Harold Wilson: The Unprincipled Prime Minister?

Review Number: 2078

Publish date: Thursday, 9 March, 2017

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ISBN: 9781785900310

Date of Publication: 2016

Price: £16.59

Pages: 352pp.

Publisher: Biteback Publishing

Publisher url: <https://www.bitebackpublishing.com/books/harold-wilson>

Place of Publication: London

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Harold Wilson occupies a strange place in the pantheon of 20th-century prime ministers. Statistically he is one of the greats: he won four out of the five elections he contested; his eight years in Number 10 are beaten only by Churchill and Thatcher in the 20th century; he was the first politician since Gladstone to be Prime Minister four times, and the only post-war PM other than Churchill to be returned to Downing Street after losing an election; finally, he was the first occupant of No.10 in the 20th century to increase his majority at successive elections. And yet despite this litany of achievements, Wilson never troubles the upper reaches of polls ranking the British premiers' of the 20th century. His placement in a BBC poll conducted in 1999 to mark the millennium saw him placed tenth out of 19: a mid-table placing that largely sums up his reputation: by no means one of the poorer holders of the office, yet never in danger of troubling Churchill, Attlee or Lloyd-George at the top of the list. As Dennis Kavanagh puts it, 'I fear that an exercise in reputation retrieval for Harold Wilson is still something of a losing battle'. When he retired in 1976, 'Wilson's reputation was also at a low point and in the forty years since, it has not risen' (pp. 39–40).

Why has history treated Wilson so unkindly? This current collection of essays, issued in the centenary of Wilson's birth, is intended to conduct a reappraisal of Wilson's reputation. It is divided into three sections: themes, policies, and perspectives, with the section on policies taking up the lion's share of the book. The contributors include political historians as well as past and present MPs. As well as the expected sections on Wilson's economic, industrial and foreign policy, the book also addresses some neglected areas of Wilson's premierships; Kevin Jeffreys pens an essay on sport policy, while Catherine McGlynn and Shaun McDaid co-write an essay on Northern Ireland. In this review I will be concentrating on the main themes of Wilson's era as PM - economics, politics, and social policy - on the grounds that a) to survey and assess everything covered in this book would produce a bloated and indigestible review, and b) Wilson's reputation will ultimately be judged on these themes: his achievement in the creating the Sports Council will not, I fear, incline many to overlook some of his failings in the spheres of economy or industrial relations. I have also tended to ignore the Wilson administration of 1974–6; as indeed do many of the contributors to this book, thus concentrating on the 1964–70 period.

Occam's Razor has it that the simplest explanation is the most likely. Wilson's historical stock then, is fairly

low because he simply wasn't a very good PM. As Kavanagh notes, Wilson's period in government was one of the most diarised in modern British political history, and the picture that generally emerged from these productions was of a somewhat devious individual, 'a Prime Minister associated with tactical manoeuvres, lack of strategy, and short-termism' (p. 39). Wilson is generally seen as a trimmer; a man with no long term vision, who was seen as 'duplicitous and inconsistent as he frequently positioned with different sides in different policy debates' (p. 3). Moreover, his paranoia increased over the years, particularly where the press was concerned – although on more than one occasion he was undoubtedly plotted against by his colleagues, moreoften than not he saw conspiracies that simply weren't there.

Yet simple explanations rarely suffice in historiography, and paradoxes soon begin to emerge. For instance, Wilson's chameleon-esque tendencies were also one of his key strengths – particularly his 'ability to appeal to all shades of opinion and make people think that he was one of them' (p. 23). In public, Wilson professed to smoke a pipe and drink beer; in private he smoked cigars and drank spirits, and when his popularity dropped this 'fed the claim that he was more style than substance' (p. 23). Yet his publicly projected image of being 'a kindly, informal man, with not too many airs and graces, had such purchase because it was largely true' (p. 23). He was a moderniser, but also a traditionalist: while on important levels, Wilson 'represented Labour's attachment to and accommodation of modernity at its most powerful, he simultaneously exemplified crucial ways in which the party failed to modernise sufficiently, or keep pace with the social changes of the time' (p. 24).

Historians of the left have come down particularly hard on Wilson, with many arguing that he was never really a socialist (a charge that goes all the way back to his accepting a position in the Shadow Cabinet in 1955). Paul Foot argued that Wilson was 'always an unprincipled opportunist and the left were naive for believing otherwise' (p. 14). Others like Ralph Miliband made the case that as long as the Labour Party remained committed to the Parliamentary system, it could not be a vehicle for socialism, as the parliamentary system meant that 'there was a need to converge on the centre ground in order to maximise votes' – Labour would always be hamstrung by the need appear 'respectable', with 'respectability defined by the norms imposed by socialism's opponents' (p. 15). In his essay on *Wilson and British Socialism*, Kevin Hickson argues that Wilson was at heart a socialist: more specifically, that there was such a thing as British socialism, and that Wilson had a firm grasp of it. While Wilson was a socialist, he was also a centrist, and sought to balance the 'left and right tendencies. This is important in this context since Wilson represents the most paradigmatic centrist in Labour Party terms since 1945' (p. 7). Nonetheless, Wilson was more principled than he has often been portrayed, and those principles were socialist 'in that they sought to use the power of the state to create a more just and tranquil society' (p. 18).

