

Service to Commemorate James Harold Wilson, 1916-1995

James Harold Wilson is probably Huddersfield's most famous son: Congregationalist by religious profession, and a mild Yorkshireman, if ever there was one. Harold's tactical nous, political dexterity and all round capacity for understated genius seem to be part of a bygone age. Commemorations can often be opportunities for some nostalgia, and I daresay with our current political maelstroms, it would be hard not to look back on Wilson's political achievements with a mixture of warm pride and deep admiration. And wistfully, I think, to sincerely wish that we had people of this calibre in the here and now. But that, perhaps, is a homily for another day.

Wilson's time was a kinder age, in many ways. True, we were enjoying *That Was the Week That Was*, but this was an era more in tune with chuckling with along with Mike rather than the more cynical *Mock the Week* of today. Yarwood. Wilson's government was progressive and brave in the best of British traditions. It was com-passionate - it felt with the people and for the people it served. This was One Nation Socialism at its best. Wilson was, indeed, the truest exemplar of the People's Prime Minister. More than Churchill, in some respects (who arguably belonged to the pre-war period), Wilson belonged to the whole nation in the second half of the twentieth century like no other Prime Minister, and he served all quarters of society. Acts of Parliament on gender and racial equality, for example, began with Wilson. His was a Premiership of popularity, not populism; of service and industry that empowered the whole nation.

Wilson somehow judged the national mood exactly right – this was the era of the swinging sixties, after all – and yet placed the country on a footing that felt secure and confident. Wilson's 1960's government sponsored liberal changes in a number of social areas. Though not specifically his own initiatives, these included the liberalisation of laws on censorship, divorce, homosexuality, immigration, and abortion; as well as the abolition of capital punishment, which was due in part to the initiatives of backbench MPs, who in turn had the support of Roy Jenkins during his time as Home Secretary. Wilson's own approach to socialism was essentially a moderate one, with an emphasis on increasing opportunities within society, for example through change and expansion within the education system, allied to the technocratic aim of taking better advantage of rapid scientific progress, rather than on the more controversial socialist goal of promoting wider public ownership of industry.

As someone who lived in Sheffield for seven years, I can personally testify to the warm regard citizens of that city still held for the 'white heat' of Wilson's Industrial Revolution, which rejuvenated working class communities and gave them a great sense of both pride and purpose. Wilson took little action to pursue the Labour Party constitution's stated dedication to such nationalisation, though he did not formally disown it. He saw himself as a member of the Labour Party's "soft left", and he reputedly joked about leading a government that was made up mostly of social democrats, comparing himself to a Bolshevik revolutionary presiding over a Tsarist cabinet. That said, there was little to divide him ideologically from the majority of the cabinet. They were, instinctively, One Nation Social Democrats, rooted in the Labour Party, but rooting for the whole country.

James Harold Wilson was born in the teenage years of our nation's most turbulent century. The battles of Gallipoli, Verdun and the Somme raged in the Great War. In the USA – and here Donald Trump might want to take note – Mexico invaded the US State of New Mexico, attacking the city of Columbus, and despite General Pershing's attempt to capture the perpetrator of the raids, one Francisco "Pancho" Villa, he failed. The lesson could not be clearer. Don't make rash promises about domestic policies, unless you can be sure about your foreign policies and affairs. (I'd pause that Mexican wall project if I were Trump, until a bit clearer on Brexit, China and Russia).

Then there are seedlings of stories that were to bud in Wilson's later life. The Easter Uprising was in 1916, and the later crisis of his first period as Prime Minister would see the real birth of 'The Troubles' as they became known in Northern Ireland. It was Wilson who sent the first troops to the Province in 1969: there was little choice. In 1916, Emma Goldman was arrested in the USA for lecturing on birth control. Under Wilson's government, half a century later, we would see family planning and contraception freely available on the NHS. Other progressive social measures, would also include, a little later, a divorce reform act, and the ecologically-minded Clean Air Act in 1968. Wilson ushered in a fairer and more equitable society.

Yet 1916 now seems like an age away. Holst finished his masterpiece, *The Planets*. Arabia was in revolt, and Palestine had no Israel to argue with, yet. Baden Powell founded the Cub Scouts that year. In New Jersey, five children were killed when swimming off the beach – by a Great White Shark that would later inspire Peter Benchley to write *Jaws*, just as Wilson was beginning his second period in office as Prime Minister in 1974.

Harold Wilson entered Parliament in the great landslide Labour win on 1945. He quickly rose through the ranks of the government, becoming Secretary to the Ministry of Works, the Overseas Trade, and later serving as Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1955-61, and Shadow Foreign Secretary from 1961-63. It was the death of Hugh Gaitskell, quite suddenly, that changed Harold's life. And as they say, a week is a long time in politics. Indeed, a day is quite enough at the moment. But you can see how capricious things are when you read the memoirs and diaries from the time.

