

Former British Labour Party leader Michael Foot dies

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4 March 2010

Former Labour Party leader Michael Foot died yesterday. His political legacy is best measured by the fact that the working class, in a political sense, is far weaker today than it was at the time of his birth 96 years ago.

Foot is portrayed in many obituaries as an “Old Labour” figure, who, having finally won the leadership of the party in the 1980s, stood on a left-wing manifesto that proved to be “the longest suicide note in history—no longer acceptable in the Thatcherite era of ‘popular capitalism.’”

His fate is also explained as the product of a successful smear campaign by the Conservative press focusing on his advanced age and poor dress sense.

In reality, Foot typified the role played by Labour’s “left” throughout the 20th Century in opposing the development of a genuinely socialist and revolutionary leadership in the working class. At several key points in history, he played a significant part in misleading left-leaning sections of workers and safeguarding the interests of British capitalism. His eventual downfall was due to the fact that Labour, by the mid-1980s, was no longer able to fulfil such a political role and was on course to becoming an openly right-wing bourgeois party.

Foot came from a background of liberal dissenters, rather than the workers’ movement. His father, Isaac, was a solicitor and a Liberal Party Member of Parliament in the 1920s and 1930s. Foot himself remained a Liberal until his days at Oxford University in the early 1930s. Under conditions where the Liberal party was split over support for the national government, and Britain was in the midst of depression, he was convinced to switch his allegiance to the Labour Party and reformist socialism.

At 22, he stood as Labour candidate for Monmouth in the 1935 general election, opposing, in particular, Britain’s rearmament by the Conservatives under Stanley Baldwin.

His initial pacifist stance gave way to seeking leftist party alliances against the growing danger of fascism and forcefully denouncing appeasement towards Hitler. He resigned from the editorial board of *Tribune*, which argued for such alliances, in protest over the sacking of its editor, William Mellor. Mellor was removed by Labour’s Stafford Cripps, who, together with the Communist Party of Great Britain, sought to impose the line of a broader popular front alliance against fascism with Liberals and Conservatives.

Foot volunteered for military service during World War II, but was rejected on health grounds. He famously published a

denunciation of appeasement, *Guilty Men*, in 1940. Written anonymously together with former Liberal MP Frank Owen and Peter Howard, a Conservative, the book confirmed that Foot was not opposed in principle to popular frontism—but only Cripps’s proposal for actions that might suggest disloyalty to the Labour Party. Cripps was to be briefly expelled from Labour for advocating a popular front with pro-war Conservatives and Liberals.

Foot won the Plymouth Devonport constituency in the post-war 1945 general election, which saw a landslide victory for Labour. This was a time of acute political dangers for Britain’s ruling class. Bankrupted by war and definitively eclipsed as a world power by the United States, to which it was massively indebted, British imperialism faced a militant working class at home that was demanding social change, and an anti-colonial movement abroad.

Labour’s task was to channel workers’ socialist demands in a reformist direction that did not threaten capitalist rule. It did so by implementing a programme of nationalisations affecting 20 percent of industry and the setting up of the welfare state, including free health care in the National Health Service (NHS).

During these years, Foot was the main ally of Aneurin Bevan, the leader of Labour’s left wing and the minister for health responsible for the NHS. A fellow Tribunite, Bevan in his 1952 work, *In Place of Fear*, argued that “classic Marxism consistently understated the role of a political democracy with a fully developed franchise,” which, he claimed, offered workers the possibility of “attaining power” by “parliamentary methods.”

With Foot as political editor after Bevan departed, *Tribune* initially argued for a foreign policy independent of the Soviet Union and the US. But in 1949, it endorsed the founding of the NATO alliance, declaring, “The major threat to democratic socialism and the major danger of war in Europe arises from Soviet policy and not from American policy.”

Foot and *Tribune* opposed the Korean War and argued against nuclear weapons, with Foot participating prominently in the Aldermaston peace marches organised by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in the late 1950s and early 1960s. He broke with Bevan after the latter renounced unilateral nuclear disarmament at the 1957 Labour Party conference.

