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From chairman to leader: the selection of Labour leaders by the Parliamentary Labour Party, 1906–80

Until 1981, Labour MPs had exclusive control of the process of choosing their party's leader. As well as constituting the electorate, they alone would decide if and when a leadership contest should be held and, if so, which of their number would be candidates for the succession. As Punnett explains, this situation first arose and persisted until the 1970s in part because Labour was not entirely sure whether it had a party leader, as opposed to a chair or leader of its MPs:

> Until 1978, the Labour leader in the House of Commons had been generally regarded as the overall leader of the party, but the situation was undefined. Whatever assumptions there may have been about the *de facto* equation of the roles of Labour leader in the Commons and leader of the Labour Party, the *de jure* position remained unstated. (Punnett, 1992: 80)

This ambiguity stemmed from the party's evolution from an extra-parliamentary movement with a handful of MPs, into a party of government. As Stark notes, Labour's origins were very different from those of the Conservative Party:

> Conservative Members of Parliament created their mass party organisation in the nineteenth century for the purpose of strengthening the MPs' support. By contrast, the Parliamentary Labour Party [PLP] was founded at the turn of the [twentieth] century by the labour movement to represent its interests in Parliament. The PLP was intended to play an important, though decidedly subservient, role within the labour movement. (Stark, 1996: 37)

In the general election of 1900, only two Labour MPs were elected to the House of Commons: the socialist Keir Hardie and the trade union leader Richard Bell. In the next, in 1906, the party (then known as the Labour Representation Committee or LRC) returned twenty-nine MPs. At their first formal meeting, held in a Commons committee room on 12 February, the new Labour

MPs elected officers, whips and a chairman of the PLP, to be re-elected on an annual basis at the start of each parliamentary session. As one of them, Philip Snowden, later recalled, the PLP decided at the outset that the post of chairman should not be permanent and 'insisted that the Sessional Chairman should not be regarded as the "Leader". It was considered to be undemocratic. The Party must not permit one man to dictate the policy of the Party. The Chairman was simply the mouthpiece of the [parliamentary] Party, stating its decisions to the House of Commons.' The PLP, Snowden recalled, was 'expected to take its decisions from resolutions of the Party Conferences'. 'Fortunately', he added, 'it never quite worked out like that in practice' (Snowden, 1934a: 218).

The post of chairman was held by a succession of MPs until 1922. In the general election of November that year, the party returned 142 MPs and became the second largest party in the House of Commons. As a result, it was required to fill the post of Leader of the Opposition. At a meeting of its MPs held shortly after the general election, Ramsay MacDonald was elected chairman and leader of the PLP, having challenged and defeated the incumbent chairman, J. R. Clynes. The new title reflected MacDonald's status as Leader of the Opposition and Prime Minister designate. As such, he was now leader of the party in a sense that none of his predecessors had been (Pelling, 1961: 52). Following a brief period as Leader of the Opposition, MacDonald became the Prime Minister when the first (minority) Labour Government was formed in January 1924.

Following MacDonald's accession in 1922, the elected leader of the PLP was widely regarded as the leader of the party as a whole. This status, however, was unofficial and the relationship between the leader of the PLP and the party outside Parliament remained ambiguous. During the 1970s, however, there was increasing interest in the question of how the Labour leader should be chosen. This, in turn, led to demands for clarification as to who that leader actually was. In 1976, the party's annual conference agreed to establish a working party to consider these questions. In 1978, following its recommendations, a resolution calling for the creation of the new post of 'Leader of the Party who shall be ex-officio leader of the PLP' was passed by the party conference (Punnett, 1992: 81–2). The question of how that leader should be chosen, however, remained controversial. Pressure for the widening of the electorate increased until in 1981 the Electoral College was established to take over the function of selecting the leader of the party from the PLP.

The election of Labour leaders and deputy leaders by the Electoral College between its creation in 1981 and the leadership election of 2010, when it was

used for the last time, is examined in Chapter 5. In this chapter, we explain the selection of Labour leaders by the PLP alone until 1981. Before doing so, we explain how the system it used worked in practice.

The PLP ballot

Until 1981, the procedure for electing the Labour leader was specified in the 'Standing Orders for the Election of the Officers of the Parliamentary Labour Party'. These applied only when the party was in opposition. No such formal procedure existed for when it was in office. Only once, following Wilson's decision to retire in 1976, did a vacancy occur when it was in government. On that occasion, the PLP adopted the same procedure it had previously used when in opposition.

As Punnett (1992: 85) notes, only the bare bones of the procedure were stated explicitly in the standing orders. At the start of each session of Parliament, MPs were informed that nominations for the post of leader could be received. If there were two or more nominations, a series of eliminating votes would be held until one candidate had secured an overall majority. There were no written stipulations governing nominations, but the normal practice was that a proposer and seconder, and the formal agreement of the nominee were required. All candidates were obliged to contest the first ballot, but could withdraw at any stage. If the first ballot was inconclusive, the candidate with the fewest votes, or the bottom two candidates if their combined vote was less than the candidate above them, would be eliminated. A further ballot would then be held involving the remaining candidates. This procedure was repeated until one candidate emerged with an overall majority (Punnett, 1992: 85–6).