For example, Tony Benn's diary of 18th January 1963 said 'it looks as though George Brown will succeed (Gaitskell), [but] for a number of reasons he is totally unsuited'. Wilson's name appeared in the frame early on, but as Susan Crosland, the wife of Tony Crosland MP wrote in her memoir, and quoting Herbert Morrison reassuringly, that 'the Labour Party will never elect a leader from the working class' (!). But I rather liked Richard Crossman's diary entry for 8th February 1963: '...with Gaitskell's death, the whole situation was transformed, and overnight I was chucked into a battle to elect Harold Wilson...[but] in view of his reputation for manoeuvring his best campaign was [probably] to have no campaign at all – and to be seen studiously doing nothing with closed eyes, while the party makes up its mind'. It duly did, and Wilson became leader. And eighteen months later, he was Prime Minister.

Historians continue to weigh Wilson's legacy. But what we can already say is that in his years in office Wilson managed a number of difficult political issues with considerable tactical skill, including such potentially divisive issues for his party as the role of public ownership, British membership of the European Community, and the Vietnam War. He had political instinct, and bravery; combined with an earthy humility. And I think his roots in Yorkshire and in Congregationalism played their part.

Like many political ideologies, one can be reasonably sure of parentage, but not of the birth date. But the birth of Christian Socialism in Britain can be dated precisely: April 10th 1848. F. D. Maurice, John Ludlow and Charles Kingsley, three theologians who were already prominent, met to consider a response to the Chartist demonstration that had petitioned in London for political reform. Motivated by a concern for the conditions of 'working men', Maurice, Ludlow and Kingsley produced a series of tracts that were to have a significant impact on the social and ideological landscape of Britain.

Socialists placed on social action and solidarity with the working classes. Initiatives such as the Working Men's College, founded in 1854 to enable adult education, were simply the practical Christian extension of the theological presuppositions that underpinned Christian Socialism. It is these kinds of roots that will have played their part in shaping Wilson's political horizons as well as his spiritual DNA. Ideas on social flourishing, critiques of economics and the forming of political theory, all three of which aspire to shape public life, are often blended in the praxis of government. The key, as always, is for those elected to serve in political office to ensure that individuals and communities are liberated *within* their society, not from it.

As we look forward today – in gratitude for Harold's life and witness, and for his enduring legacy too – I find myself asking how we might recover that gentle, firm, robust, mild, irenic socialism that Harold Wilson stood for and also embodied in his character, speeches and example? It was, as I say, a kind of One Nation Socialism. And despite the testing times we undoubtedly face in the present, I dare to hope. To be sure, part of the difficulty we now have in politics, economics and society is that much of the 'old world order' has vanished, and the shape of the new world order is more liquid than concrete.

With the collapse of Communism, and the shrinking powers and influence of many nation states, many countries now live in more politically post-ideological times. Liberal social democracies – delicate reticulate streams of socialism, capitalism, liberalism and conservatism – abound all over the world, even in the poorest continents. Industrial relations are now more complex than the workers-versus-the-owners' paradigm; politics is more multifaceted than the poor against capitalism.

In short, the situations of the twenty-first century warrant responses that may be more fluid than their forbears, perhaps recognizing the 'liquid' character of late modernity. Under such conditions, there continues to be a need to recognize the rights and dignity of workers; but this may be extrinsically linked to a notion of market sustainability, adaptation in productivity and economic viability within our global market place. It is partly for this reason that we can look back today with such gratitude for the life and legacy of Harold Wilson. Politics is a pragmatic business, and principles can sometimes be dangerous and alienating things; even hostages to fortune. So finding a man of principle, who had a nose for pragmatism, and could hold this together in his very being as a person of integrity, and who believed in the fundamental dignity of all humanity, is a rare thing.

I do think Harold Wilson was such a man. By all accounts he is the Queen's favourite Prime Minister to date – and I put that down to sound judgement on her part, and the irenic, earthy character that Wilson was. And he might yet be remembered as our best post-war Prime Minister to date: socially liberal, culturally progressive, politically wise – he was a cherished 'man of the people'. He embodied some of the very best virtues to be found in our political system: behold a man chosen for high office, who never forgot his roots, and always had the common touch: a true servant-leader in our time.

So we give thanks for Harold Wilson today, in this service marking the centenary of his birth. We give thanks for all his family, also represented here today. We give thanks for Mary, his wife, who cannot be with us today - and yet played such an enormous part in making and sustaining the Harold that we came to so admire and respect as a nation. We give thanks to Huddersfield, and to God, for lending Harold Wilson to our nation. He was a true servant: the People's Prime Minister.

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