Having been briefly suspended as a Labour Member of Parliament by party leader Hugh Gaitskell in 1961, Foot returned to the parliamentary party in 1963, which was then under the

leadership of another former Bevanite, Harold Wilson. Foot associated himself with calls for greater nationalisation and opposition to joining the European Economic Community. He opposed Labour's support for the Vietnam War and allied himself with the trade union leaders in opposing Labour's attempt to clamp down on the unions with its proposed legislation "In Place of Strife" in 1969.

His left credentials earned in those earlier years were to be utilised by Labour during its long period of crisis and decay from the mid-1970s. Labour had been brought to power in 1974 on the crest of a massive and potentially revolutionary movement of the working class that culminated in a miners' strike and the fall of the Conservative government of Edward Heath.

Foot became secretary of state for employment under Harold Wilson, who sought to placate oppositional sentiment in the working class with a massive pay rise for the miners. From the experiences of the early 1970s in particular, Foot understood very well that Labour needed the support of the trade unions in order to govern successfully, and fought to deepen the "social contract"—a number of arrangements to bind the trade unions firmly to the government and establish corporatist labour relations. To this end, he reversed the restrictions placed upon the unions by the Heath government and made the closed shop legal, as well as creating various bodies to regulate employment, such as the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service.

When Wilson stepped down in 1976, Foot stood as party leader but was defeated by James Callaghan. He was elected as deputy leader that same year and was instrumental in the negotiations leading up to the electoral pact with the Liberals that kept Labour in office after it lost its majority.

Labour's declining fortunes were the result of its imposition of austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund, preceded by Callaghan's famous repudiation of Keynesian-style reformist measures at Labour's 1976 conference. Callaghan had agreed to cut spending by a third in the space of just one year, leading to a massive rise of unemployment to 1.5 million and high inflation.

Against this background, Labour's imposition of a 5 percent ceiling on wage rises provoked an explosive growth of industrial action, culminating in the "winter of discontent" in 1978-1979. But with Foot and the Labour lefts such as Tony Benn refusing to take up a struggle against the right wing in the Labour Party, the political beneficiaries were the Conservatives. In March 1979, Margaret Thatcher came to power after a campaign whose main slogan was "Labour isn't working."

The immediate response to Thatcher's victory and the monetarist policies she began to impose was a shift to the left within the Labour Party. The resignation of Callaghan precipitated a leadership contest that was won by Foot.

A section of the party's right, the "Gang of Four"—made up of Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Shirley Williams and Bill Rodgers—left the party. The right was divided and discredited. Opposition to the Tories was widespread and growing against a background of record unemployment. Foot's response was to come to the rescue of his supposed opponents.

When Benn challenged the right-winger Dennis Healy for deputy

leader, the Tribunites abstained from the vote, while Foot broke with parliamentary convention and attacked Benn for his challenge. The influence within the Labour Party of the Militant Tendency—a group claiming to be Trotskyist, but which advocated reformist policies—was growing as a result of the leftward shift in the working class. Foot responded by establishing an inquiry into the Militant's "penetration" of the Labour Party. The 1982 Labour Party conference adopted a list of proscribed organizations, which in February 1983 was used to expel Militant's central leadership.

Alongside the witch-hunt of the left, Foot and the Labour leadership threw a political lifeline to Thatcher by supporting her April-June 1982 war against Argentina over possession of the Falkands/Malvinas islands in the South Atlantic. Using the pretext of the right-wing character of the Argentine junta, Foot declared in Parliament that it was Britain's "moral duty and political duty and every other kind of duty to expel the Argentinians."

Foot's real record—and not Labour's supposed left-wing programme—is why in the 1983 general election Thatcher secured a second term in office. Labour's support collapsed to fewer than 28 percent of the vote.

Defeat prompted Foot to resign as party leader, but only after informing his protégé, Neil Kinnock, of his decision and allowing Kinnock's campaign to begin before any other challenger was prepared. Kinnock was to marshal a team of political ideologues, drawn from both the nominal right and left of the party and the trade unions, that was dedicated to purging Labour of its reformist baggage and repositioning it as an openly pro-capitalist party—a process that came to fruition in the 1990s under Tony Blair.

Foot retired from the House of Commons in 1992. His last major contribution to political life was his support for another imperialist military adventure—NATO's 1992-1995 war against Serbia. He was the first British politician to advocate the bombing of Belgrade—denouncing opposition to the war as another example of "appeasement."



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