



# Harold Wilson obituary

## Leading Labour beyond pipe dreams

**Geoffrey Goodman**

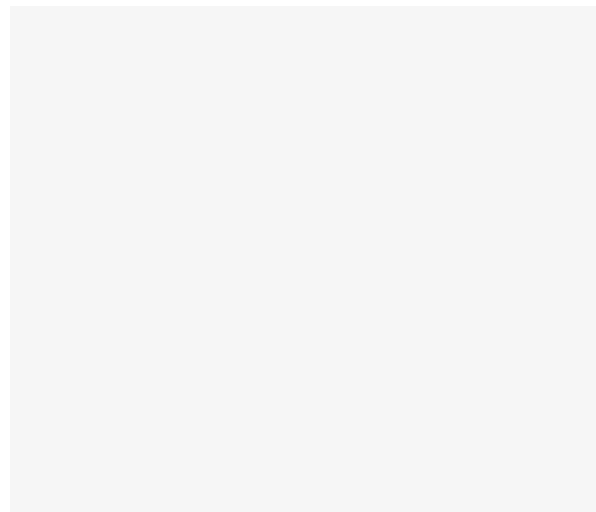
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Lord Wilson of Rievaulx, as he came improbably to be called - will not go down in the history books as one of Britain's greatest prime ministers. But, increasingly, he will be seen as a far bigger political figure than contemporary sceptics have allowed far more representative of that uniquely ambivalent mood of Britain in the 1960s and a far more rounded and caring, if unfulfilled, person.

It is my view that he was a remarkable prime minister and, indeed, a quite remarkable man. Cynics had a field day ridiculing him at the time of his decline. Perhaps that was inevitable given his irresistible tendency to behave like the master of the Big Trick in the circus ring of politics - for whom there is nothing so humiliating as to have it demonstrated, often by fellow tricksters, that the Big Trick hasn't worked.

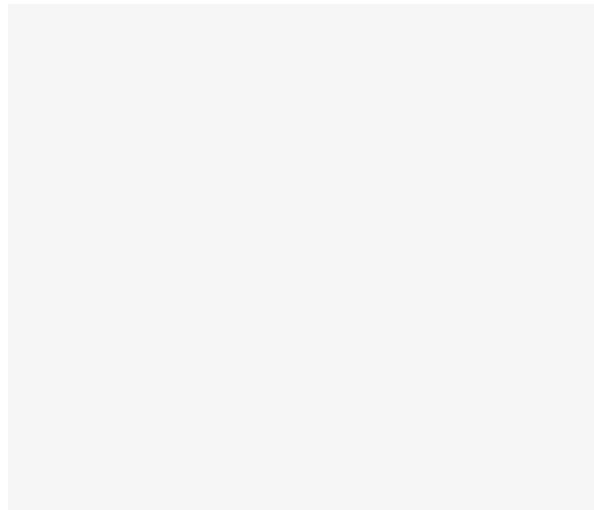


James Harold Wilson happened to be prime minister leading a left wing party at a time when the mores of post-war political and economic change in Britain (and elsewhere) were just beginning to be perceived. Arguably it

was the period of the greatest social and industrial change this century, even if the people - let alone the Wilson governments - were never fully aware of the nature of that change. Social relationships across the entire class spectrum were being transformed. What with the Pill, television, fashion, life style, pleasure and leisure, there was a deepening uncertainty in the 1960s about what it all meant and where it was all leading. Harold Wilson's "burning with the white heat of technology," and other famous phrases, sought to grapple with the era while never quite understanding what was happening to him or his government in a changing Britain and a dramatically changing world. He was blamed for things he never properly understood were happening.

In that sense the Wilson of the 1960s was a victim far more than a hapless architect. He lacked the deep conviction of Thatcher or De Gaulle he never possessed the philosophical and inspirational qualities of Aneurin Bevan - who, had he lived beyond 1960, would probably have been Labour's prime minister. Wilson often drifted. There was no compass, no weight of ideological baggage.

But Denis Healey is wrong in his assessment of Wilson as a man who had "neither political principle" nor "sense of direction." Wilson did have both - embedded not in ideology but in his intuitive sense of decency and his powerful drive to try and spread that decency among his fellow citizens. Not classical socialist doctrine, but a profound belief that the Labour party was the instrument in his hands for the establishment of social decency.



