



Hugh Gaitskell
Labour Leader 1955 - 1963

Born on 9th April 1906 into a middle class family with a history linked to administrative service for India and Empire. At an early age he began public schooling leading to attendance at Oxford reading politics and economics. He lectured in economics to the wider labour movement during the 1920's and by the 1930's was also director of an independent think tank.

In 1935 he stood for the Labour Party for the first time in Chatham, but was defeated by the Conservative candidate in a straight fight. He was successful in holding the Leeds South seat for the party in the 1945 Labour landslide election. Within a couple of years he was appointed a junior minister in Atlee's first government. He briefly held the position of Chancellor from 1950 to the 1951 General Election, introducing only one budget that included charges for prescriptions in his 1951 that caused a split in the Government.

After the 1955 General Election he won the leadership contest following the resignation of Atlee. As leader of the opposition he was widely respected within the party for his opposition to the intervention in Suez in 1956 after initially giving qualified support.

Labour was expected to win the 1959 election and when they did not he looked to the left wing of the movement and the Party commitment to Clause 4 as the reason for the defeat. Though an inspirational leader for those who agreed with him, he inspired passionate dislike amongst his political opponents. In the final analysis his ability to hold the Labour Party together was questionable as internal divisions continued and he was challenged in both 1960 (by Harold Wilson 81 votes to 166) and 1960 (Anthony Greenwood 59 votes to 171) as leader of the Party.

Hugh Gaitskell's legacy to the Labour Party was a style of confrontational leadership and a political approach of brutal frankness His revisionism was a commitment to the future of the Labour Party as an independent political entity and he did not support any coalition or merger with Liberals but advocated, in his attempt to replace Clause IV, the modernisation of the Labour Party so that it absorbed the radical centre. He was helped considerably by the formation of the "Campaign for Democratic Socialism" as a pressure group within the Party to support his modernising ideals. It is therefore ironic that a number of its members (Rogers, Jenkins et al) some 20 years later would walk away from the Party to set up the SDP.

He died suddenly in January 1963 at the age of 57, often being described as the "greatest Prime Minister Britain never had".