



**Arthur Henderson**  
**Labour Leader 1908 - 1910; 1914 - 1917; 1931**

Born in Glasgow in 1863 Arthur Henderson was to become the Labour Party's key organiser from 1911 when he became Party Secretary - helping to create a national structure and individual membership - through to his death in the mid 1930's.

His early life was based in Newcastle Upon Tyne (he moved here after the death of his father and his mother remarrying around the age of 10) and by the age of 12 he began work at the Stephenson Locomotive Works. Upon completion of his apprenticeship he briefly moved to Southampton before returning to Newcastle as an Iron Moulder.

In 1892 he became a paid official of the Iron Founders Union (having joined in 1883) and was also a representative on the North East Conciliation Board. At this time he was also an active Methodist, meeting his future wife Eleanor at the local chapel who he married in 1889.

1892 also saw him stand for Newcastle City Council in a by-election, working with the local Liberal Association who had adopted him as their candidate and organised his campaign. Confirming his belief at this time that labour and Liberals could work together. By 1896 he was working as a full time Liberal Party agent in Barnard Castle.

In 1900 he was one of the delegates present at the formation of the Labour Representation Committee, becoming its secretary in 1903. In the same year he won a Parliamentary by-election at Barnard Castle, taking the seat from the Liberal Party who had refused to support his candidature – Turnout was 85% and his majority was just 47 votes!

Even though elected as an independent Labour MP in 1903 he still felt that long term success was through cooperation with the Liberals. However, the scale of Labour's performance at 1906 elections allowed him and others to consider complete independence as the long term goal. By this date he was already a leading figure within the movement and in February 1906 was elected Chief Whip.

In 1908 he was elected chairman of the Party (thereby leader) following the resignation of Keir Hardie, beating his rival David Shackleton for the post. However, from the start he was viewed by ILP members with suspicion as a liberal with little socialist credentials. Being unable to gain the full support of the Party he stood down from this position two years later and was replaced by Ramsey MacDonald.

In 1913 Henderson and Clynes represented the Labour Party in a delegation including representatives of the TUC in discussions on closer cooperation with the cooperative movement. Following initial meetings it was clear that the leadership of the cooperative union would not support any formal agreement and negotiations ended.

The outbreak of War in 1914 saw an unexpected turn of events when the Labour Party supported the Government request for War Bonds. MacDonald resigned in protest at the decision of the Party, which was split over the decision, and Henderson – who had supported the decision – once again became chairman of the Party and Leader. Later, Party support for an ongoing recruitment campaign arguably to limit potential conscription further alienated the ILP members of the Party who opposed his action.

In 1915 Henderson became the first Labour Party Government minister, joining Asquith's war Coalition Government, becoming President of the Board of Education (May, 1915 - October, 1916) and Paymaster General (October, 1916 - August, 1917) - In reality, much of his time was spent using his Trade Union links on behalf of the Government in attempts to appease workers and ensure their grievances did not affect the war effort. He was later joined by John Hodge (Minister of Labour) and George Barnes (Minister of Pensions) in Government.

Following the revolution in Russia in 1917 Henderson was sent there with government approval to convince the provisional government to remain in the war until a socialist conference could be set up to discuss how to stop the war in Stockholm. Though initially supported by the British Government, under pressure from the Americans this support was withdrawn. Upon returning from Russia he found himself locked out of the cabinet room while his fate was being decided. He burst in upon Lloyd George to confront him on the matter before resigning from the Government in protest and shortly after as Labour Leader.

In February 1918 at the Labour Party conference he instigated a number of changes such as the introduction of individual membership and a socialist constitution. The new constitution also had the effect of significantly reducing the influence of the socialist societies and trades councils. The new constitution was also seen as an attempt to combat the "New Democratic Party" created by those labour members remaining in the coalition Government. Henderson would spend much of the next few years organising the party to make it a truly national party.

The 1918 General Election also saw him lose his seat - by this time he had moved seats and was standing in East Ham South - initially opposed by a National Democratic and Labour Candidate (effectively a rump of Labour MP's and supporters who had remained within the war coalition in 1917), who then withdrew in favour of the successful Conservative candidate. He did though ensure that the Cooperative movement were given 10 seats to place their own candidates, resulting in the first cooperative Member of Parliament - A. E. Waterson - after the election.

During the summer of 1920 it became apparent that the government were making plans for full scale war against the new government of Russia. This greatly worried the party leadership to the degree that Henderson sent a telegram on 4<sup>th</sup> August to all local labour parties to demonstrate against the plans. The following day the PLP met with the executive of the TUC and agreed to call on all workers to withdraw their labour if the war went ahead. Faced with such united opposition the government backed down.

The next few years saw him in and out of Parliament before winning a by-election in Burnley in 1923, serving the following year in Labour's first, short lived, Government. Victory in the 1929 election saw him become Foreign Secretary. However, the Great Depression resulted in a major split in the Party in 1931 following the suggestion that the budget could be balanced by cutting unemployment benefits. Henderson opposed these, and cabinet was split on the proposal, resulting in MacDonald turning against the party to form a National Government and holding a General Election.

Henderson once again became leader - short lived until the disastrous 1931 election - where he and most of the Labour Leadership lost their seats. It is fair to say that at this point both Henderson and MacDonald were poles apart as to the direction for the labour movement. The result was that Lansbury - as the only leading figure to retain his seat - became Leader after the election.

He was to return to Parliament in 1933 - again in a by-election - however his efforts turned to securing world peace and he was rewarded with the Nobel Peace prize in 1934. In 1934 he stood down as Secretary of the Labour Party, a position he had held since 1911.

Henderson died on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1935 aged 72.

The above account is derived from the following recommended reading:

- Political Portraits: Arthur Henderson - Chris Wrigley; University of Wales 1990
- Dictionary of Labour Biography - Greg Rosen (ed) 2001
- The Life of George Lansbury – Raymond Postgate, Longmans Green & Co 1951
- Consumers in Politics – Thomas F Carbery, Manchester University Press 1969
- Memoirs – J.R. Clynes, William Brendon & Son 1937