



John R Clynes
Labour Leader 1921 - 1922

Born in Oldham in 1869 he was the son of an Irish Labourer who would become, briefly, the first English born Leader of the Labour Party. Working by the age of 10 – mornings at a local Downy cotton mill – followed in the afternoon at school.

He began working full time at the age of 12 when he bought his first book – a dictionary! He then took on an additional job to pay for tuition 2 nights per week. He also used the Oldham Equitable Cooperative's Library to educate himself to the degree that by the age of 16 he was writing articles about child labour in the Textile industry.

By this time he was active in the local branch of the Irish National League, where he began to pick up his public speaking skills. He was also becoming active within the trade union movement at this time and by the age of 17 (around 1886) was already setting up a local Piercer's Trade Union. It was in the same year – 1886 – that he met his future wife Mary Harper a worker in a neighbouring mill.

From 1886 he slowly built up his influence and by 1891 became a paid district organiser for National Union of Glassworkers and General Labourer's Union and a year later president of Oldham Trades Council. It was in this year that he eventually married Mary Harper. By 1896 he had become union secretary of the whole region of Lancashire.

Clynes was present at the foundation conference of the Independent Labour Party in 1893 and also attended an international conference in Zurich where he met Bernard Shaw of the Fabians and developed a friendship with him. He became more involved in the ILP, attending political meetings to promote the new party. He was in attendance as a union delegate at the creation of the Labour Representation Committee in February 1900, gaining a place on its executive committee through the support of the Trade Councils.

His first experience in standing for parliament was in 1900 Khaki Election, where he unsuccessfully stood in Leicester. At the 1906 General Election he was persuaded by supporters to stand for Manchester North-East seat, taking it from the Conservatives. His rise in the new party continued and in 1909 was elected as conference Chairman, speaking resolutely in favour of the need for independence from the liberals and other alliances.

In 1913 he and Henderson 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.

By 1914 Clynes was a leading ILP member in the Parliamentary Labour Party to support the war effort and though opposed to participation within the initial coalition government, he eventually found himself as a minister becoming only the second Labour MP to enter Government at that time. During his time as a minister to the food ministry - he continued to work with representatives of the Cooperative union in establishing a consumer council, for which he became its Chairman and also persuaded Hyndman (of the Marxist Social Democratic Federation) to join.

A special labour Conference was held in 1918 to determine whether to continue in the coalition after the end of the war. Clynes spoke in favour of retaining this alliance, but was strongly opposed by

Bernard Shaw. When the vote was taken there was a clear majority for withdrawal from the Coalition and he promptly resigned from his ministerial post.

Following the 1918 General Election he became Deputy Leader, becoming leader in 1921 following the resignation of William Adamson. He took the Party into the 1922 election which proved a huge success – the Party finishing with 142 Seats (a net gain of 67). Unfortunately for Clynes this also included the return of MacDonald who stood against him as Leader and was successful by a majority of only 5 votes in taking the leadership from him. Clynes remained his deputy until 1931.

In January 1924 Clynes moved the vote of censure in the House of Commons which defeated Baldwin and led to the formation of the first Labour Government. Clynes became Lord Privy Seal and Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, occupying Number 11 Downing Street.

In the second Labour Government (1929-31), Clynes became Home Secretary, one of his most controversial decisions being to refuse Trotsky asylum in Britain. He also took much interest in prison reform, improving factory conditions and in health and safety matters. In the rebellion by cabinet in 1931 over the prospect of cutting unemployment benefits (amongst other austerity measures) he sided against MacDonald in opposing the plans and did not serve in the National Government that followed.

1931 election saw Labour plunge to just 52 seats (they lost 225) and Clynes was one of a number to lose their seat. However, he returned to Parliament in 1935 and though pressed to stand as leader remained a loyal and reliable elder statesman of the Party until he retired in 1945. He died on 23 October 1949 and his wife followed not long after.

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
- Consumers in Politics – Thomas F Carbery, Manchester University Press 1969
- Memoirs – J.R. Clynes, William Brendon & Son 1937