

# The Wilson Years, Labour government 1964-70:

## A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

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There are many general studies of Labour's term of office from 1964 to 1970, one of the earliest and most sympathetic is from Labour supporter Brian Lapping, *The Labour Government, 1964-70*, (Harmondsworth, 1970). Lapping lists the accomplishments of Labour, which were many, but overshadowed by the economy and industrial relations. Following on was a study from the former Conservative MP, Robert Rhodes James, *Ambitions and Realities: British Politics 1964-70*, (London, 1972), who describes the period as one of stagnation. Interestingly, he does raise the issue of race relations and the muddled response to racism egged on by Enoch Powell. In a series of essays from Labour supporters, criticism is mounted against policies pursued in the economic field in Wilfred Beckerman (ed.), *The Labour government's economic record 1964-70*, (London, 1972). This was not the first series of essays to be edited by a Labour adviser, Tyrell Burgess et al, *Matters of principle: Labour's last chance*, (Harmondsworth, 1968) particularly raises the disaffected supporters concern about education policy and Labour's conservative approach to Commonwealth immigration. From the Labour left perspective David Howell, *British Social Democracy*, (London, 1976), Ch.9, argues that the surrender to economic orthodoxy, the confrontation with the trade unions and the lack of principle in international affairs caused the terminal sickness of the post war social democratic inspiration. This is a theme that Clive Ponting, *Breach of Promise: Labour in Power 1964-1970*, (London, 1989), expands upon in arguably the best study of Labour in office during the 1960s. Ponting was part of the generation whose aspiration and faith in Labour's 'white heat' of change in 1964 was formidable and whose reaction to perceived failure led to a sense of disillusionment. Ponting points to the day to day reaction to events, the government having dropped any rational plan of action. A key factor for Ponting was Labour's dishonourable foreign policy and his study reveals much about secret deals with the United States. The work is groundbreaking in that he was the first of a new generation of commentators to reassess Labour's performance. Although David Walker's essay perhaps takes this prize, 'The First Wilson Governments, 1964-1970' in Peter Hennessy and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *Ruling Performance: British Governments from Attlee to Thatcher*, (Oxford, 1987). Walker argues that in retrospect, looking back from the Thatcher years Wilson can be judged less critically and to use Herbert Morrison's phrase, 'socialism is what a Labour government does'. The Wilson reassessment went into Labour's overall economic performance which is treated favourably in the essays in R.Coopey, S.Fielding and N.Tiratsoo (eds.), *The Wilson Governments, 1964-1970*, (London, 1993). In the age of New Labour the 1960s reappraisal by Lewis Baston, 'The Age of Wilson, 1955-79,' in Brian Brivati and Richard Heffernan (eds.), *The Labour Party: a centenary history*, (2000), 87-111, suggests that the criticism from the Left that commenced with Paul Foot was responsible for maintaining the detrimental attitude to the Labour government.

Almost everyone connected with the 1960s Labour government has contributed memoirs or diaries for public scrutiny. First out of the starting gate was Harold Wilson's, *The Labour Government 1964-70*, (London, 1971), that is a vast and not totally reliable tome. According to Marcia Williams (Falkender) in *Downing Street in perspective*, (London, 1983) it only took him four months to write and was undertaken to clear his bank overdraft. Wilson recalls his efforts at international diplomacy in great depth in contrast to major issues that backfired like 'In Place of Strife' that gets short shrift. Although only written a few months after leaving office, if Wilson's memoir was read in isolation the picture would be much obscured. The 'white heat' of Wilson rhetoric at its best can be found not in his memoir but in a collection of his pre-election speeches, Harold Wilson, *The New Britain: Labour's Plan Outlined by Harold Wilson*, (Harmondsworth, 1964). The 1964-70 government is unique for the historian not only for the Prime Minister's own account but for the richness of the published diaries of three members of the cabinet. Tony Benn, *Out of the Wilderness Diaries 1963-67*, (London, 1988) and *Office without power: Diaries 1968-72*, (London, 1988), Barbara Castle, *The Castle Diaries 1964-70*, (London, 1984) and Richard Crossman's massive *The diaries of a Cabinet Minister: Vol.1, Minister of Housing, 1964-66*, (London, 1975), *Vol.2, Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons, 1966-68*, (London, 1976), and *Vol.3, Secretary of State for Social Services, 1968-70*, (London, 1977). Such is the quality and quantity of these works that Clive Ponting said in *Breach of Promise*, that his principle sources in addition to the information obtained from the United States under the Freedom of Information Act were the three diaries, and he needed no recourse to the Cabinet papers. Roy Jenkins, in his own memoir *A Life in the Centre*, (London, 1991), adds to the praise by describing Barbara Castle as a good witness and an honest diarist. The difference between memoir and diary where selected memory and commentary intervenes is revealed in Castle's own memoir *Fighting all the way*, (London, 1993). The 'Centre' in Jenkins, *Life in the Centre*, could be either the political or his own ego. One thing the historian can confirm from Jenkins' memoir, he absolutely owed no loyalty to Wilson. Although not described as a memoir, the chapter on Wilson in David Marquand's *The Progressive*