Although the rules provided for a leadership election every year when Labour was in opposition, in practice only eleven were held between 1922 and 1980. As Table 4.1 shows, Labour leaders, once elected, enjoyed considerable security of tenure. Clement Attlee led the party for twenty years, Wilson for thirteen and Hugh Gaitskell for seven until his sudden death (aged fifty-six) in 1963. Attlee's re-election was challenged once and Gaitskell's was twice, but on each occasion, they were comfortably re-elected with more than two-thirds of the votes.

MacDonald's accession in 1922 was unique, in that it was the only occasion when the incumbent (Clynes) was challenged and defeated in a ballot of the PLP. As Drucker observed, 'Once Labour elects a Leader, it is noticeably reluctant to remove him' (1976: 378). This reluctance has been explained with reference to the party's ethos (Drucker, 1979: 1–2, 9) and/or leader-eviction

Table 4.1 PLP leadership elections, 1922–80

Year	Context	Number of candidates	Ballots required	Winner	Winner's share of final vote (%)
1922	Opposition	2	1	MacDonald	52.1
1931	Opposition	1	0	Henderson	N/A
1932	Opposition	1	0	Lansbury	N/A
1935	Opposition	1	0	Attlee	N/A
1935	Opposition	3	2	Attlee	66.7
1955	Opposition	3	1	Gaitskell	58.8
1960	Opposition	2	1	Gaitskell	67.2
1961	Opposition	2	1	Gaitskell	74.3
1963	Opposition	3	2	Wilson	58.3
1976	Government	6	3	Callaghan	56.2
1980	Opposition	4	2	Foot	51.9

rules, specifically the 'political risks and institutional costs' incurred by prospective challengers and selection institutions alike. As Quinn explains, 'Labour's in-from-the-start (IFTS) rule compels all challengers to stand directly against the incumbent, ensuring that the processes of evicting the incumbent and finding a replacement are fused into one. It is almost certainly one reason why no modern Labour leader has been replaced by a challenger' (2005: 799). As we noted above, the procedure for electing a new leader applied only when the party was in opposition. No such procedure existed when it was in office, as it was in 1924, 1929–31, 1945–51, 1964–70 and 1974–9. As one of Wilson's biographers observes, a crucial reason why no challenge to his leadership occurred in 1968–9 was the absence of an eviction mechanism:

> [T]he rules of the Labour Party, unlike those of the Conservatives after the introduction of elections to the Party Leadership, contained no constitutional mechanism for disposing of a Prime Minister in office. This meant that for any assault to succeed, [it] needed overwhelming support from ministers and back-benchers; it also meant, since the outcome of any attempt was uncertain and the price of failure high, that there were always good reasons for postponement. (Pimlott, 1993: 504)

In addition, on the rare occasions when a vacancy arose and the PLP was required to choose a new leader, the favourite and front-runner at the close of nominations almost invariably went on to win. The campaign, to the extent that one existed, made little difference, if any, to the outcome (Drucker, 1976, 1981; Stark, 1996:112–13, 118–20; see also Heppell, 2010b; Heppell, Roe-Crines and Nicholls, 2010; Heppell and Roe-Crines, 2011).

As Punnett (1992: 89) notes, the competitiveness of a leadership contest can be measured in three ways: the number of candidates it attracts, the number of ballots required to produce an outcome and size of the winner's share of the vote in the final ballot. As Table 4.1 shows, PLP ballots were relatively non-competitive in each of these respects. In most cases, the contests attracted only two or three candidates. Seven required no more than one ballot. In three, the winner received over two-thirds of the votes and in two others close to 60 per cent. The closest outcome in this respect was in 1980 when Foot narrowly defeated Healey.

Having explained how the system used by the party until 1981 worked in practice, we now explain why the PLP elected the leaders it did.

Chairman of the PLP

Despite the return of twenty-nine MPs in the 1906 general election, the newly constituted PLP lacked cohesion from the outset. This problem arose, in part, from the democratic traditions of the labour movement. The Labour Party was a federation of independent organisations and it was to be expected that the differences that existed among the various bodies sponsoring its MPs, notably between socialist societies and trade unions, would also appear in Parliament. The difficulties this created were immediately apparent when the PLP met to elect its first chairman:

> There were two candidates: Hardie … the Socialist candidate, and Shackleton … a non-Socialist trade union leader. On the first vote, which was an open one, the two men obtained equal support … MacDonald as Secretary of the extra-parliamentary party abstaining. Then, a ballot was held: MacDonald again abstained and the result was the same. Finally, a second ballot took place with MacDonald participating, and Hardie was elected. (Pelling, 1961: 20)

According to the minutes of the meeting, all twenty-nine of the PLP's newly elected MPs were present, along with members of the LRC's executive committee. After the latter had withdrawn, the MPs, sitting alone, proceeded to elect officers and whips for the coming parliamentary session. The post of chairman, the first to be discussed, was resolved as follows:

> Chairman: W. Crooks moved 'That D.J. Shackleton be the Chairman': this was seconded. G.N. Barnes moved 'That J. Keir Hardie be the Chairman': this was seconded, and a vote being taken, 13 voted for D.J. Shackleton, and 13 for J. Keir Hardie. A ballot was then taken when there voted 14 for D.J. Shackleton and 15 for J. Keir Hardie. J. Keir Hardie thereupon took the Chair,

D.J. Shackleton being declared Vice-Chairman, and called for nominations for Whips. (Labour Party Archive, 1906)

Based on these figures, twenty-six MPs voted in the initial show of hands, while three others (presumably MacDonald and the two candidates, Hardie and Shackleton) abstained. The decisive vote in the final ballot was 'apparently cast by MacDonald' (Morgan, 1975: 155). Writing to a colleague a few months later, MacDonald admitted that he had voted for Hardie 'with much reluctance, as I could not persuade myself that he could fill the place' (Morgan, 1975: 155).

