



## **George Lansbury** **Labour Leader 1932 - 35**

Lansbury was born near Lowestoft, Suffolk, on 21<sup>st</sup> February 1859 in an age before most of the electoral reform acts, in which “bribery was carried on as an honourable profession” at election time. His father was a timekeeper for a group of railway contractors and the family were strongly influenced by Evangelicalism.

At the age of nine he moved to East London where he attended school until the age of eleven before starting work in an office – but was able a year later to return to school at St. Marys in Whitechapel until the age of fourteen.

This was followed by a succession of jobs as clerk/grocer and working in a coffee bar and he eventually started up his own business working as a contractor for the Great Eastern Railway. By 1875 at the age of sixteen he was seeing a young girl Elizabeth Jane Brine, but waited until he had paid off debts incurred due to illness before marrying her five years later in 1880. By this time he was already becoming radicalised and was often found in the House of Commons listening to the great leaders of the day.

In May 1884, now with three children, the family immigrated to Australia hoping to find work. He took a number of jobs as a labourer until taking up work on a farm. He found this to be a scam where rent and food were inflated so that he was forever in debt to the farmer. In May 1885 he received money from his father in Law to get back to England. Upon his return he spent time confronting the “fraud” of emigration to Australia and caused such a stir that the government set up an “Emigration information department” to provide independent advice on such matters.

In regards his politics by 1886 Lansbury had joined the local Liberal Party, becoming that same year the secretary of the local liberal Association and agent for the local Liberal MP. He became increasingly restless in this role and eventually came into contact with the Marxist Social Democratic Federation and its leader Hyndman. Still with the liberal Party he persuaded his local branch in 1889 to support a resolution for an eight hour working day, but national conference would not allow a debate on the subject, finally breaking with the Liberals following the 1892 election to join the SDF.

His first taste in elections was a by-election for Walworth, London, in 1894 where as an SDF candidate he polled 340 votes only to poll 204 votes at the general election the following year. However, in 1900 he stood for the Bow and Bromley constituency where he polled 2558 votes (around 37% of the poll) but was unsuccessful.

Around this time in his life he began to go back to church and the influence of the SDF began to lessen. He began to be involved with the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and joined them in 1903, being elected to the council that same year. He unsuccessfully fought the 1906 General Election in Middlesbrough against Havelock Wilson who had deserted the ILP in favour of the Liberals. He continued to serve as a London councillor until 1912.

In the January 1910 General Election Lansbury came second in the Bow and Bromley CLP, but in the December election of the same year was elected as Labour MP with a majority of 863, and he and Hardie launched headlong into the campaign in Parliament for votes for women. On this issue he went up to Asquith and shook his fist at him in the chamber and was ordered out of the chamber by the speaker of the house.

In October 1912, Lansbury was persuaded to resign his seat in the House of Commons by the Pankhurst’s as an act of principle in order to fight a by-election on a platform of votes for women. He was defeated by 731 votes. The following year he was sentenced to six months imprisonment for making speeches in favour of suffragettes who were involved in illegal activities. He went on a hunger and thirst strike and was released due to the embarrassment this was causing the Government.

For the next ten years Lansbury was out of the House of Commons and concentrated on journalism and played a key part in the creation of the Daily Herald, eventually becoming its editor, and used this as an effective anti war propaganda tool and to publicise the Coalition Governments attempts to bring the new leadership of Russia to its knees. In 1920 he smuggled himself into Russia, met with Lenin and addressed the Moscow Soviet.

In 1921, Lansbury became Mayor of the popular Borough council and took the decision to increase the amount of money spent on poor relief, bringing it in conflict with the Liberal Government and in 1921 Lansbury and the majority of the local council were imprisoned for over four months until the Government released them under pressure.

In the 1922 General Election Lansbury, with his battles over poor law relief still fresh in peoples minds was once again elected as the Labour MP for Bow and Bromley, this time with a majority of 7,000, a seat he held for the remainder of his life. Elected to the Parliamentary Labour Party Executive in 1923, (Shadow Cabinet) and expected Cabinet office on the formation of Labour's first government in 1924. Instead he was offered the post of Transport Minister outside Cabinet, which he declined.

In February 1925 he started the Lansbury's Labour Weekly. The newspaper rapidly reached a circulation of 172,000 and provided an important source of news during the 1926 General Strike. The publication eventually amalgamated with the ILP's "New Leader" the following year. Throughout this period he was politically handicapped by his continued patronage of the newly formed communist party, though this did not stop him becoming chairman of the Party in 1928.

Lansbury was in 1929 he joined Ramsay MacDonald's Cabinet as First Commissioner of Works. He advocated retirement pensions at 60 but was not successful. He became increasingly frustrated at labour's failure to agree a programme for the relief of unemployment through public works. Indeed it was the cabal of Ministers opposing proposals to cut unemployment benefit in the summer of 1931 that led to the formation of MacDonald's National Government. As a cabinet minister, his only legislative success was an act of parliament to protect ancient monuments, passed in June 1931, just before the fall of the Government.

The resulting 1931 election was both bitter - with former colleagues such as Snowden making unfounded allegations such as "Labour will rob you of your post office savings" – as well as being a disaster – Labour falling from 289 seats in Parliament to just 46 and 5 ILP members. Lansbury, being the only former Labour Cabinet Minister to retain his seat, was joined by Attlee and Cripps as the two surviving junior ministers. Lansbury became labour Leader and Attlee his Deputy.

Lansbury was a lifelong pacifist and when Italy invaded Abyssinia he refused to support the view that the League of Nations should use military force against Mussolini's army. The 1935 Conference Bevin taunted him over this position after a resolution was passed supporting military sanctions against Italy. He resigned a week later and at first this was not accepted, but he refused to change his mind, being replaced by his deputy Attlee.

Lansbury spent the last few years of his life trying to prevent another world war. After having talks with Hitler in 1937 he believed it was possible to reach agreement with the Nazis and prevent war. His final years were taken up leading the "Pease Pledge Union" up until the outbreak of war.

George Lansbury died of cancer at his home in London on 7th May, 1940 aged 81. he was cremated, and per his wishes this was carried out while those in attendance sung "the red flag".

The above account is derived from the following recommended reading:

- Dictionary of Labour Biography - Greg Rosen (ed) 2001
- The Life of George Lansbury – Raymond Postgate, Longmans Green & Co 1951