

Former Tory Prime Minister Edward Heath dies

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The death of former British Prime Minister Edward Heath at 89 years of age on July 17 has been the occasion for a wave of nostalgia on the part of the media. He held the premiership from 1970 to 1974. After this brief spell in Number 10, he spent the rest of his long political career denouncing his successor Margaret Thatcher from the back benches.

Heath is now seen in a more favourable light than at the height of his career. By comparison with Thatcher and Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, Heath has come to be seen as a better man and a more principled politician. His fall from power in 1974 is regarded as unlucky, even tragic. According to this view, it was a fate he did not deserve. The conflicts of the time have been forgotten as this embittered old man has been apotheosised into an elder statesman.

Labour's Tony Benn recalled that at the time of the Iraq invasion, Heath rang him and demanded to know, "How are we going to get rid of Blair?" They had earlier flown out to Iraq in an attempt to mediate.

Benn and Heath feared that Britain was being drawn into a war that threatened the country's national interests by making it a satellite of the United States. It was, they knew, a war that would seriously destabilise international relations and put an intolerable strain on domestic political relations.

In both respects they have been proved right. Heath and Benn represent a body of historic experience in the British political class. Between them, they have more political experience than Blair and all his cabinet. Individually, they are more considerable politicians than Blair. What at another time would have been a decisive intervention by two elder statesmen became instead a futile expedition by two elderly parliamentarians who were made to look ridiculous.

Their failure to avert the war or to keep the UK out of it was not due to their personal weaknesses, but reflects the profound decline that has taken place in UK political life. Their words of warning had no impact on Blair, who lacked the depth of political vision to understand what he was being told. He could not see the dangers that they understood very well.

By the time Heath could play the role of an elder British statesman, there was no stage left on which to play it. The entire framework of national politics in which he had been trained and worked had been fundamentally undermined. His warnings found no resonance in a younger generation of politicians for whom the social relations that had formed Heath and the political considerations that flowed from them were like relics of a former age.

This is not to say that Heath was simply a victim of changing times. He played his part in making those changes whose results he came to deplore. It is easy to forget that his premiership was one of the stormiest periods in recent British history. No less than five states of

emergency were declared. Unarmed civilians were shot down in Northern Ireland. Workers' leaders were imprisoned. Industry was reduced to a three-day week. Power cuts became routine. Unemployment rose to what were then unprecedented levels. Class conflict reached such a peak that Britain was on the brink of a revolutionary situation by the time Heath was brought down by a massive strike wave in 1974. It was only the return of a Labour government that averted the breakdown of parliamentary rule.

Heath's record is inevitably coloured by the fact that while he failed to defeat the miners in 1974, Thatcher succeeded some 10 years later. But Thatcher's victory was a decade in the preparation and depended on the lessons that the ruling class learnt from this earlier experience. Nor was Thatcher dealing with the same kind of opponent. By the time she came to confront the miners, the Trades Union Congress had reneged on any pretence of defending their members' interests or any commitment to solidarity between one section of the working class and another.

Thatcher had the luxury of dealing with the miners in isolation. Heath had to confront a succession of strikes by a mobilised and militant working class whose leaders were not able to isolate the miners as they did in 1985.

This is not to say that they did not try. Heath's biographer John Campbell points out that when he came to power, Heath had every expectation that the trade union leaders would back his bill to curb the right to strike. They had assured him in private that they welcomed the Industrial Relations Bill, although they could not say so in public. Ray Gunther, a Labour minister of labour, was favourable and offered Heath private advice on the anti-union measures. Labour had attempted to introduce similar legislation in the previous administration.

At every point, the trade union leaders showed themselves willing to compromise, but they could not contain the anger of the working class. In January 1972, 120,000 union members marched through London against the Industrial Relations Act in the largest union demonstration in British history. A series of one-day strikes followed, and unions refused to register under the Act despite legal penalties.

Ultimately, it was the Labour Party leaders who were to clear the way for a decisive defeat of one of the most militant sections of the working class.

Heath came to power on a right-wing agenda that had been defined at a strategy meeting at Selsdon Park in January 1970. It was Labour leader Harold Wilson who coined the phrase "Selsdon Man" for the new Tory aspirant to the post of prime minister and his programme. The *Economist* noted the change and commented that the Tories now "looked like the next government all right—but not a visibly

compassionate one.”

While Selsdon has been read as a decisive break with the past and a move towards the monetarist policies that were later to be associated with Thatcher, the shift was not as complete as it seemed. In many respects, Heath valued the post-war politics of consensus.

