

"Thirteen Wasted Years"

Following the defeat in 1951, the party became split over the future direction of socialism. The "Gaitskellite" right of the party led by Hugh Gaitskell and associated with thinkers such as Anthony Crosland wanted the party to adopt a moderate social democratic position whereas the "Bevanite" left led by Aneurin Bevan wanted the party to adopt a more radical socialist position. This split, and the fact that the 1950s saw economic recovery and general public contentment with the Conservative governments of the time, helped keep the party out of power for thirteen years.

After being defeated at the 1955 general election, Attlee resigned as leader and was replaced by Gaitskell. The trade union block vote, which generally voted with the leadership, ensured that the Bevanites were eventually defeated.

In the decade following the Second World War, Labour councils played an important part in the housing reconstruction that followed the end of the conflict, and stood as important players in the reconstruction of housing and city centres. In Newcastle, under the leadership of the visionary but corrupt T. Dan Smith, an accelerated "modernisation" of the city took place, as characterised by an ambitious programme of road construction and public building and the replacement of slum terraces with new innovative estates such as the Byker "wall."

The three key divisive issues that were to split the Labour party in successive decades emerged first during this period; nuclear disarmament, the famous Clause IV of the party's constitution, which called for the ultimate nationalisation of all means of production in the British economy, and Britain's entry into the European Economic Community (EEC). Tensions between the two opposing sides were exacerbated after Attlee resigned as leader in 1955 and Gaitskell defeated Bevan in the leadership election that followed. The party was briefly revived and unified during the Suez Crisis of 1956. The Conservative party was badly damaged by the incident while Labour was rejuvenated by its opposition to the policy of prime minister Anthony Eden. But Eden was replaced by Harold Macmillan, while the economy continued to improve.

In the 1959 election the Conservatives fought under the slogan "Life is better with the Conservatives, don't let Labour ruin it" and the result saw the government majority increase. Following the election bitter internecine disputes resumed. Gaitskell blamed the Left for the defeat and attempted unsuccessfully to amend Clause IV. At a hostile party conference in 1960 he failed to prevent a vote adopting unilateral nuclear disarmament as a party policy, declaring in response that he would "fight, fight and fight again to save the party I love". The decision was reversed the following year, but it remained a divisive issue, and many in the left continued to call for a change of leadership.

When the Conservative government attempted to take Britain into the EEC in 1962, Gaitskell alienated some of his supporters by his opposition to British membership. In a speech to the party conference in October 1962 Gaitskell claimed that EEC membership would mean "the end of Britain as an independent European state. I make no apology for repeating it. It means the end of a thousand years of history".

Labour revisionism turned out to be a powerful ideological tendency within the Party in the 1950s and 1960s, taking intellectual sustenance from Anthony Crosland's book, *The Future of Socialism* (1956) and political leadership from Hugh Gaitskell. Its important intellectuals included Douglas Jay, Roy Jenkins, and the writers who contributed to *Socialist Commentary*. The goal was to reformulate old socialist principles, and bring the Labour Party policies up to date with the changing British society and economy. Revisionism rejected the old view that socialism ought to be primarily identified with the ownership of the means of production. That meant that continuous nationalization was not a central goal. Second, was a series of political values focused on personal liberty, social welfare, and equality. Themes of destroying or overthrowing the rich and elite were downplayed in favor of government policies of taxation, widespread educational opportunity, and expanded social services. Revisionists insisted on me

the necessity of a market-oriented mixed economy with a central role for capitalism and entrepreneurship.

Gaitskell died suddenly in January 1963 from a rare disease. His death made way for Harold Wilson to lead the party. The term "thirteen wasted years" was coined by Wilson as a slogan for the 1964 general election, in reference to what he claimed were thirteen wasted years of Conservative government, but one may well refer to it as thirteen wasted years for the Labour Party.