



Harold Wilson **Labour Leader 1963 - 1976**

James Harold Wilson was born in Huddersfield on 11th March 1916. He had a middle class upbringing with his father being an industrial chemist. As a boy he regularly attended church and Sunday school, this continuing at Oxford where he still went to College chapel. He was even to marry the daughter of a Congregationalist minister.

Wilson's family background was steeped in politics with his grandfather being an active National Liberal, his great uncle being a Liberal Lord Mayor of Manchester, while his uncle was Keir Hardie's agent in the ILP. His mother was also politically active and his father became a strong Labour supporter. Early work as a researcher for Beverage allowed Wilson to gain contacts – especially with the NUM - who helped him to gain the nomination for the West Lancashire Ormskirk constituency in the 1945 Election.

In July 1945, aged 29, he was elected, winning the seat from Stephen King-Hall who had held the seat as a National Labour member in Parliament. Within two years he became the youngest Cabinet Minister since 1806 as President of the Board of Trade. It was in this position that he made several official trips to the USSR that would later be used in various conspiracy theories relating to Wilson's motives for these trips. Due to boundary changes he changes constituencies and narrowly won the newly created Huyton seat at the 1950 election, holding this until his retirement.

He was viewed as slippery and unprincipled by many of his colleagues during the 1950's for a number of reasons. These included resignation with Bevan from the 1951 cabinet over NHS charges and opposing Gaitskell's attempt to abolish Clause 4 of the Labour Party constitution. He was seen as a pragmatist untrusted by either the right or left of the party at the time. He stood against Gaitskell in the 1960 leadership election, but was heavily defeated. But this established him as a clear alternative leader and was comfortably elected Leader after his death in 1963.

As leader he quickly launched an assault against the crumbling Tory Government. His impressive 'white heat of technology' speech at the 1963 Scarborough conference typified the public perception of the Tories as out of date and the Labour Party as modern and professional.

The 1964 General Election saw the Labour Party returned to power with a Parliamentary majority of just 5 seats. This was followed two years later when Wilson went to the polls to increase his majority, being successful with a new majority of 96 in Parliament. The period of his government oversaw a remarkable drive for social reform (though this was partly through the back door use of private members bills) between 1965 and 1969. Legislation included:

- the abolition of capital punishment (bill introduced by Labour MP Sydney Silverman),
- the abolition of theatre censorship (which had been in existence since 1737),
- the decriminalisation of homosexuality (1967 Sexual Offences Act),
- relaxation of divorce law (Divorce Reform Act 1969 allowing couples to divorce after they had been separated for two years)
- relaxation of abortion law (via the Liberal David Steel's 1967 private member bill).
- The creation of the Open University established in 1969 with the first students enrolling in January 1971.

Like all governments, policy setbacks began to creep in with cuts to public services in 1966 and the abandonment of the National Plan – all eventually leading to the humiliating devaluation of the Pound in 1967. Labour suffered a string of by-election disasters. Although the economy picked up a little towards the end of his Government, and the polls with it, his electoral defeat in 1970 was rooted in public disenchantment that the great ambitions of 1964 had not been fulfilled. Defeat at the 1970 General Election was clearly the worst setback of Wilson's political career and devastated his self-confidence.

Like most commentators, Wilson thought he would lose the 1974 election but managed to squeeze home with fewer votes but a few more seats. The refusal of the Liberals to enter into coalition with

the Tories allowed him to become Prime Minister of a minority administration. He returned to the polls again in October 1974 securing a majority just 3 seats in Parliament.

Legislation passed in the two year period of his second term as Prime Minister once again included significant social reform such as the 1974 of the Trade Union & Labour Relations Act, Employment Protection Act (1975), Sex discrimination act (1975) and legislation that introduced universal child benefit and the state earnings related pension scheme (SERPS).

His final premiership was conducted quite differently from the triumphal days of 1964-66. He kept a distinctly low profile, resigning in March 1976 at the age of 60. Ironically he departed at virtually the only time in his leadership when there were no plots among colleagues to remove him. However, his resignation was clouded by the atmosphere of scandal surrounding his bizarre final honours list.

Not long after retirement, his mental deterioration from Alzheimer's disease began to be apparent, and his last public appearance was in 1988 for the unveiling of a statue in honor of Clement Attlee. He died in May 1995, aged 79.