*Dilemma*, (London, 1992), has the touch of personal reminiscence. Marquand was at the time a Labour M.P. and an acolyte of Jenkins and therefore not surprisingly blames Wilson, Callaghan and Healy for all that went wrong without any criticism of Jenkins. Interestingly he confirms that the Jenkins camp plotted against Wilson acknowledging that he was one of the plotters!

Many of the other memoirs lack gravitas for various reasons. Some concentrate on the author's own particular role in Government even if they were close to the hub as with Marcia Williams, *Inside Number 10*, (London, 1972). Marcia may have been the socialist conscience of Wilson but she is less revealing about the insider's view of the major controversies. Other major figures like George Brown have their axe to grind in *In My Way*, (London, 1971), in which he fails to examine his own character for his downfall. Little can be gained from Dennis Healy's, *The Time of My Life*, (London, 1989), he takes a detached view of his period of office with six years in limbo as Defence Secretary. Some works are somniferous like Michael Stewart's *Life and Labour: an autobiography*, (London, 1980).

Harold Wilson expectedly has the greater number of biographies attributed to him. The early works can now be discounted as either hagiography such as Leslie Smith, *Harold Wilson: The Authentic Portrait*, (London, 1964), a Conservative diatribe from Dudley Smith in *Harold Wilson: A Critical Biography*, (London, 1964) or scurrilous from Andrew Roth, *Sir Harold Wilson: A Yorkshire Walter Mitty*, (London, 1977). The passage of time has led to a less harsh consideration of Harold Wilson. Beginning with Kenneth O. Morgan's sketch in *Labour People: Leaders and Lieutenants, Hardie to Kinnock*, (Oxford, 1987) and continuing with three serious and substantial biographies ranging from the disappointed leftist school of Austen Morgan, *Harold Wilson*, (London, 1992) to the rehabilitation of Wilson by Ben Pimlott's reassessment of Wilson in *Harold Wilson*, (London, 1992). While Pimlott's work has strength dealing with Labour's internal struggles Philip Ziegler, *Wilson: The Authorised Life of Lord Wilson of Rievaulx*, (London, 1993), provides depth in his coverage of foreign affairs. Of the other senior figures Kenneth O. Morgan has written two on Jim Callaghan, the first a short study in *Labour People* followed by *Callaghan: A Life*, (Oxford, 1997), that are sympathetic to his subject and avoid criticism for his handling of the economy. Of the others, there is one very accessible biography that could almost be in part the unwritten memoir, Susan Crosland's, *Tony Crosland*, (London, 1982).

The catalogue of Marxist critique of Labour's floundering is vast but of the principle studies Paul Foot's *The Politics of Harold Wilson* (Harmondsworth, 1968) was not only one of the first but also had the greatest impact. Foot's work taken in conjunction with the postscript to the second edition of Ralph Miliband's classic *Parliamentary Socialism*, (London, 1972) provide all the Marxist needs to attack Wilson's Labourism. If further reading is required, the Labour left will always fail according to David Coates, *The Labour Party and the Struggle for Socialism*, (Cambridge, 1975), Ch.5 and 7, but the revolutionary left may not, however they were driven from the Labour Party. Some of whom are described by Nick Tiratsoo, 'Labour and its critics: the case of the May Day Manifesto Group', in R. Coopey, S. Fielding and N. Tiratsoo (eds.), *The Wilson Governments, 1964-1970*, (London, 1993). The Socialist Workers Party interpretation of events is found in Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein, *The Labour Party: a Marxist History*, (London, 1988), Ch.13, who argue that Labour were mere pawns in the hands of world bankers with surprisingly no plan to introduce socialism.

