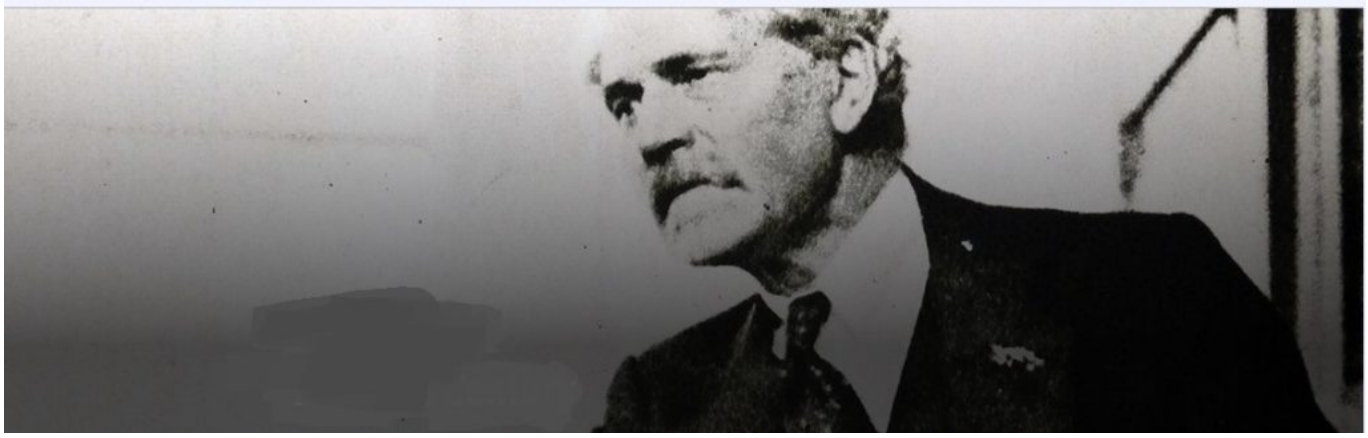
Labour’s Century

By Theodore Dalrymple

The party that once sought to improve life chances in the U.K. now strives mostly to improve the lives of opportunists.

A century ago, on January 22, 1924, a newspaper placard in London announced: “Lenin dead (official). Ramsay MacDonald Premier.” MacDonald was the first leader of the Labour Party and avowed socialist to become prime minister of the United Kingdom. Many in the country feared that a Labour government would impose extreme socialist measures, akin to those of Soviet Russia.



For at least two reasons, these fears proved greatly exaggerated. MacDonald was the head of a minority government, dependent for its survival on support in the House of Commons of the Liberal Party, which would have withdrawn that backing had the government tried to do anything too radical. Further, Labour, though socialist in sensibility, was a coalition of tendencies and not a disciplined party, such as Lenin’s Bolsheviks: it had no iron doctrine that would have enabled it to establish a secular theocracy. True, it had a conspiratorial left wing, such as has plagued the party ever since, impatient for an immediate and complete transformation of society to a socialist one. The party always has been susceptible to infiltration by real Communists, which often

impaired its electability by allowing its opponents to raise the specter of Communism—most recently, when left-wing activists imposed the eternal student revolutionary, Jeremy Corbyn, as leader for a short time. The Labour Party's predominant tendency, however, is reformist, not revolutionary.

MacDonald had come back from the political dead when he was appointed prime minister: unlike many of the other Labour Party leaders, he had opposed Britain's participation in World War I, an unpopular stance that was widely predicted to have ruined his political fortunes. It is intriguing to speculate on what would have happened if he had his wish: Britain would not have dissipated its vast accumulated wealth, but Germany would have become the hegemonic power in Europe.

