



James Keir Hardie
Labour Leader 1906 - 1908

Better known as Keir Hardie he was born on 15th August 1856 to Mary Keir, a servant from Legbrannock in Scotland. His Mother later married a David Hardie and they moved to Glasgow. He was one of 9 children living in a single room cottage.

His first job was at the age of 7 as a message boy before, at the age of 10, he started work down the mines. While still a teenager he was already gaining a reputation with the mine owners and by his mid 20's helped to establish a union at his local colliery. Leading a strike in 1880 led to his dismissal and blacklisting by the local mine owners. To make ends meet, Hardie turned to journalism and in 1887 he launched a new publication called "The Miner". In August 1886 his ongoing efforts to build a Union of Scottish miners were rewarded when they formed (and he became secretary of) the Ayrshire Miners Union.

His Political ambitions began with a by-election in 1888 for the Mid Lanark Constituency where Keir stood as an Independent Labour candidate, finishing bottom of the poll, but with a respectable 8.4% of votes cast. That same year he helped form the Scottish Labour Party, becoming its first secretary.

The 1892 General Election saw the first real breakthrough, with 3 Independent Labour MP's being elected (from a total of 9 standing at the election), with Hardie taking the West Ham South seat from the Conservative and Liberal Unionist Party. Upon entry into Parliament he created a commotion by wearing a cloth cap rather than top hat, which was the tradition at that time. At this time he and other independents were much reliant upon Liberal Support for their successful candidatures.

The election breakthrough was followed in 1893 when he helped form a new socialist group, the Independent Labour Party (ILP), for which he was elected leader. Soon after he created and edited the "Labour Leader" as the mouthpiece of this new Party. Success was short lived and in the 1895 General Election he lost his seat – indeed the ILP failed to win a single seat.

This prompted Hardie and others - who had for a long time believed that the various trade unions and the different socialist groups (in particular the Fabians and SDF) should join forces – to work toward a single political party. Negotiations began in 1899 and the following year resulted in the formation of the Labour Representation Committee.

The 1900 General Election saw Hardie elected as Labour MP for Merthyr Tydfil Constituency - again with Liberal support - a seat he would represent for the remainder of his life. A pact with the Liberal Party in 1906 allowed a free run in an agreed number of seats (including Sunderland where Thomas Summerbell was elected) and saw the number of Labour MP's rising to 29 in total.

He was elected leader of the party in the House of Commons in 1906, but was not very good at dealing with internal rivalries and his leadership was short lived, resigning the post in 1908. The party was proactive in supporting a Trades Dispute Bill (to reverse the Taff Dale decision) resulting in the Liberal Government taking it over as a government bill and becoming law.

The 1910 General Election The Labour Party numbers rose to 40 members of parliament. What followed were a series of attempts by the Liberal leadership to undertake a "closer relationship". This came to a head in 1914 when McDonald was allegedly offered a seat in government. Hardie, concerned that the new party was losing its independence successfully organised against the proposals of a closer relationship and annual conference of the ILP in the same year rejected the idea.

Being a pacifist, he was bitterly opposed to the outbreak of the First World War. This stance was not popular, even within the Labour Party at that time as he continued to address anti-war demonstrations across the country and to support conscientious objectors. In December 1914 he had a stroke and returned to Scotland where he died in hospital on 25th September 1915 aged 59 years old.

The above account is derived from the following recommended reading:

- J. Keir Hardie; A Biography - William Stewart 1921
- Keir Hardie: Radical and Socialist - Kenneth O Morgan 1975
- Dictionary of Labour Biography - Greg Rosen (ed) 2001
- Memoirs – J.R. Clynes, William Brendon & Son 1937