Economic historians began to reassess Labour's economic performance before the overall 1960s record was re-examined. One of the earliest was Peter Browning's *The Treasury and economic policy, 1964-1985*, (London, 1986), which is a comprehensive narrative of the economic events of the Wilson government written by a former senior Treasury official combined with individual chapters on the Chancellors of the Exchequer, Jim Callaghan and Roy Jenkins. The importance of Browning's work is that it is one of the earliest to suggest that Labour's economic management in the 1960s was in retrospect a good record but was overshadowed by the balance of payment crises. Labour's economic record has been heavily scrutinised over the years particularly the question of devaluation of sterling. If there had been no balance of payments crises the overall assessment of the Labour government would undoubtedly have been favourable. The predominance of sterling over all other issues is illustrated in Tim Bale, 'Dynamics of a non-decision: the "failure" to devalue the pound, 1964-7', *Twentieth Century British History*, 10(2), (1999), 192-217. Bale's study suggests that in addition to the widely accepted political problem, Wilson resisted devaluation because of the risk to the disruption of the global economy and that he had a macro economic strategy to try first. With the wisdom of hindsight the failure to devalue earlier rather than later was an error but not a mistake according to Nicholas Woodward, 'Labour's economic performance, 1964-70', in R. Coopey, S. Fielding and N. Tiratsoo (eds.), *The Wilson Governments, 1964-1970*, (London, 1993), who suggests that in retrospect the record was creditable. One argument for Wilson's resolve to defend Sterling has been his experience during the Attlee government devaluation of 1947. Alan Shipman, 'Falling with the pound: the Labour

Party's exchange rate problems, 1947-70', *Contemporary Record*, 5(1), (1991), 105-114, contrasts the circumstances and options available between the two events. Interestingly, Shipman argues that the balance of payments crisis was a myth and questions if the problem really existed after a re-examination of the figures. Another cause of devaluation was the position of Sterling as a reserve currency. International speculation on Sterling strained relations between the bankers and Labour an issue that Rob Stones examined in 'Government-finance relations in Britain 1964-7: a tale of three cities,' *Economy and Society*, 19(1), (1990), 32-55. The distinguished economic historian Sir Alec Cairncross has also added his voice to the contemporary reassessment of the Labour government. Cairncross suggests that it was not that bad, in *Managing the British Economy in the 1960's: A Treasury Perspective*, (Basingstoke, 1996). Cairncross praises the government for the innovative taxes, Corporation Tax and Capital Gains Tax, that have survived the test of time. Further detail can be found in the study by R.C. Whiting, 'Ideology and reform in Labour's tax strategy, 1964-1970', *Historical Journal*, 41(4), (1998), 1121-1140. The triumvirate of Wilson, Callaghan and Brown are blamed by Cairncross for muddling the responsibility for policy and holding up devaluation as a sacred cow, a view that was shared by Anthony Crosland. The economic history of the period has been covered before by Cairncross in works like *The British Economy since 1945: Economic Policy and Performance, 1945-1990*, (Oxford, 1992), Ch.4 and A.Cairncross and B.Eichengreen, *Sterling in Decline*, (Oxford, 1983) Ch.5. He places balance of payments at the core of the economic problems of the government and his criticism that the government operated in a ramshackle manner may be a little misplaced for someone who was so closely involved, he was after all chief of the Government Economic Service.

