

Working-class heroes An engrossing account of Labour's big gamble

Alan Johnson

POLITICS

The Wild Men

The Remarkable
Story of Britain's First
Labour Government
David Torrance



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On 22 January 1924, Labour formed a government for the first time in its quarter-century existence. Circumstances had conspired to present an opportunity that many in its ranks were loath to take. The result of the December election had been inconclusive. Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin's Conservatives (then badged as Unionists) were still the largest party, with 258 seats. The Liberals had 158 and Labour 191. Six weeks of speculation and permutation ensued; Baldwin knew he didn't have the numbers to carry a king's speech. He could have tried to do a deal with the Liberals but that would have resurrected a coalition rejected by the public at the October 1922 election. As for the Liberals themselves, Herbert Asquith made the fateful decision to stand aside so that Labour could reveal their inadequacy to govern.

"If a Labour government is ever to be tried in this country," he'd told a gathering on 18 December 1923, "as it will be, sooner or later, it could hardly be tried under safer conditions."

He meant safer for the Liberal party, because the problems Labour would face were immense. The UK had shrunk by a fifth with the advent of the Irish Free State a year earlier. Unemployment was rising. The economic forecast was dire. Labour's main manifesto pledge had been a capital levy on all individual fortunes in excess of £5,000. It was predicted to cause a run on the banks,

drain gold reserves and even cause food shortages and starvation. Labour's leader reckoned that the policy had cost his party 50 seats.

That leader was Ramsay MacDonald, who knew full well that taking office would be a perilous gamble. But MacDonald calculated that if he spurned this opportunity Baldwin would come to an arrangement with Asquith, putting the Tories in power, the Liberals on the opposition frontbench, and nudging Labour into irrelevance, seen as too scared to take responsibility.

Labour's main objective was to demonstrate that it was fit to govern. MacDonald's dilemma, as with every leader since, was how to reconcile a public that wanted stability with a party seeking drastic change. He took office the day after Lenin died and only five years after the Russian Revolution. The first cousin of George V had been murdered by the Bolsheviks, and concern that revolution could happen in Britain may well have been in the king's mind as he allowed the new prime minister to kiss his hand.

Author and House of Commons library researcher David Torrance illuminates all of this brilliantly in his engrossing book. He also goes beyond the politics to expose the personalities of the extraordinary group of men who formed the first Labour cabinet. (The shop workers' leader, Margaret Bondfield, who was to become the first female cabinet member later in the decade, was only a junior minister in this administration and one of only three women on Labour's benches.)

Among those first politicians of humble birth to enter the cabinet room, none was from a lowlier background than MacDonald himself. Born out of wedlock, the result of a liaison between a servant and a ploughman, when his illegitimacy was revealed by a tabloid paper in 1915 he was immediately expelled from his golf club. Such were the times. There were some representatives of the middle classes in that first cabinet, but the majority were autodidact manual workers.

They were undoubtedly concerned more about respectability than radicalism (nothing more was heard about the capital levy), but they introduced progressive benefit reforms, lifted the salaries of agricultural workers, reduced the national debt, initiated a national electricity grid, built roads and began constructing decent homes for working people.

As one minister reflected, the nine months of Labour rule was not "so important for what it accomplished as for what it presaged". It enabled the public "to begin to picture for themselves what Labour would be at to do when it had a span of years to work instead of mere months".

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