Hardie was not a success as chairman and resigned after two years in 1908. Arthur Henderson, a trade unionist, was elected unopposed as his successor. Like Hardie, Henderson resigned after two years and was succeeded, again without a contest, by another trade unionist, George Barnes. The following year, Barnes was taken ill and resigned. MacDonald was then elected, again without a contest, and re-elected unopposed for the next three years (1912–14). In August 1914, he resigned after the PLP voted to support the Government on Britain's participation in the First World War. Henderson was elected, again without a contest, as his successor. It was subsequently decided that Henderson should Remain as chairman for the duration of the war, but when he served in the cabinet from May 1915 to August 1917, two acting chairmen in turn, John Hodge and George Wardle, took his place. After leaving the cabinet, Henderson was reinstated as chairman once again. Shortly afterwards, he resigned and was succeeded, again without a contest, by trade unionist Willie Adamson (McKenzie, 1964: 305–6). In the December 1918 general election, Henderson and MacDonald were both defeated and lost their seats in Parliament. When the PLP met to elect its chairman for the following parliamentary session, Adamson was re-elected unopposed. In February 1921, he resigned and was succeeded, again without a contest, by trade unionist Clynes.

Chairman and leader

In the 1922 general election, 142 Labour MPs were elected, an increase of eighty-five on the party's return in December 1918. Of the PLP's 142 members of the new House of Commons, fifty-six had retained their seats, but the majority (eighty-six) were new MPs, including many who had been re-elected after having lost their seats four years earlier. As one of the latter, Snowden, would later recall:

> The Labour Party had been slow in reaching the position of a full-sized parliamentary party. From the [general] Election of 1922, however, it emerged as the second largest Party in the State … The Labour Party in the new Parliament was remarkable in another respect. In previous Parliaments the Labour members, with few exceptions, were Trade Union nominees and representatives. … The new [PLP] contained a larger element of middle-class people and professional men. The ex-Liberals who had recently come into the Party, including Mr. Trevelyan, Mr. Lees-Smith, Mr. Arthur Ponsonby, Mr. Roden Buxton, Mr. Noel Buxton and Mr. Morel, had been returned as candidates. We had doctors, lawyers and a parson! (Snowden, 1934b: 570–2)

As McKenzie notes, the PLP elected in 1922 had not merely increased in strength compared to that returned in December 1918. Its composition had been completely transformed:

> Only eight of the MPs elected in 1918 had been representatives of the [socialist] ILP [Independent Labour Party] or of the Divisional Labour Parties; but in 1922 the ILP returned 32 candidates and the divisional parties 19. The trade union nominees had risen to 85, but clearly the influence of the more militant socialist element in the PLP was enormously strengthened; and what was particularly important, the PLP was reinforced by a whole group of younger men who were to become leaders of the Party during the next three decades. In addition, a number of the most colourful pre-war leaders were returned, including Snowden, Lansbury, Jowett and Ramsay MacDonald. (McKenzie, 1964: 347)

As MacDonald's biographer David Marquand notes, in normal circumstances, it might have been expected that Clynes, as the incumbent chairman, would be re-elected unopposed, given the increased size and strength that the PLP had gained in the general election under his leadership. These were not normal circumstances, however, and many Labour MPs believed that the PLP required a more vigorous chairman than Clynes if it were to provide more effective opposition in the next Parliament than in the last (Marquand, 1977: 285). As a trade unionist himself, Clynes was backed by most, but not all, of the returning trade union MPs who had constituted the overwhelming majority of the PLP in the previous Parliament. MacDonald was preferred by most of the (eighty-six) new Labour MPs who now constituted the clear majority of the PLP. As McKenzie explains, MacDonald also had 'a further, enormous advantage: as no one else in the Labour Party did, he exemplified the qualities of Max Weber's "charismatic leader"' (1964: 352).

On 21 November, six days after the general election, the PLP met to discuss arrangements for the next parliamentary session. As the incumbent chairman,

Clynes presided at the outset. According to the minutes, an amendment was moved that all officers and whips for the next parliamentary session and for the following one beginning in the New Year should be elected forthwith, and this was carried. Nominations for the position of chairman were invited, and Clynes and MacDonald were duly nominated. Clynes then vacated the chair and Henderson, although no longer an MP, was asked to take his place. A vote was taken, and the result was as follows: Clynes, fifty-six votes; MacDonald, sixty-one. The election of MacDonald was then put to the meeting as a substantive motion and carried unanimously. MacDonald then took the chair and 'suggested it would be a good thing to have a Deputy Leader'. He 'expressed the hope that Mr. Clynes could see his way to accept nomination'. Clynes agreed, was duly nominated and elected unanimously (Labour Party Archive, 1922).