Turning to Wilson's record in Government, an irony of Wilson's first two periods as Prime Minister is that, given that his government has largely been excoriated for its failures in economic policy, he is the only professional economist ever to become PM. Assessments of the Wilson government's economic policies though, generally tend to be fitted into what we might term a right-wing 'declinist' narrative – specifically, that after the Second World War the British economy struggled until Mrs Thatcher came along and turned it all around. As Jim Tomlinson points out in his piece, this narrative has 'distorted our understanding of much of post-war British economic history and policy' (p. 109). Nonetheless, as Kenneth O Morgan notes, 'economic planning, supposedly Wilson's strength, was never properly worked out' (p. 304).

One of the key turning points (or lack thereof) in the Wilson era was the decision not to devalue the pound upon reaching office in 1964. Anthony Crosland, among others, argued that the socialist case for higher growth 'had been sacrificed at the high altar of protecting the parity of sterling' (p. 16). Failure to devalue in 1964 saw the government sacrifice in vain its 'mandate to end the 'stop-go' cycles of economic management' (p. 47). However, several essays in the book make the point that such a view is somewhat simplistic. To begin with, there was widespread support for Wilson's decision at the time, 'not least in Whitehall' (p. 48). Devaluation in 1964 may well have improved the trade balance (as it did in 1967), but the political cost would have been high, as devaluation tends to bring a 'substantial blow to working class living standards' (p. 102). Revisionist hindsight with regards to devaluation also tends to ignore the practical

constraints that Wilson was under in 1964: he had a slim majority, a party split on the issue, and furthermore he was under pressure from the Americans not to devalue. Although it is fair to say that early devaluation could have prevented some of the economic problems that beset the 1960s Wilson governments, 'addressing the problems of the international role of sterling and overseas government spending was bound to be constrained by the political complexity surrounding any solutions, which had defeated previous post-war governments' (p. 110). That said, the impact of the devaluation crisis undoubtedly hamstrung the rest of Labour's spell in power in the 1960s.

The previously alluded to output of diaries with regards to the Wilson era tends to lay the stress on the day to day battles that ministers engaged in over economic issues; as a result the liberalisation of Britain that occurred under Wilson has been overlooked in many accounts of his governments. Jeremy Nuttall notes that if we take a more *long duree* view, then a different picture of the Wilson era emerges: from a 'long historical view, the most significant and distinctive feature seems less the fluctuating economic crises and policies, the desperate attempts to secure growth, stabilise the pound, or increase real wages ... and more the underlying social, educational, and moral changes of the time' (p. 28). For Nuttall, it is strongly arguable that 'taken collectively, virtually no other Prime Minister has presided over such an intense and wide-ranging programme of reform in these areas' (p. 28).

Of course, social reforms are always a double-edged sword; the legislation that Wilson's governments passed in the 1960s 'liberated millions of people from repressive prejudice and puritan intolerance', but have also been decried as unleashing 'an era of licentious behaviour and moral depravity' (p. 165). Under Wilson's governments, homosexuality and abortion were legalised, the death penalty was abolished, as was theatre censorship, while divorce law was reformed.⁽¹⁾ Wilson's attitudes to these reforms were often ambivalent ⁽²⁾; more than one commentator has suggested that he allowed the Sexual Offences (No. 2) Bill to go through for tactical reasons; although he found homosexuality personally distasteful, he allowed the bill to reach the statute book on the grounds that he wanted the matter 'resolved swiftly, lest it cause Labour problems near the next general election' (p. 170).

That said, had Wilson been genuinely opposed to reform on these issues, he surely would not have appointed Roy Jenkins as Home Secretary in 1965. As Andrew Holden put it in a recent work, Wilson's appointment of Jenkins implied a 'willing acceptance of what was to come', given that Jenkins' views on social reform were well known (p. 176). In Jenkins' own memoirs, he recalled that Wilson's response to his outline of what he had in mind when he was appointed Home Secretary was 'enthusiastic' (p. 176.) As a proponent of social egalitarianism, Wilson was generally opposed to 'discrimination and the unjust treatment of disadvantaged sections of society', and it was this inclination that probably led him to acquiesce to the reforms put forward by Jenkins (p. 182).