There was another curious aspect to Harold Wilson - a strange modesty. Sometimes one had the impression that he never quite believed that he had arrived at the top of the greasy pole. Just before he was due to go to the palace in 1964 after narrowly winning that memorable election, I interviewed him for the Daily Herald. We sat alone in Labour party headquarters at Transport House and I asked him how he felt. "I still can't believe it," he responded. "Just think, here I am, the lad from behind those

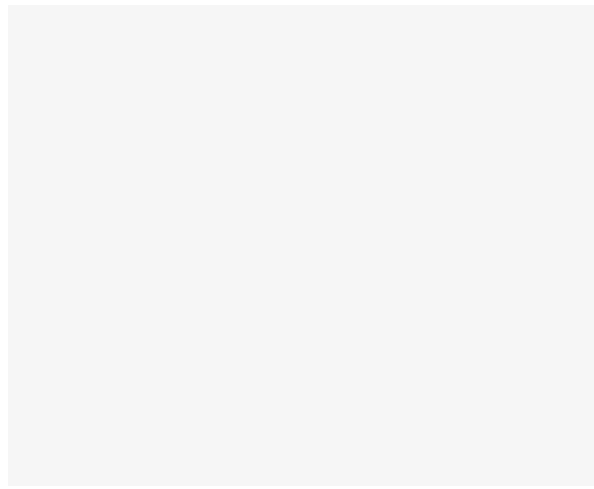
lace curtains in the Huddersfield house you saw - here I am about to go to see the Queen and become prime minister... I still can't believe it." The cynics will dismiss that as an act. I am convinced it was genuine, vintage Wilson.

Not that those lace curtains concealed a working class home of poverty and deprivation. He came from a lower middle class family. His father, James Herbert, whom Harold later had pride in bringing to Labour party conferences, was an industrial chemist who worked for ICI. But in the slump after the first world war Herbert Wilson was made redundant. It devastated the family and shaped Harold Wilson's political mind for all time. He later confessed: "Unemployment more than anything else made me politically conscious." At Milnsbridge New Street council school he won a county scholarship to Royds Hall secondary school in Huddersfield. But when Herbert found a job as a chief chemist on the Wirral, Harold was transferred to Wirral grammar school - from where he won a history scholarship to Jesus College, Oxford. He was on his way.

One is tempted to say that he was the typical grammar school boy up at Oxford in the pre-war 1930s. Almost working class certainly lower middle class no particular privileges in his background - unless you regard the nonconformist social and moral discipline as a privilege. Yet he wasn't typical. Unlike Denis Healey, from a roughly similar background in Yorkshire, Wilson did not dive headlong into Oxford politics or literary life. He was a swot. He spent his time almost exclusively on his studies - and did brilliantly. He won the Webb Medley economics prize as well as the Gladstone history prize. He gained an outstanding first-class honours degree in PPE and was elected to a junior research fellowship at University College, where he helped the master, Sir William Beveridge, in a study of unemployment and the trade cycle which had a clear influence on the great Beveridge Report.

Nor was Wilson a political lefty: his views were radical - but much more akin to the liberalism of Lloyd George than, say, the socialism of Stafford Cripps (Wilson's later hero) or even Clem Attlee. He regularly attended the Oxford Liberal Club in the mid-thirties and was hardly known at all to the band of student socialists like Healey or young socialist dons like Dick Crossman.

But shortly before the war Wilson joined the Oxford Labour Club - largely, it is said, under the influence of G D H Cole, economics fellow at University College and guru of Oxford socialism in the inter-war years. There was another important influence developing - in the summer of 1938 Wilson became engaged to Gladys Mary Baldwin and they were married on New Year's Day 1940.



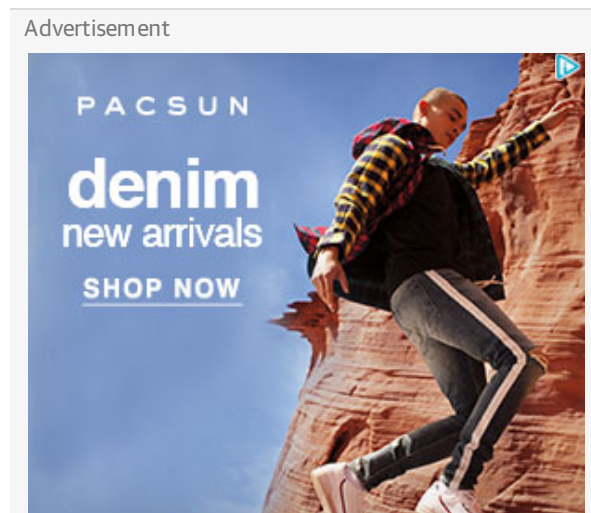
It was then that he began seriously to consider a political career, though he was still deeply attached to the academic lifestyle. When he registered for war service he was directed, as a specialist, to do government department work and this eventually led, through the War Cabinet secretariat, to Wilson's appointment as director of economics and statistics at the Ministry of Fuel and Power. It was a critical turning point in his developing political awareness. Soon he came under the gaze of the redoubtable Hugh Dalton, in charge at the Ministry of Economic Warfare. Dalton chose Wilson to be secretary of an inquiry into the coal mining industry which resulted in a book on the nationalisation of coal. *New Deal For Coal* became a minor political classic which provided the launch pad for Wilson's leap into a parliamentary candidature. In the 1945 election he won Ormskirk, close by the Wirral, by a large majority and remained there till 1950 when re-distribution took him to the nearby Merseyside seat of Huyton, where he remained until his retirement in June 1983.