As Lyman observes, 'Looking back, the remarkable thing is not that MacDonald won, but that the result was so close' (1962: 159). The basis of MacDonald's appeal to his parliamentary colleagues, he argues, had more to do with his personal leadership qualities than his views, which were, at most, marginally different from those of his opponent:

> Here Clynes, 'slight, grey-haired, and quiet voiced, turning his neat phrases in the true Parliamentary manner', could hardly compete. 'He does not inspire that devotion in his supporters, or that fear in his opponents, which characterises the real genius of leadership', wrote Brockway in 1921. 'He has worked hard, he has never "let down" the Party. But he has not lifted it up'. (*Labour Leader*, 1 September, 1921; quoted in Lyman, 1962: 159)

As Lyman notes, at no stage in his career was MacDonald the most trusted of Labour leaders, but in November 1922 he possessed an array of talents unmatched by any potential rival:

> He was Parliamentarian and mob orator; self-educated intellectual and practical politician; internationalist and Scottish patriot; a fundamentally moderate man who could arouse the most passionate devotion to the movement. His very vagueness as to how the socialist commonwealth would be attained was in this context an asset; most of the Party were vague about this, too, and those who were not were at loggerheads with each other. (Lyman, 1962: 160)

The PLP, he concludes, elected MacDonald in 1922 'for the most common of political reasons; they thought him the man best equipped to lead them to victory and power' (Lyman, 1962: 160; Williams, 1965: 74–8).

From MacDonald to Attlee

MacDonald remained leader until August 1931, when he was expelled from the party after agreeing to lead a coalition government dominated by Conservatives. As in 1914, Henderson succeeded him unopposed. In November, Henderson lost his seat in the general election, but remained leader of the PLP, in the expectation that he would soon return to the House of Commons. He was succeeded as chairman by George Lansbury. This dual leadership arrangement proved to be temporary and ended when Henderson retired the following year. Lansbury was then invited to continue as both chairman and leader of the PLP.

The 1931 general election had reduced Labour to just forty-six MPs and marked 'the slow transition of power from one generation to another, often an awkward moment for any political party' (Golant, 1970: 318). In this case, the question of who should lead it thereafter was easily solved:

> The [PLP] did not want another great man like MacDonald … Most believed that the Party's revival depended on developing bright plans for the next socialist government. The ideas mattered more than the individuals. At all events, since Henderson was sixty-eight when he became leader and Lansbury was seventy-three when he succeeded him, their ages alone precluded the possibility that the Party would again be dominated by its immediate leader. The [PLP] followed the obvious rules of seniority. Henderson and Lansbury were the highest-ranking Cabinet Ministers and oldest MPs in the Party. (Golant, 1970: 318–19)

Apart from Henderson and Lansbury, the only other politician of stature in the PLP after the 1931 general election was Sir Stafford Cripps, but he was an abrasive character and apparently content to let others lead in the short term. The quiet and unassuming Attlee, meanwhile, made the most of his luck, as one of only three former ministers to retain his seat in Parliament, which he did by a mere 551 votes. His chance came, as many in politics do, by accident:

> Lansbury fell and broke his hip in December 1933. He had wanted Cripps to deputise, but Cripps was busy running his Socialist League and, apparently because he underestimated the time it would take Lansbury to recover, declined. The unassuming Attlee took over. In the event, he led the Party through much of 1934. He was more [of] a team leader than, like MacDonald, a man to impose his own views on his colleagues. (Drucker, 1976: 13)

Lansbury remained in hospital until the summer of 1934, which extended Attlee's tenure as acting leader. This was crucial in ensuring his accession in 1935. By deputising successfully for Lansbury, Attlee had an invaluable opportunity to demonstrate his parliamentary skills. By general agreement, he did so

with a high degree of competence. In so doing, he secured both the commendation of the party outside Parliament and election to its National Executive Committee (NEC) (McKenzie, 1964: 360).

In October 1935, Lansbury resigned after the party conference overwhelmingly rejected a resolution, which he had strongly supported, endorsing a pacifist foreign policy. Lansbury's resignation had been expected for several days and some newspapers had pressed the claims of former Minister of Health Arthur Greenwood as his successor. When the PLP met, however, the desire for continuity and an appreciation of Attlee's parliamentary skill and efforts as acting leader prevailed and he was asked to lead the party through the general election campaign, after which, it was agreed, the Labour members of the new House of Commons should be left once again to make their own choice for the future (Jenkins, 1948: 162–3).