MacDonald was undoubtedly a remarkable man. Lenin despised him as a mere bourgeois reformist, but to be despised by Lenin was a mark of human decency. MacDonald was born in the Highlands of Scotland in 1866, the illegitimate son of a farm laborer, John MacDonald, and a housemaid, Anne Ramsay. He was registered at birth in the name of James Ramsay. This was later to cause him some grief: the unscrupulous jingoist journalist and promoter of fraudulent companies, Horatio Bottomley, wrote in his popular journal, *John Bull*, that MacDonald had lied about his own name to disguise his illegitimacy. Already accused of cowardice and treason for opposing the war, MacDonald was ignominiously expelled from Moray Golf Club, many years later refusing reinstatement. It is surely a sign of moral progress that an illegitimate child is no longer blamed for his own illegitimacy; whether it is a sign of moral progress that more than half of the children now born are illegitimate is another matter.

MacDonald's rise to prominence was arduous. He left school at 15, became first a farmworker and then a pupil teacher of younger children, and moved to Bristol and then to London, where he aimed at a scientific career, never achieving a

degree, and involved himself deeply in the nascent socialist movement. He married Margaret Gladstone, a socialist interested in social reform and the daughter of an academic chemist; their marriage was happy, and she bore him six children, one of whom became the last colonial governor of Kenya. She died in 1911; grief-stricken, MacDonald never remarried. Distinguished-looking, well-read, and cultivated, he had no difficulty in integrating into high society, one of his closest friends becoming the Countess of Londonderry. This did not endear him to fellow socialists.

His cabinet had many estimable men in it, some with harder beginnings even than his own. Permit me to describe a few of them. Arthur Henderson, for example, who became Home Secretary, was the illegitimate son, born in Glasgow, of a domestic servant and a father who died when he was ten. He went to work in an iron foundry at 12 and then became both a union leader and a Methodist preacher. In 1934, he received the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts at the Geneva Disarmament Conference in 1932. Well-mannered and imperturbable, he was known as Uncle Arthur.

John Wheatley was born in Ireland, but his family moved to Scotland when he was seven. As a child, he worked in a coal mine, and he would be a miner until he was 24. Always a strong Catholic, he also pushed to better himself educationally. After a period working as a reporter for the *Glasgow Catholic Observer*, he started a successful printing and publishing company, writing many of its releases himself, with titles such as *Miners, Mines and Misery*, thereby becoming prosperous. As MacDonald's Minister of Health, he was esteemed as a powerful and humorous speaker, with an excellent grasp of facts, untainted by bitterness.

Philip Snowden, MacDonald's Chancellor of the Exchequer, was the son of weavers. His parents, politically radical, were religious Methodists, as Snowden remained. Having received extra lessons in Latin and French at his local school in

Yorkshire, he became, like MacDonald, a pupil teacher. He then worked as a clerk, first for an insurance company and then in the civil service. At 27, he suffered a bicycling accident that paralyzed him from the waist down, and though he learned to walk again (with sticks), he suffered the painful effects of the accident for the rest of his life. A Christian socialist, he was fiscally conservative, firmly believing in balanced budgets and eager to cut taxes. A man of acerbic wit and private charm, he once expressed the wish that his tombstone should say, “He worked for the poor.”

William Adamson, the son of a Scottish coal miner, left school at 11 to become a miner himself; he worked as such for 25 years. He rose in the Labour Party through the National Union of Miners and was de facto leader of the party until 1921. Under MacDonald, he became secretary of state for Scotland.

James Henry (“Jimmy”) Thomas was born the illegitimate son of a Welsh domestic servant and raised in great poverty by his grandmother, a widowed washerwoman. At nine, he worked as an errand boy, and then as a railway man. He, too, rose in the Labour Party via his trade union (he had led a successful national railway strike), and in the first Labour government served as secretary of state for the colonies, which then covered quite a proportion of the earth’s surface. He was a genial man, much liked by the king, George V, and known for his dandyism. His son became a Conservative member of parliament.

J. R. Clynes, whom MacDonald defeated for the party leadership, was the son of an Irish worker. He toiled, at ten, in a cotton mill, but attended classes after work and was an assiduous reader, later surprising everyone with his effortless quotations from Shakespeare, Milton, and the Bible. Also rising through union activity, he joined Parliament in 1906, at 37. He was a member of MacDonald’s first cabinet, though without specific ministerial responsibility. He died in the month of my birth, at 80, in near-poverty—something almost

inconceivable in a politician today. A Congregationalist, he once said that Labour Party policy was based on the Sermon on the Mount.