Turning to industrial policy; when Wilson launched the 1964 general election campaign at the annual meeting of the TUC, he invited the trade unions to participate in a 'great adventure'; he wanted to 'harness the goodwill and participation of the trade unions in what he saw as his social-democratic project' (p. 126). As Robert Taylor puts it in his essay on Wilson and industrial relations, Wilson wanted to convince the trade unions to 'shoulder responsibilities in restraining the material appetites of their own members for their own long term good' (p. 126). The problem was however, that the unions were not particularly interested in being social partners or instruments of government. Trade unions represented the sectional interests of their members; said members saw their unions as 'guardians for what they regarded as limited, piecemeal objectives in a competitive labour market' (p. 127). What is slightly puzzling about Wilson's attempts to reform industrial relations, which culminated in the *In Place of Strife* White Paper, is that he abandoned his trademark pragmatism and went out on a limb. Wilson's hawkishness over the issue 'plunged the government into a prolonged and needless crisis that turned into arguably one of the most serious in the Labour Party's history' (p. 117). It is perhaps to Wilson's credit that he stood by Barbara Castle when her sacking would have allowed the unions to blame the crisis on her and let him off the hook. By steadfastly backing her though, he turned the issue into a test of his own personal prestige. Eventually Wilson was forced to climb down by the Cabinet; agreement was reached with the TUC over how to handle unofficial

disputes, but it represented a humiliating defeat for Wilson, and Castle's political career never recovered.

Wilson's foreign policy can be effectively summed up in two words – Vietnam and Rhodesia. Arguably Wilson's greatest foreign policy achievement was managing to keep British troops out of Vietnam. Wilson's 1964–70 governments were highly dependent on the United States in terms of keeping the British economy propped up – as we have seen, in 1964 the Americans put pressure on Wilson not to devalue the pound due to fears that as a consequence they would have to devalue the dollar (p. 264). In the summer of 1965, the US provided a rescue package for the pound, which had come under pressure due to shrinking exchange reserves. The quid pro quo was clearly British support for America's commitments in Vietnam; as Rhiannon Vickers sums up, 'the US Administration and President Johnson repeatedly demanded that Wilson commit troops to the Vietnam War, but he steadfastly refused to do so' (p. 266). Wilson was caught between a rock and a hard place over Vietnam: failure to condemn the American action in the country alienated many back-benchers, and Wilson was plagued by anti-Vietnam demonstrations in 1967 and 1968. Yet to have done so would be to, as he put it to Frank Cousins, 'kick our creditors in the balls'.⁽³⁾ Wilson had to walk a tightrope on the issue of Vietnam, and he did it remarkably well; in light of the relationship between Tony Blair and George W. Bush, the contemporary accusation that Wilson was little more than Johnson's poodle seem way off the mark.

Wilson's efforts to deal with the problem of Rhodesia – which oddly occupy only a page or so of Vickers' survey – were somewhat less successful. When Ian Smith issued a unilateral declaration of independence in 1965 in response to British pressure to end the apartheid regime, Wilson imposed sanctions. However, said sanctions were ineffective, and Wilson's boast that the collapse of the Smith regime would be a matter of 'weeks rather than months' quickly came back to bite him. Nothing much came of Wilson's two efforts at Churchillian summitry in order to resolve the problem of Rhodesia – on HMS Tiger in December 1966 and on HMS Fearless in October 1968 – and many colleagues wondered why he was putting so much effort into something which seemed palpably unlikely to succeed. Arguably any British PM would have struggled to deal with the problem – the Tories were split over the issue during the same period – but Wilson's high-profile failure to do so contributed to the view that, by the end of 1968, he was little more than a liability.

In the end, although this book may not persuade too many that Wilson's historiographical standing ought to improve, it does provide a more detailed and context as to *why* Wilson's governments are generally seen as failures. Commenting on the failure of Wilson's attempts to reform industrial policy, Taylor remarks that although the failure of *In Place of Strife* was 'a national tragedy', the trade unions 'were always prisoners of their own past and it would be wrong to criticise ... at the time they [the union leaders] could not have done [i.e. acted] otherwise' (p. 128). This seems to suggest that failure was inevitable; while few historians would perhaps go this far, it would be nonetheless fair to say that the Wilson governments operated within a set of practical circumstances that didn't leave them with much room for manoeuvre. In the sphere of foreign policy, they had to deal with the reality of British decline, while the outgoing Conservative administration bequeathed a balance of payments deficit of £800 million. Theodore Dalrymple sums up Wilson as 'almost a tragic figure, decent by the low standards of contemporary politicians, a man who wrestled with indifferent success with intractable economic problems and who may, contrary to his wishes, have exacerbated social ones' (p. 302). As an attempt to rehabilitate Wilson, this collection might be considered a failure; but it does leave us with a more sympathetic portrait of him than some readers will have started with.

Notes

1. It should be noted though, that homosexuality was still thought of as something akin to a disease; Roy Jenkins referred to it as a 'disability' in one of the Parliamentary debates.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. He was however, an enthusiastic advocate of the abolition of the death penalty.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Philip Ziegler, *Wilson: The Authorised Life* (London, 1993), pp. 228–9.[Back to \(3\)](#)

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