In the 1935 general election, Labour recovered most of the national vote it had lost in 1931 and won 154 seats. When the PLP met shortly thereafter, it was assumed that the leadership was now 'wide open' (McKenzie, 1964: 361). As Attlee recalled in his autobiography:

> When I was elected to lead the Party after George Lansbury's resignation, a writer in the *Daily Mail* said, 'I don't think he will hold it long'. This was not an unreasonable supposition, for the General Election brought back to the House a number of Labour members who had held Cabinet office—among them, the veteran J. R. Clynes, Herbert Morrison, A. V. Alexander … and Tom Johnston. (Attlee, 1954: 80)

In the event, three candidates were nominated: Greenwood, Morrison and Attlee. In the first ballot, Attlee received fifty-eight votes and Morrison forty-four; Greenwood, with thirty-three votes, was eliminated. In the second ballot, Attlee defeated Morrison by eighty-eight votes to forty-eight. As his biographer, Roy Jenkins, observes:

> The figures in the first ballot strongly support the view that Attlee's principal support came from his colleagues of the previous four years. His vote coincided almost exactly with the number of Labour members in the previous House. They were the men [sic] who knew him best and whose support, for this reason, he had every cause to value most … Greenwood's support probably came largely from northern trade unionists, and these, it is clear, voted solidly for Attlee as their second choice. (Jenkins, 1948: 167)

In his memoirs, Morrison recalled that it was 'perhaps unkindly said that in the 1931 Parliament, the hierarchy of the Labour Party was virtually a tea party' and implied that this had helped to decide the outcome. 'Those of the inner

circle knew that they must tread very warily, for the rank and file were in a strange frame of mind where they were very suspicious of the leadership, even if MacDonald had gone overboard. I think they wanted a leader who was in fact a follower—"leadership from the rear" I heard it called' (Morrison, 1960: 164). As his official biographers explain, however, there were numerous reasons for his defeat:

> The so-called left of the Party could hardly have supported Morrison with enthusiasm. For nearly twenty years he had hammered them at conferences. His concern for gradualism, constitutional procedures, financial responsibility and appeals to the middle class, together with his scorn for communists, United Fronts, Socialist Leagues and 'socialism in our time', struck no sympathetic chords in them … His obsession with the public corporation seemed to bolster up capitalism with bureaucracy. They distrusted his eagerness to reassure businessmen, as well as his emphasis on compensation for property taken over by the state. Morrison seemed an 'arch-reactionary'. (Donoughue and Jones, 1973: 239)

Morrison, they note, was also defeated by the feeling of loyalty many Labour MPs, especially those who had served in the 'rump' Parliament of 1931–35, had developed towards Attlee:

> As temporary leader after Lansbury's retirement, Attlee had led the Party in a General Election which increased their number by over a hundred. It seemed an act of ingratitude to deprive him of the leadership after he had done so well. Morrison, absent from the Commons since 1931, seemed an interloper. Indeed, Attlee had greater parliamentary experience. A member continuously since 1922, he had devoted himself to Parliament. But Morrison had been an MP only in 1924 and in 1929–31 … His experience of Parliament was limited [and] the Party was choosing a *parliamentary* leader above all. (Donoughue and Jones, 1973: 240)

Morrison also appeared too ambitious, his loyalty was suspect and he was too closely identified with London. He had also declined to give a clear undertaking that he would relinquish the leadership of the London County Council on becoming leader. Hence, the very position which had made his reputation as a vote-winner and administrator now stopped him from acquiring the leadership. In addition, many trade union MPs did not support Morrison. His understanding of and sympathy for the trade union movement were questioned. Ernest Bevin, the general secretary of Britain's largest trade union, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), was determined that Morrison should not become leader. He issued no general instructions, but his influence was felt among trade union MPs. Bevin also had a pathological hatred for Morrison. Labour MPs, aware of this antipathy, knew that Bevin would not co-operate

easily under his leadership. The two wings of the Labour movement, political and industrial, seemed likely to be more united under Attlee than under Morrison. Of the three candidates, Morrison's background was closest to the working class. Despite this, trade union MPs preferred Attlee, 'a public school, very bourgeois, leader' (Donoughue and Jones, 1973: 241–3).

As Golant explains, the 1935 general election revived the PLP and it was the effectiveness of Attlee's efforts as one of its leaders and the 'specific disabilities' of his opponents that secured him the leadership thereafter:

> Within the Party Arthur Greenwood had the reputation of being 'rarely sober'. Morrison, on the other hand, had incurred the hatred of Ernest Bevin … The election to the leadership of Morrison or Greenwood would have divided the Party more than [that] of Attlee … Attlee's seniority, courtesy, hard work in the House of Commons and contrast with MacDonald led his colleagues to make him leader of the [PLP] in 1935. (Golant, 1970: 330)

Attlee's election, he argues, was 'a surprising choice' from the public point of view, but to the PLP it was not. In contrast to MacDonald, Attlee embodied 'leadership without vanity, which allowed the Party's plans and policies to be the spearhead of its public appeal' (Golant, 1970: 332).

From Attlee to Gaitskell

Attlee led the party for twenty years, eventually retiring in 1955. Like Attlee's accession in 1935, that of his successor, Gaitskell, was contested. Morrison, now aged sixty-seven, still wanted to be leader and, with some justification, suspected Attlee of delaying his retirement in order to build up the claims of Gaitskell, who was forty-nine, almost nineteen years his junior (Drucker, 1976: 384).