His rise to cabinet office was exceptionally rapid. He was quickly appointed to a junior post in the Attlee administration. His feet had scarcely touched the back benches before he was made parliamentary secretary of the Ministry of Works and two years later, in March 1947, he was promoted to secretary for overseas trade. By October he was in the Cabinet as president of the board of trade - at 31 one of the youngest cabinet ministers of all time - succeeding Sir Stafford Cripps who became the government's economic overlord.

Wilson fell under Cripps's spell and continued to carry out many of the policies that Cripps had already laid down - especially the intensive post-war export drive. It was while at the Board of Trade that he first established a contact with the Soviet trade mission and with Stalin's shrewd and experienced trade minister, Anastas Mikoyan. Wilson's time at the Board of Trade is perhaps best remembered for his "Bonfire of Controls" - when between November 1948 and February 1949 he removed hundreds of controls covering consumer goods, industrial equipment and

the purchase of foreign supplies. Wilson's bonfire delighted the press and the public - but not many of his backbench MPs, particularly those on the left who regarded it as a clear sign that Wilson was really a right-winger at heart.

The real test of Wilson's political courage - or opportunism if one now reads his motives that way - came when he joined Aneurin Bevan in resigning from the government in protest against the NHS charges in Hugh Gaitskell's 1951 budget. Gaitskell, a new chancellor, was faced with the commitment to a huge re-armament programme (the outbreak of the Korean war) which Bevan opposed as fundamentally mistaken and because it meant the erosion of other spending plans, notably on the NHS. But Gaitskell was as stubborn as Wilson was flexible and, though no natural supporter of Nye Bevan, Wilson followed Bevan's resignation a day later, along with another minister, John Freeman.



For a time Wilson went along with the Bevanites, participating in Tribune brains trust meetings throughout the country and campaigning on a broad left wing platform. He was co-author of a famous Tribune pamphlet, One Way Only, a socialist argument against revisionist policies. Generally he identified himself with the anti-Gaitskell camp which split the whole Labour party after the 1951 election defeat. Yet there was never a great deal of trust for Wilson among the proven Bevanites - and always some doubt in the mind of Nye himself a doubt which became entrenched when Wilson took Bevan's place in the shadow cabinet in 1954 after Nye walked out over another policy rift. That gulf of distrust between Wilson and the left was never effectively healed.

Increasingly Wilson seemed to be grooming himself for a senior role in the the Labour leadership. When Gaitskell became leader in 1955 Wilson canvassed and voted for Gaitskell - not for Bevan. In the late 1950s Wilson became a very effective shadow chancellor. He was also chair of an internal inquiry into organisation which produced a damning report on the party's

cob-webbed methods and called for an end to the "penny farthing" party machine. The legendary Morgan Phillips, party secretary, never forgave Wilson for that report.

Yet the "Walter Mitty" label which was to become the trade mark of Harold Wilson's personality in his premiership years was already being woven. He hovered between moderate left and moderate right throughout the late 1950s and into the 1960s. In 1960, the year Gaitskell was defeated over nuclear disarmament, Wilson actually challenged Gaitskell's leadership - but was heavily defeated, 166 votes to 81. It was Wilson's bid to try to rebuild a bridge with the left in the party, though it was regarded by the left as pure opportunism. The result of it all, ironically, was that he became shadow foreign secretary.

Then came Gaitskell's sudden death. It found the Labour party completely unprepared and the contestants had little time to develop their individual platforms. George Brown, James Callaghan and Harold Wilson went into the first ballot of MPs which eliminated Callaghan, who polled 41 to Wilson's 115 and Brown's 88. In the run off Wilson beat Brown by 144 to 103 - largely with the help of the old Bevanite left.