It is remarkable that so many men of humble origin rose to be members of the government of what remained a great power. Their successful, though doubtless painful, struggle to better themselves educationally is worthy of the highest respect and admiration. Whatever their successes or failures, they were clearly idealists, with a genuine desire to alleviate the condition of the class from which they came.

I think it is impossible not to find their stories moving. And however one may reject the theory of socialism in the abstract, it is not surprising, or reprehensible, that men with life experiences such as theirs thought that a different system of economic organization from the one that they had known in their childhood was possible, desirable, and better from every point of view. Even in 1924, conditions were deplorable for factory workers, foundry workers, and miners. Hours were long, pay was low, and accidents frequent. Social security was niggardly (the age of the state pension, first introduced 18 years earlier, was set at 70, so that few people would ever receive it). It might have been true that standards of living had improved, compared with the second half of the nineteenth century, but to expect people to find such a reflection satisfying would be like expecting hungry people to refuse potatoes because they are fattening. Present dissatisfactions are always stronger in the mind than past progress.

But if these men were admirable, it is also worth considering the virtues of the society in which they succeeded, and did so without the resentment so prevalent today. It was a class-ridden society, of course, likely more than any society today. And there were snobs even among the socialists—Beatrice Webb, for example—who were themselves upper class.

But a class society is not necessarily rigid, and if the means by which people try to rise within it reflect its values, one might say that the values of late Victorian or Edwardian society were themselves admirable, at least partly. Evidently, that society had managed to impart a respect and thirst for high culture and intellect even in its lowly members, who also saw in it a path to ascension. Moreover, the aspirants did not conceive of that ascent in purely personal or selfish terms; on the contrary, they aspired on behalf of a whole class, or for society as a whole. They wanted to bring civilization to the masses.

The response of the king, George V, to the first Labour government was surprisingly correct, generous, and eventually even cordial. He naturally detested and feared anything that smacked of socialism: the Bolsheviks had slaughtered his first cousin, Tsar Nicholas II, and his entire family. (George felt guilty that he had refused asylum to Nicholas, with whom he had hitherto enjoyed close friendship, though he could not have foreseen his fate.) But George decided on fair play and, in turn, won over those who might otherwise have been hostile to him. For example, he recognized that the members of the new government were not wealthy and could not afford the elaborate court costume then de rigueur when visiting the monarch (the salaries of politicians in those days were meager). He even came to appreciate the bawdy jokes of Jimmy Thomas; and when MacDonald went to see him after the fall of the government, George V said, “You have found me a simple man, I hope.”

The first Labour government lasted only from January to November 1924 and is generally thought not to have achieved much, though it introduced a home-building program that, in a few years, put up half a million houses. Still, it established Labour as one of the great parties of the two-party system, in place of the Liberals, and in 1945, soon after World War II, it won a landslide victory. This government, under Prime Minister Clement Attlee, was formidable enough to return to

the party's socialist ambitions: it nationalized about 20 percent of the British economy, greatly extended the welfare state, and founded the National Health Service (NHS). Even now, opinions vary as to whether this was a great triumph for common human decency or the original cause of the country's subsequent chronic difficulties and failure to compete in world markets. The workshop of the world seems to have become the workshy of the world, with exceptional levels of nonparticipation in the economy.

The creation of the NHS, the feather in the Labour Party's cap, was, at the very least, a propaganda triumph that only now is beginning to be questioned. Yes, the health of the population improved greatly after its establishment, but not at a faster rate than before its establishment, and slower than in most Western European countries. In 1948, life expectancy in France was five years lower than in Britain; in 2023, it was 1.5 years higher. While life expectancy is determined by far more than the health-care system, this difference hardly suggests a great triumph of the NHS. The difference with Spain's progress, even under Franco, was more marked still. The NHS lacked an egalitarian effect even within the country—the gap between the health of the richest and poorest widened under it, and from the outset. Again, causation in these matters is hard to prove: that something happened after something else does not prove that it happened because of that something else. Nevertheless, the triumphalist narrative and mythology of the NHS, which became universally fixed in the British mind, prevented any real reflection on its workings and stymied efforts at fundamental reform until it has become both vitally necessary and virtually impossible.