The struggle to succeed Attlee began after the resignations from his second government of Aneurin Bevan, Harold Wilson and John Freeman following the introduction of prescription charges in 1951. The two main protagonists were Chancellor the Exchequer Gaitskell and Bevan, the architect of the National Health Service (NHS) in the first Attlee government and, prior to his resignation, Minister of Labour in the second, who became the principal spokesmen thereafter for conflicting perspectives within the party on both the nature of socialism and on the defence and foreign policies it should adopt. As McKenzie explains:

> In the years that followed, the struggle was fought out within each section of the Labour Party, in the Parliamentary Committee, in the Parliamentary Party itself,

> in the NEC and in the Annual Conference. Throughout this period, the centre and right-wing elements, led first by Attlee and then by Gaitskell, always had on their side a majority of the Parliamentary Party; they consistently defeated the Bevanite faction, which in the Parliamentary Party usually numbered 50 to 60 MPs (or about one-fifth of the total). (McKenzie, 1964: 598)

Following the party's defeat in the general election of May 1955, Attlee continued as leader. As his biographer Kenneth Harris notes:

> From the day after the election to Attlee's resignation in early December, the question of when he would go and who would succeed him dominated discussion in the Labour Party. Attlee wanted to resign the leadership immediately after the election, but he preferred to stay if it was clear that his going would precipitate a struggle for the succession between Morrison and Bevan which would ruin the Party. (Harris, 1995: 535)

By late November, Attlee had decided that the time had finally come for him to go. He summoned Chief Whip Herbert Bowden and informed him 'I'm going. Fix a date.' Bowden replied, 'We should get it over before Christmas. Let us say December 7.' Attlee nodded. Bowden then asked if he should let the contenders know privately, to which Attlee replied: 'Tell Gaitskell' (Harris, 1995: 541). On 6 December, Attlee wrote to his brother Tom as follows:

> I am tomorrow giving up the leadership of the Party. As you know I wanted to go after the last Election, but stayed on to oblige. There is, however, so much speculation as to the next leader going on that I think it best to retire now. The Party is in good heart. (Harris, 1995: 541)

The next morning, Attlee announced his retirement to the shadow cabinet. Significantly, he had made no attempt to inform Morrison in advance. He confirmed his decision at a meeting of the PLP later that day. The same evening, Gaitskell's biographer Philip Williams records, Morrison and Bevan dined together:

> Nominations were due by 11 a.m. on Friday [9 December] and on Thursday afternoon [8 December] their last curious and desperate manoeuvre was mounted. Bevan told the press that he would willingly accede to the proposal of ten MPs (mostly ageing advocates of seniority) that the younger men [Gaitskell and himself] should withdraw and give Morrison an unopposed return … Public pressure was no way to persuade Gaitskell, but his enemies doubtless hoped his refusal would cost him votes. Their misjudgement was complete. The reputations that suffered were those of his two opponents, cynically allied after years of mutual hatred. (Williams, 1979: 366)

The leadership election was held at the PLP's next meeting, a week after Attlee's resignation. As in 1935, there were three candidates: Gaitskell, Morrison and Bevan. Gaitskell was expected to win comfortably and did. In the first ballot, he received 157 votes, Bevan seventy and Morrison forty. As one of Bevan's supporters later recalled, the result 'hit [Morrison] like the dash of a sjambok across his face. His whole body crumbled … He was shattered not by being defeated, but by [his] very low vote, which showed that he had been coldly deserted by many whose support he had expected and indeed been promised' (Mikardo, 1988: 155). As his biographer explains, Gaitskell secured the leadership for several reasons:

> He reaped the rewards of years of hard work, arguing assiduously and persuasively in the PLP, and becoming in the House [of Commons] 'the mainstay of the Opposition. Bevan lost primarily because he treated the [PLP] with barely concealed contempt'. Having always dismissed the Labour MPs as irrelevant, [he] suddenly discovered, as [Richard] Crossman noted, that they mattered after all. He had waited too long. (Williams, 1979: 368)

Gaitskell's vote, he notes, had 'surpassed most prior estimates. It was so impressive because of a political factor: the urge to settle the debilitating succession struggle' (Williams, 1979: 368–9). As Harris observes, 'nobody had anticipated that Morrison would be so humiliated. Except Attlee' (1995: 542). In a note of congratulations to Gaitskell, Attlee wrote: 'I was delighted with your vote which was just about what I had anticipated. It was a pity that Herbert insisted on running. He had, I think, been warned of the probable result … I hope that Nye [Bevan] & Co. will now go all out to support you' (Harris, 1995: 542). Attlee had achieved what he had wanted ever since the general election in May:

> He had kept Morrison out, and had performed what he thought was a real service to his party. If Morrison had become leader, Attlee believed, the Party would have staggered on to another disaster. A year after Attlee chose his time to resign, Bevan was Shadow Foreign Secretary, and two years after it Bevan was a powerful and accepted Number Two to Gaitskell. The Shadow Cabinet was made up of young men far more radical, able and appealing than Morrison would ever have mustered. By keeping Morrison out, Attlee did not create a new, strong and attractive Labour Party, but he saved it from an embittered and destructive wilderness. (Harris, 1995: 542–3)

As Harris records, however, Attlee's 'secret hope' had earlier been that Bevan, not Gaitskell, would succeed him:

> During the crisis in the Party which had been brought on by the attempt [in February and March 1955] to have Bevan expelled, Crossman, as others did, went