When unemployment rose to 1 million, a figure unknown since the Great Depression, Heath and his ministers panicked. Political experience warned them that unemployment on that scale threatened social upheavals, the destabilisation of parliamentary rule and even revolution. By 1972, Heath had returned to Keynesian measures in an attempt to boost the economy and avert an open class conflict. For Thatcher, who was increasingly drawn to the monetarist doctrines preached by Enoch Powell, this was treachery.

The other great issue that came to distinguish Thatcher and Heath was Europe. It was the Tory Prime Minister Harold Macmillan who first attempted to take Britain into the European Community (EC). He chose Heath as his emissary and it was a policy to which Heath remained committed for the rest of his career. He finally succeeded in winning entry in 1973.

Heath was unusual among UK prime ministers in his enthusiasm for Europe and his indifference to Britain’s “special relationship” with the US. But ever since Macmillan, successive governments had pursued the goal of membership in the European Community. It became an economic necessity as Europe recovered from the devastation of the war and became a major market for British industry.

Without its empire, Britain could not maintain a positive balance of trade and needed Europe as it had never done in the past. The decision not to join immediately after the war proved to be costly, as Britain was forced to accept extremely unfavourable terms that continue to poison the relationship between Britain and France today.

To the extent that EC membership threw Britain an economic lifeline, it was at the cost of hundreds of thousands of jobs, as industry was restructured to compete in Europe. Cheap labour and relaxed employment laws gave the UK a temporary advantage in relation to its European competitors.

The economic recovery of which Thatcher boasted and Blair now enjoys was brought about by the inward investment of US and Asian companies that saw Britain as the ideal assembly platform for the European market.

Thatcher always characterised herself in contrast to Heath. In fact, they were very similar in social origin and political orientation. Both came from a lower-middle-class background and won their way to Oxford from grammar schools, rather than the public schools that normally trained the political elite. They represented a distinct change in the post-war period, as the Tory party attempted to broaden its social base and promote the image of a modern, capitalist party, rather than one rooted in the shires.

Heath was the first Tory leader to be elected as party head, rather than emerge from a mysterious process of selection by the circle of aristocratic grandees. He was the first Tory leader since Churchill who had no independent means, and the first Tory prime minister since Bonar Law in 1922 without his own country house.

The rapid promotion of this group of new Tories within the party reflected dissatisfaction with the retreat that post-war Conservative governments had been forced to make from empire and in relation to the working class at home, where they had been obliged to accept the creation of the welfare state and the nationalisation of large sections of industry. Abroad, they had lost India, had been humiliated at Suez, and had been obliged to offer Africa independence. By developing a

new leadership that had no affiliations with the old aristocracy, it was hoped that the party could go on the offensive.

If Heath failed in this agenda, it was not for want of trying. In retrospect, much has been made of his personal shortcomings—his refusal to marry, his awkwardness in public, his coldness and his rudeness—but his political failure cannot be attributed to these personal characteristics. Many politicians, Thatcher among them, have lacked charm. But Thatcher succeeded because she and her supporters had learned the lessons of Heath’s failure.

Blair can rightly be seen as the heir of this warring couple. No previous Labour leader has ever enjoyed such freedom of action. He was able to transform the Labour Party and launch his government on a right-wing trajectory more easily due to the protracted degeneration of the labour movement, as the bureaucratic clique at its head sought to accommodate itself more directly to the economic imperatives heralded by Thatcher.

An appraisal of Edward Heath, therefore, necessarily takes on the form of an obituary of a political and social formation, although, strangely, not one to which he belonged. While the Tories learned the lessons of Heath’s failure, the working class did not.

The period of Heath’s government was the high point of the traditional labour movement and the bringing down of that government represented its greatest success. But it was its last hurrah. The year 1974 marked the end not only of Heath’s political hopes, but, more significantly, the end of a protracted historical period in which the trade unions and the Labour Party had seemed to represent the immediate, practical interests of the working class.

In 1974, the British working class brought down a government. The situation had the character of a revolutionary crisis. It was one, however, whose revolutionary potential was better understood by the ruling elite than by the working class.

For four days Heath hung on in Number 10, trying to construct a coalition while the threat that military force might be used was very real. The crisis was averted when, with the blessings of the trade union leaders, Labour was returned to power.

After another five years in which Labour drove wages down and unemployment rose to levels that Heath would have thought politically unsustainable, the working class was disillusioned and divided. Better-off sections of workers were attracted by Thatcher’s call to popular capitalism. The unions were unwilling to risk finding themselves at the head of another movement like that in 1974 and refused to oppose Thatcher’s anti-union legislation or countenance solidarity action. The Labour government had weakened the sense of class solidarity that for Heath had been an insurmountable barrier to the success of his programme.

No frontal assault by a Tory government could have done what Labour had achieved from within the workers’ movement by treachery and betrayal.



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