So in February 1963 the little man from Huddersfield took over the Labour party and immediately began preparations for the general election that had to take place in 1964. At the Scarborough Labour conference of 1963 Wilson produced his famous speech on the "white heat of technology" - from material provided for him by several committees in which Richard Crossman and Professor P M S Blackett played a crucial role. And in the period between that conference and the election of October 1964 Wilson made six major speeches outlining the "socialist alternative" to 13 years of Tory rule and mismanagement. It was an unusually effective preparation in the country as a whole while, in parliament, Wilson dominated the House against the gentle but inadequate Alec Douglas-Home.



The surprise was to come: most pundits believed Wilson would secure a substantial majority in the October 1964 election: yet Labour won by a mere five seats, soon reduced still further by deaths. Even so, it was a remarkable victory.

In the first hundred days of that first Wilson government there was genuine political excitement. The inheritance was a crippling one in economic terms. There were fearful problems with the balance of payments, the strength of sterling and the entire condition of the domestic economy. Lord Cromer, governor of the Bank of England, told the prime minister that there would have to be severe cuts in government spending and fundamental changes in Labour's election promises. That was an outright and direct challenge to Wilson from the City establishment - within weeks of the election. Wilson's response was equally forthright. He told the governor that his challenge was a threat to the government mandate and to democracy itself.

Wilson told Cromer that if forced he would "go back to the electorate for a mandate giving me full power to handle the crisis". Perhaps gamblers' talk, but also Wilson at his most audacious and courageous. He knew he must go to the country again before long. The counter-attack worked. Cromer retreated though the City never forgot.

In fact none of the four Wilson governments was free from economic crises in one form or another. The 1966 election victory gave him a majority of 97, but by July the government was plunged into its worst crisis of all: a seamen's strike exacerbated an already tense financial situation. Inflation at home led to a run on the pound and a severe strain on reserves. Devaluation was discussed and advocated by George Brown - but rejected by Wilson. Rumours spread about a cabinet crisis and a possible putsch against Wilson. The government scrambled through - far from the harmonious band their majority had promised.

What should have been the beginning of Wilson's most productive period as prime minister began in crisis and rarely moved away from that pitch. George Brown's National Plan was dumped. There were endless problems with the trades unions over incomes policy culminating in Barbara Castle's White Paper on reform of industrial relations, *In Place Of Strife*, which was undermined by union resistance and backbench MPs, as well as cabinet divisions, where James Callaghan led the opposition. The retreat from *In Place Of Strife* in summer 1969 contributed directly to the defeat of the Wilson government at the 1970 general election. Wilson's retreat in 1969 was seen by the press and public as capitulation to trade union power - which in many senses it was, though the issue was more complex than that.

On the overseas front there were few successes. Wilson's endless attempts to reach an accommodation with Ian Smith's Rhodesia ended in fudged deals culminating in UDI. Over Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson put increasing pressure on Wilson to provide a British contingent - which he resisted. But he also had to maintain the posture, which was costly window dressing, of a significant British defence presence east of Suez. The devaluation of the pound in 1967 virtually destroyed what was left of the economic strategy. In November sterling fell to \$2.40 and a badly shaken prime minister made an inept television address to the nation, arguing that the "pound in your pocket" was unaffected - an extraordinary reversal of the euphoric days of 1964-1966.

Most people, including Wilson, believed Labour would win the 1970 election. The polls were consistently in Labour's favour. The economy was showing distinct signs of improvement and Roy Jenkins's standing as chancellor was regarded as a significant strength. Edward Heath was not rated as a dangerous challenger but turned a large Labour majority into an easily workable Tory one. Inside Wilson's Downing Street entourage there was a last-minute panic and much disagreement, especially between Marcia Williams (Lady Falkender) and other members of Wilson's "kitchen cabinet". These disagreements and personal animosities were to return and haunt the Wilson government of 1974.

In opposition the spark seemed to have been snuffed out of Wilson. It took him a long time to regain his confidence after the 1970 defeat. Yet he did so with, once again, unusual skill - holding the Labour party together and avoiding serious splits over the Common Market and defence policy. He was still a master at exploiting the theme of Labour unity and finding the compromise formulas. Indeed, it was during that period that Wilson picked up the theme of the "Social Contract" - chiefly from Jack Jones, the Transport Union leader and Professor Tommy Balogh (Lord Balogh) - which provided the main platform when Labour returned to office in 1974. The Heath government blundered into a miners' strike after the oil crisis of 1973 and by the winter of 1973-74 appeared to offer no clearer solution to the "trade union problem" than the Wilson governments of the 1960s. The February 1974 election was an extraordinary political event. The Heath government in effect abandoned ship. Wilson, to my own close knowledge at the time, did not expect to win. It was not so much an election victory for him as a defeat for Heath. No one had an overall majority though Labour was the largest group. For several days the formation of a new Labour government remained in doubt as Heath sought a deal with the Liberals. Only when that failed did the Queen call on Wilson to form his third administration - a minority Labour government.