> to see Attlee privately to ask him to intercede. According to Crossman … Attlee said: 'Nye had the leadership on a plate. I always wanted him to have it. But, you know, he wants to be two things simultaneously, a rebel and an official leader, and you can't be both.' (Harris, 1995: 543)

In his book *The Road to Brighton Pier*, Leslie Hunter recalled a conversation with Attlee in November 1955, in which Attlee had apparently said he would have liked to see Bevan become leader: 'I'd like to see him get it … Trouble is, he's so unstable, all over the place, [and] you never know where you are with him. Anyway, he's cooked his goose for the time being, and the [parliamentary] Party would never stand for him' (Harris, 1995: 543). As Bevan's most recent biographer argues:

> Bevan was a man of power. His period as a Cabinet minister had brought out the best in him. The early 1950s were to demonstrate that opposition could bring out the worst in him … Bevan had all the credentials to be Labour Party leader. By 1951, he was not only experienced in high office, but he had achieved great things in government. He had a vision of society … in which human spirit meant more than material wealth. With his seat on the NEC, he had influence within the Labour Party machinery, and a passionate following among Party members. He had personal charisma and was a magnetic speaker. Even Gaitskell's wife, Dora, thought that Bevan, rather than Gaitskell, should have been Party leader. (Thomas-Symonds, 2015: 205)

In the 1950s, however, Bevan's prospects of leading the party depended entirely on the support of his fellow MPs. For this reason alone, he was fighting a losing battle from the start. The right wing of the PLP, and Gaitskell in particular, was strongly backed by powerful figures in the trade union movement: Arthur Deakin, general secretary of the TGWU, Will Lawther, president of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and Tom Williamson, general secretary of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers (NUGMW). Young, Oxford-educated MPs, including Anthony Crosland and Roy Jenkins, surrounded Gaitskell and became known as the Hampstead Set (Thomas-Symonds, 2015: 205). As one of Bevan's supporters later recalled, a 'somewhat incongruous alliance developed between these horny-handed sons of toil and the delicately nurtured aristos of the Hampstead set who surrounded Gaitskell' (Mikardo, 1988: 123). Bevan's support, largely confined as it was to the Bevanite group within the PLP, was simply too small to give him the backing he required to secure the leadership in December 1955 (Thomas-Symonds, 2015: 205).

From Gaitskell to Wilson

Gaitskell's victory was the largest yet of any newly elected Labour leader. As the first choice of 157 MPs, numbers were clearly on his side. Many of the party's most effective parliamentarians, however, had backed Bevan instead. As McKenzie explains, two factors weighed heavily with Bevan and Morrison, and with their respective supporters, following their defeat in December 1955:

> The first was that, if they were to persist in their efforts to overthrow the Party's chosen Leader, this would almost certainly destroy the possibility that Labour might win the next election … The second [was that Gaitskell] was [also] the 'Shadow Prime Minister'; and if Labour did manage to win, then there was not the slightest doubt that he would become Prime Minister and have within his gift the 80-odd offices which taken together constitute a Ministry. (McKenzie, 1964: 603)

These factors, McKenzie notes, unquestionably account for Gaitskell's success as Leader of the Opposition from 1955 to 1959 in 'holding the Labour Party to a line of policy in both home and foreign affairs which reflected, in almost every respect, the view of the majority of the PLP who had elected him' (1964: 603).

Following Labour's defeat in the general election of 1959, however, Gaitskell chose to launch a full-scale attack on Clause Four of the party's constitution, which committed the party to the eventual creation of a society based on the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. This resulted in a humiliating defeat for Gaitskell and, in July 1960, the NEC decided not to proceed with any amendment or addition to Clause Four. In October, the party conference met in Scarborough and voted to adopt a policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament. Gaitskell's defiant response was to make it clear that he was not prepared to accept this decision and implement such a policy. On 14 October, Anthony Greenwood, a prominent unilateralist, resigned from the shadow cabinet and announced that, unless a stronger candidate came forward, he would challenge Gaitskell for the leadership. After some hesitation, Wilson, then shadow chancellor, decided to stand and Greenwood withdrew. When the result was announced on 3 November, Gaitskell was decisively re-elected by 166 votes to Wilson's eighty-one. Having reversed the party's decision to adopt unilateralism at the following year's conference, Gaitskell was challenged again, this time by Greenwood, and was re-elected even more decisively, by 171 votes to sixty-nine.

By 1962, Gaitskell had acquired commanding authority within the party. Indeed, it is 'doubtful if anyone in the party's history, with the possible exception of MacDonald in the 1920s, [had] enjoyed a comparable position of ascendancy in the parliamentary party' (McKenzie, 1964: 628). In October that year, his stature increased still further after a powerful speech to the party conference in Brighton in which he expressed strong opposition to Britain's entry into the EEC. The speech demonstrated once again that Gaitskell was his own man and 'did not hesitate to take up a position on a major issue which angered some of his staunchest friends and pleased his left-wing foes' (McKenzie, 1964: 628–9). Following this speech, Gaitskell was now, more than ever, the unassailable leader of the Labour Party. Within three months, however, he was dead. On 18 January 1963, he died after a short illness. He was fifty-six. With the exception of Clause Four, he and his supporters had won every major battle in the party since the fall of the second Attlee government in 1951. Hence, there was 'a certain irony' in the outcome of the contest to determine who should succeed him (McKenzie, 1964: 630).