Young Keynesian economists felt let down by the government of Harold Wilson, he had been like many of them an economist in government service. In 1964, the Wilson administration held out so much promise. The contemporary essays in the collection by Wilfred Beckerman (ed.), *The Labour government's Economic record: 1964-1970*, (London, 1972), generally praise the enlightenment of social policy but cannot hide the disappointment at the lack of economic progress and sense of disillusionment felt by most of the essayists who worked to assist Labour during the 1960s including Beckerman who was both the friend and personal economic advisor of Crosland. Andrew Graham's essay *Industrial Policy* highlights Labour's failure in this field and Michael Artis in *Fiscal policy for stabilisation* argues that Labour ended the 'stop-go' policies of the previous Conservative administrations but at the expense of 'go' by its deflationary budgets. Roger Opie in *Economic planning and growth* makes the more fundamental criticism that Labour gave greater priority to tackling the balance of payment crisis at the expense of its big idea, the National Plan. Only Jeremy Hardie suggests a positive note in *Regional Policy* where the government was generally successful. Although Michael Stewart argues in *The distribution of income* that Labour did achieve its aim, but only slightly, of redistributing wealth. Stewart was not just a Labour sympathiser and one of the many economists who were so disappointed by Wilson in the 1960s but a Labour activist and parliamentary candidate. In Chapters 3 and 4 of *The Jekyll and Hyde Years: politics and economic policy since 1964*, (London, 1977), Stewart criticises the lack of priority given to the National Plan as the ultimate cause of both the lack of economic growth and his own disillusionment 'the light that failed'. The story of the Department of Economic Affairs (DEA) that was to be the engine house of the National Plan is told by Christopher Clifford, 'The rise and fall of the Department of Economic Affairs, 1964-69: British government and indicative planning', *Contemporary British History*, 11(2), (1997), 94-116. The growth orientated DEA was created initially with stronger leadership than that of the rival Treasury but the adoption of orthodox policies to tackle the balance of payments problem meant devaluation and ended Britain's attempt at indicative planning and the flagship of Labour's economic policy. The government was a cornucopia of economists from members of the Government, Crosland to Wilson himself and to the advisors like the Hungarian 'twins' Balogh and Kaldor. The story of the intellectually brightest government of the twentieth century has never been assembled in full but recent work like Ilaria Favretto, "'Wilsonism' Reconsidered: Labour Party Revisionism 1952-64," in *Contemporary British History*, 14(4), (2000), 54-80 illustrate the centre-left thinking that created the policies that Wilson stood for in 1964. Andrew Graham's study 'Thomas Balogh' in *Contemporary Record*, 6(1), (1992), 194-207, does much to shed light on the amiable advisor, who deserves a biography of his own, perhaps the most influential voice behind Wilson and who advised that devaluation should be opposed in 1964.

If devaluation dominated the first years of Wilson's administration one issue could be said to dominate the closing years, relations with the trade unions. There are many studies of the antagonism created by 'In Place of Strife'. The relationship between the trade unions and the leadership of the Labour Party was at a watershed in the 1960s and if the choice of studies is limited to one there is no better analysis than that of Lewis Minkin, *The Contentious Alliance*, (Edinburgh, 1991), Ch. 5 and 6. The pay policy of

government was a source of friction but the battle over 'In Place of Strife' not only soured relations but arguably was a cause of Labour's defeat in 1970.

Rather like New Labour's new look ethical foreign policy, Labour in 1964 also held out a fresh liberal morality to foreign policy. What was style and what was substance is the question addressed by Chris Wrigley, in an essay that examines Wilson's domination over foreign policy during the period in 'Now you see it, now you don't: Harold Wilson and Labour's Foreign Policy 1964-70', in R.Coopey, S.Fielding and N.Tiratsoo (eds.), *The Wilson Governments, 1964-1970*, (London, 1993). One of the most important aspects of Britain's foreign policy has been the relationship with the United States. The American political and economic dominance over Britain is a major theme in Clive Ponting's work *Breach of Promise*. In a more recent study, John Dumbrell, 'The Johnson administration and the British Labour government: Vietnam, the pound and east of Suez,' *Journal of American Studies*, 30(2), (1996), 211-231, the argument is rather more succinctly put but in contrast Wilson is seen as fending off the pressure from Washington. But according to Alan P.Dobson, Labour were just not good at relations with the U.S., 'Labour or Conservative: Does it matter in Anglo-American relations?', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 25(4), (1990), 387-407. In contrast Peter Jones, *America and the British Labour Party: The 'special relationship' at work*, (London, 1997), Ch.4. suggests that although Wilson was a confirmed Atlanticist, he overestimated his relationship with Lyndon Johnson. The Vietnam argument is viewed from British government sources in Rolf Steinger, "'The Americans are in a hopeless position": Great Britain and the war in Vietnam, 1964-65', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 8(3), (1997), 237-285. Harold Wilson is revealed as consistent in his belief that the United States could not win in Vietnam and his attempts at negotiation were entirely honourable. Economic reality forced Britain to reassess its global role and withdraw from the Far East is considered in the report of a witness seminar from Peter Catterall (ed.), 'The East of Suez Decision,' *Contemporary Record*, 7(3), (1993), 612-653.