



Ramsey MacDonald
Labour Leader 1911 - 1914 & 1922 - 1931

James Ramsay Macdonald was born 12th October 1866 in Lossiemouth, Scotland, son of a farm labourer and housemaid. He attended a local free school at Drainie run by the Church of Scotland, becoming a pupil-teacher at the school in 1881. At this time of his life he was associated with the radical wing of the Liberal Party.

In 1885 he moved to Bristol and became an assistant to a clergyman. While in Bristol he became involved with the Social Democratic Federation and Bristol Socialist Society. He moved to London in 1886 and a year later was witness to the Bloody Sunday massacre in Trafalgar Square. It was while in London that he joined the Fabian Society. His ambition by this stage of his life was to become a teacher of science but this coincided with a period of poor health and he had to give up his studies.

In 1888 he became the private secretary of a radical Liberal MP Thomas Lough, which finally gave him access to the political establishment which would prove useful later in his career. Following courtship with the Liberal Party he sought the seat of Southampton to fight the 1895 General Election but the local Liberal Association would not support him. Realising he was wasting his time with the Liberals he made contact with Kier Hardie and applied to join the ILP in 1894, standing in Southampton in 1895, but was not successful.

In 1900 he again stood for Parliament in Leicester and again was unsuccessful, however the same year saw him become secretary of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC). Ironically it was only possible to take this job following marriage to Margaret Gladstone in 1895, as she was able to provide him with a private income. It was as Secretary of the LRC that he secured a secret agreement of the Liberals for the 1906 General Election to allow each party to have a clear run. In his pact with the liberals Macdonald himself finally entered Parliament as MP for Leicester in the historic election of 1906, which returned twenty nine MPs for Labour. The Party Conference that took place following the election agreed to adopt the name "The Labour Party".

Two events occurred in 1911 that were to transform his live – the first were a series of family bereavements - his son David, followed by his mother and later in the year his wife Margaret. The second was his election as Leader of the Labour Party (which now numbered 40 MP's following the decision of the miners in 1909 to transfer their loyalty to the new party) following the resignation of George Barnes. As leader he had a number of clashes with senior figures – including Hardie – over a wish to support amendments to the 1911 National Insurance Act and over Woman's Suffrage (Hardie wanting to promote more radical actions in both cases). However, the greatest clash with the party took place at the outbreak of the First World War with the ILP (for which he owed his place in Parliament) being opposed. He resigned as leader in 1914 when the Party agreed to support the Governments War Credits plans.

His eventual opposition to the war resulted in a hostile press and it was not surprising that he lost his seat in the 1918 General Election precipitated by a major split in the Labour Party between pro and anti coalition factions, the former splitting to form the National Democratic and Labour Party. MacDonald remained out of Parliament until the 1922 election where he comfortably won the Aberavon seat in Wales for Labour. 1922 was also significant as Labour became the official opposition to Baldwin's Conservative Government following the General Election. Tory 347 - Labour 142 - Asquith Liberals 64 - Lloyd George Liberals 53.

On re-entering parliament MacDonald stood for the Labour Party Leadership against Clynes being proposed by Emanuel (Manny) Shinwell - result being Clynes 56, MacDonald 61 - and a year later a further General Election saw the Party obtain 191 seats (Tory 258 - Liberal 158). Baldwin tried to cling on as Prime Minister but was defeated on a confidence vote on 17th January 1924 - upon which Labour under MacDonald was asked to form a minority administration. The only real achievement of this short lived minority government was the Wheatley Housing Act, resulting in a massive municipal housing programme being developed, much of which still stands today. MacDonald under pressure from party activists did however formally recognise the newly created Soviet Republic and offer a proposed loan (seen as one of the reasons for the eventual fall of this first Labour Government). The release of the infamous "Zinoviev letter" just before the 1924 General Election resulted in a heavy defeat for the Party, falling back to 151 seats in parliament.

1929 saw MacDonald again as prime minister in a further minority administration, though this time Labour was the biggest Party in Parliament. Achievements included the raising of unemployment pay, an act to improve wages and conditions in the coal industry and a housing act which focused on slum clearances. They also restored relations with the new Soviet Union.

June 1929 he made a speech in Parliament suggesting a "Council of State" - basically that the parties should work together in the national interest. The speech was made without the blessing of the Party and could be seen as the beginnings of disharmony within the parliamentary party. However, a whirlwind was approaching from America in the form of the Great Depression that would prove the downfall of the Labour Government.

By summer of 1931 a small cabinet sub committee began considering implications of the "May Report" outlining options to balance the budget. This sub committee were split as to increase income or reduce expenditure (MacDonald favouring the latter). They were asked to approve large public sector wage cuts and a cut of 10% on benefits to the unemployed. The options were put to cabinet on 19th August 1931 but MacDonald was unable to persuade the majority to his side. This proved too much and at a further meeting on Sunday 23rd August a number of senior figures argued the party should leave government and remain united but also threatened their resignation. It was generally expected that MacDonald would resign as Prime Minister when faced with mass resignations and that Baldwin would be asked to form a minority Conservative administration.

Cabinet reassembled on Monday 24th August to be told by MacDonald that a new Government had been formed - a "National Coalition" with the Conservatives and Liberals. He anticipated that many government ministers would join him in this development but in total only 12 could be persuaded. His break with the party was compounded when he announced the creation of an alternative "National Labour Organisation". To this day, many socialists view this as an unforgiving act of betrayal and has led to MacDonald becoming one of the most reviled figures in the history of the Labour Party.

On 26th September 1931 the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party agreed to expel each and every Labour member of the National Government. One month later there was a General Election and Labour - now headed by Henderson (who lost his seat) - were almost annihilated, falling to just 46 seats with Lansbury elected as the new Party Leader and Attlee his deputy. The general election also saw the ILP standing as a separate party following their decision to disaffiliate from the Labour Party.

Increasingly MacDonald became Prime Minister in name only, hated by his former Labour colleagues and viewed with contempt by the other coalition partners. Initially protected by Baldwin he was eventually pushed into resigning as Prime Minister and notional head of the National Government on 7th June 1935.

The Labour Party obtained something of revenge in that the 1935 General Election in that Manny Shinwell (who had earlier lost his seat in 1931) stood for Labour at Seaham and easily took the seat from him. However, Baldwin again came to his rescue a year later and supported his candidature for a Scottish University seat, where a vacancy had occurred. He had no problems taking up a position in Baldwin's Conservative dominated cabinet.

Poor health led him to take a vacation and he died on board the liner in the Atlantic on 9 November 1937, aged 71.

The above account is derived from the following recommended reading:

- The tragedy of Ramsey MacDonald - L MacNeill Weir 1938
- Dictionary of Labour Biography - Greg Rosen (ed) 2001
- A History Of The labour Party From 1914 – G. D. H Cole, Routledge & Keegan Paul 1948