Immediately the prime minister turned to settling the miners' strike and the follow-through industrial problems. He appointed Michael Foot as Employment Secretary to orchestrate the Social Contract. It was a period of intense activity, a touch reminiscent of October 1964, albeit with the climate profoundly different. Former cabinet ministers from the 1960s met in depressed mood, privately of course, to discuss what they regarded as the grim prospect of another Wilson administration. Men like Roy Jenkins - appointed unwillingly to the Home Office in 1974 - had already lost all confidence in Wilson's leadership and were actually looking for a defeat in the 1974 election. It was an unstable government - quite apart from whether a group of MI5 officers was busily trying still further to destabilise it. Yet in the few months between March and October 1974, when Wilson won his fourth term, the "interim" government did actually perform rather well. Its very existence hinged on support from the Liberals, and the gamble that Scottish and Welsh Nationalists would not vote with the Tories. Healey's first budget was very tough, making no attempt to disguise the grave economic situation. Wilson began the process of trying to "re-negotiate" the terms of Britain's EEC membership. Michael Foot started to re-draw the Heath government's industrial relations legislation. And the National Enterprise Board was established to help link the state and private industry in a re-development programme, while Wilson and Tony Benn fought their own ideological battle in the cabinet about the degree of state intervention.

If the conspiracy theory of Wilsonia is to be believed, then it was about this time that, according to Peter Wright's book *Spycatcher*, a group of MI5 "dissidents" began to "work" on the government. Wilson himself, albeit later, as well as Lady Falkender, became persuaded that there was "something in it." At any rate those months between the two 1974 elections were certainly the time when Wilson pencilled a ring around the date of his resignation - to come shortly after his 60th birthday in March 1976. The great disappointment for him was the result of the second 1974 election. He hoped for a reasonable, if not large, working majority. In the event he secured a fragile overall majority of only three. He had achieved something no previous prime minister had done this century: led four administrations, equalling the record of one of his old heroes, Gladstone. He had also kept the Labour party in one piece. Yet, somehow, real success evaded him.

Wilson began his final period as prime minister with an outward display of boldness. He helped Giscard d'Estaing, the French president, launch the concept of annual economic summit meetings in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli war and the huge increase in oil prices, the Wilson government managed another rescue operation to save sterling which Wilson

described as "the most hectic and harrowing month (December 1975) I experienced in nearly eight years as Prime Minister."

He brilliantly trumped Tony Benn's demand for a referendum on the Common Market by holding one certainly an act, tactically, of political genius well in the tradition of Wilson. Domestic inflation, after its peak of 27% early in 1974, was beginning to fall the Social Contract, despite all the strains, was actually working and Wilson pushed strongly for a new impetus to be given to regional policies in Scotland, Wales and the North. Quite remarkable for a man who was already tired, unwell and surrounded by personal uncertainties.

He resigned on March 16, 1976 - five days after his 60th birthday. I happened to be working for him at the time (though I had no idea of what was impending) and I knew how tired and ill he was. Some observers of that scene, like Len Murray (Lord Murray) the former TUC general secretary, still believe he could (and should) have continued. But I doubt it. He had had enough.

He was not driven out by MI5 plots, real or imagined; there were no hidden mysteries about scandals, sexual or otherwise; it was not because Marcia Williams, Joe Haines and Bernard Donoughue were squabbling in an ante-room (though they were). His doctor - the late Joe Stone - had already detected problems which, later, became diagnosed as cancer of the colon. He was taking brandy to comfort the difficult afternoons and evenings. What I witnessed, first hand, was the reality of a tired man trapped by his own deep sense of uncertainty which always lurked below the self-confident surface.

Yet after all criticism has been thrown at him, and the sneers and scepticism reduced to routine cliches, Harold Wilson , in my view, remains a remarkable man and a remarkable prime minister. He alone - other than Attlee in 1945 - was capable of making Labour the "natural party of government" and maintaining a unity within such a disparate and warring coalition of ideas and ambitions. He failed to rise to greatness because he failed in the critical period after the victory of 1966.

The final tragic years in which the jewel of his extraordinary memory became increasingly destroyed by terrible illness robbed him - and probably the nation - of an opportunity to demonstrate a matured wisdom that, undoubtedly, was there.

James Harold Wilson, Baron Wilson of Rievaulx, statesman, born March 11 1916; died May 24 1995

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