Here historiography played an important role. The general belief became embedded that, pre-NHS, no health care to speak of was available in Britain; yet at the time of the NHS's founding, people generally accepted that health care in the country was among the best available in Western Europe. The

problem (or the advantage) was that it was hardly a system at all, with an unstable and illogical mixture of voluntary, charitable, philanthropic, local, and national governmental contributions. But after the Soviet triumph in World War II, central planning of everything had an allure, especially for tidy-minded rationalists. Douglas Jay, one of Attlee's ministers, famously declared that the man from Whitehall (where the central government is sited) really did know better than the general population. Besides, many predicted that, with universal health care free to all at the point of use, the British population's health would so much improve that the cost of such service would fall, for everyone would now be healthy. As a prediction, that proved far wide of the mark, and Britain found itself saddled with a system from which it now cannot extricate itself.

The next Labour government, under Harold Wilson, was, in some sense, a transition from Attlee to Tony Blair. Its economic room for maneuver was severely limited by the chronic weakness of the British economy. Faced with inflation, it favored wage and price controls, with predictable effects; it also favored union power (the Labour Party then depending financially on the unions). Not surprisingly, this obstructed economic efficiency, as unions sought to further the interests of their members at the expense of everyone else: all in the name of justice.

This government, though, also concentrated on social reforms, some necessary (the decriminalization of homosexuality between consenting adults, say) but some with long-term adverse effects, anticipated or not. By greatly liberalizing divorce laws, for example, and instituting no-fault divorce, the government emptied marriage of much of its meaning and made whim the measure of all relationships, with the result that, nearly 60 years later, it is increasingly uncommon for a British child to live in a household with its two biological parents. This leads to problems requiring ever greater public

intervention—and while government dependency may be bad for people, it is good for government.

No Conservative government, including that of Margaret Thatcher, has ever reduced the role of the state in British life after a Labour government has increased it. At most, it has changed the role, and not always for the better. Thatcher, for example, for whom I have a high personal regard, in effect legalized—and institutionalized—corruption in the country, albeit of a special kind. She meant to do no such thing, but when she told the managers of the public services that they should be *businesslike*, they concluded that they should be *businessmen*, leading to the formation of large apparatchik and nomenklatura classes, with massive looting of the public purse. The "businesses" they ran were all dividends (for them) and no profits (for the public).

This was a system that Blair inherited and greatly expanded, behind a smoke screen of benevolence, modernization, and efficiency. Whether he did so with any conscious intention, I cannot say; but the conferral of newfound rights on the population, ever-greater regulation (supposedly for the public good), and the duty of public services to prove their efficiency swelled bureaucracies and blurred the difference between public and private (by, among other things, the government employment of consultants). Before long, the salaries of those directing public entities exploded upward. Vice chancellors of public universities, for instance, who had always been well paid, now gave themselves salaries that most genuine businessmen would envy. You had to pay the most to get the best people, they argued—but no market existed to establish who was truly the best, only a cartel with a definite class-consciousness. The nomenklatura class soon realized on what side its bread was buttered. Under Blair, the chief executive of my hospital was heard to say, "My job is to make sure the government is reelected."

Not that she had anything to fear from election defeat. A

nomenklatura class is easy to create but difficult to destroy, even if the will to do it is there, which it was not. Indeed, there was a scramble by the Conservative Party, true to its tradition of absence of courage or principle, to get on board. It was, after all, the means by which ambitious nonentities and mediocrities could prosper mightily.

One hundred years on, all that remains of the Labour Party's social purpose are occasional outbursts of rhetoric, dishonest and insincere, unlike that of MacDonald, Wheatley, Snowden, et al. The object is not to improve anybody's life chances but to improve the life of chancers—British English for opportunists who are always looking for dubious schemes to advance their interests or feather their nests. The human mind being so marvelously subtle an instrument, they may not even realize that this is what they are doing.

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