of time, money and hard work to produce. But we do it because we believe our perspective matters - because it might well be your perspective, too.

The Guardian is editorially independent, meaning we set our own agenda. Our journalism is free from commercial bias and not influenced by billionaire owners, politicians or shareholders. No one edits our Editor. No one steers our opinion. This is important because it enables us to give a voice to the voiceless, challenge the powerful and hold them to account. It's what makes us different to so many others in the media, at a time when factual, honest reporting is critical.

If everyone who reads our reporting, who likes it, helps to support it, our future would be much more secure. **For as little as \$1, you can support the Guardian - and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**

Support The Guardian →



Topics

Michael Foot

Labour / Politics past / obituaries



more on this story



Former Labour leader Michael Foot dies

3 Mar 2010

219



Michael Foot: Ninety six years in the life of a passionate English radical

3 Mar 2010

86



Michael Foot, 1913-2010: romantic democrat
Neil Kinnock

3 Mar 2010

135

Michael Foot: key quotes

3 Mar 2010

Farewell to a great rebel
Simon Hoggart

3 Mar 2010

Most viewed

across the guardian

in politics

- 1 Turkish lira crisis: central bank action fails to quell contagion fears
- 2 Conservatives call for constitutional intervention last seen 230 years ago
- 3 Halfway to boiling: the city at 50C
- 4 UN human rights chief: Trump's attacks on press 'close to incitement of violence'
- 5 Geoffrey Rush accused of simulating 'groping and fondling' actor at centre of lawsuit
- 6 Thirty micrometres a minute: scientists discover the speed of death
- 7 Q&A: Why is the Turkish lira in freefall and should we worry?
- 8 'Hell no': counterprotesters outnumber white supremacists at White House rally
- 9 Orca mother finally abandons dead calf she carried for more than two weeks
- 10 Companies in Brexit 'supply shock' as fewer EU citizens come to UK



Sign up to our daily email

Email address

Sign up

[jobs](#)
[make a contribution](#)
[subscribe](#)
[guardian labs](#)
[help](#)
[terms & conditions](#)
[privacy policy](#)
[cookie policy](#)
[securedrop](#)
[complaints & corrections](#)

[about us](#)
[work for us](#)
[contact us](#)
[advertise with us](#)
[all topics](#)
[all contributors](#)
[facebook](#)
[twitter](#)
[digital newspaper archive](#)