As in 1935 and 1955, there were three candidates: Wilson, the shadow foreign secretary; George Brown, the party's deputy leader; and James Callaghan, the shadow chancellor of the exchequer. Wilson had been Bevan's principal lieutenant in the rebel campaign against the party's parliamentary leadership following their resignations from the second Attlee Government in 1951. He subsequently made his peace with the leadership much sooner than Bevan, replaced the latter when he resigned from the shadow cabinet in 1954 and then supported Gaitskell, not Bevan, for the leadership in 1955. After Bevan's death in July 1960, he sought to establish himself as the natural leader of the left by attempting to depose and replace Gaitskell, a decision which had 'earned him the deep enmity of a considerable part of the PLP' (McKenzie, 1964: 630). In November 1962, he also challenged Brown for the post of deputy leader, but was defeated by 133 votes to 103.

Wilson's unsuccessful challenges for the leadership and deputy leadership in 1960 and 1962 respectively appeared to show that there was considerable opposition towards him within the PLP and implied that he was seen as a divisive, rather than a unifying figure. In 1960, he had received only eleven votes more than Bevan had won in 1955 and the base of his support had merely replicated that secured by his former mentor five years before. In 1962, he had received only twenty-two more votes when challenging Brown for the deputy leadership than he had when challenging Gaitskell for the leadership two years before. Both challenges had apparently weakened his position and he feared that his

leadership ambitions were over. As Heppell notes, however, there were two positives for Wilson that could be taken from this period:

> First, the two challenges [had] provided him with the nucleus of a voting bloc of between 80 and 100 Labour [MPs]. They could be assumed to be backers of Wilson in a future … leadership contest, should an opportunity arise. Second, the nucleus of the voting bloc for his assumed rival, Brown, may have been bigger at around 130, but there was a question mark over whether they [had voted] for Brown himself, or … were [merely] endorsing him as the candidate that Gaitskell was backing. (Heppell, 2010b: 157)

Brown, a former protégé of Bevin, had strong support from the trade unionists in the loyalist centre of the PLP and was 'the candidate to beat' (Drucker, 1976: 384). In the first ballot, Wilson received 115 votes, Brown eighty-eight and Callaghan forty-one. In the second, Wilson defeated Brown by 144 votes to 103.

As McKenzie (1964: 630) explains, Wilson did not secure the leadership because the PLP had 'swung to the left'. Instead, he argues, there are two principal reasons why he did so. First, Wilson was 'incomparably the ablest parliamentary performer in a party no longer very rich in such talents after so many years in opposition'. The second reason was that Brown, who had a greater reputation than Wilson for loyalty to the party's parliamentary leadership, 'did not, for purely personal reasons, inspire widespread confidence among the members of the PLP'. Specifically, McKenzie notes, Brown had a reputation for 'impulsiveness, truculence and insensitivity, which more than offset his other qualities' (1964: 631). The reservations many Labour MPs had about Brown were threefold:

> First, there were concerns about his electoral appeal, both in terms of the party leadership ballot itself … and to the wider electorate in a General Election campaign. These concerns reflected a belief that his defeat [of] Wilson [for] the deputy party leadership was exactly that: for deputy. Moreover, in that ballot, Brown had benefited from the covert support of the Gaitskellites, who were keen to retain Brown as deputy to Gaitskell, rather than allow a Gaitskell—Wilson instability ticket to emerge. Implicit within this argument was the assumption that Brown had the skills and aptitudes to be a deputy party leader, but not necessarily to be a party leader and potentially a Labour Prime Minister. Second, there were reservations about his capacity to unify the Party. His alignment to the right was so absolute there was a concern that he would be so unpalatable to the left that there would be a new outbreak of infighting. Furthermore, there were doubts about his capacity to maintain the cohesion of the right themselves. The social democrats were dividing on the question of Europe, and the strong pro-Europeanism of Brown was a significant concern. (Heppell, 2010b: 158)

Finally, there were concerns about Brown's temperament. His reputation for excessive drinking was becoming well known and 'deeply disturbing' in a potential prime minister (Heppell, 2010b: 158).

Doubts about Wilson's reliability had been the most dangerous question mark hanging over his candidature from the outset and, as Howard and West observe, largely explain why, after Brown's campaign team published an impressive list of his sponsors, it was impossible for Wilson's to do the same:

> With the exceptions of Earl Attlee (the former Prime Minister), Bert Bowden (the Party's Chief Whip) and one other member of the 'shadow' Cabinet (Fred Lee), Wilson was virtually without support in the highest echelons of the Party: for him to win it was essential that he should have the chance to make his appeal to the back benches – and a series of major debates in the House [during] the contest provided him with just the opportunity that he needed. Neither George Brown nor James Callaghan disgraced [himself] in these debates: but there was not the slightest doubt that Wilson, widely regarded since the death of Nye Bevan as the most brilliant Commons debater, emerged with the greatest advantage. From the moment that he began a speech … at the dispatch box, the message lying behind it came over: if the Party … really wanted a Leader who could successfully discomfit the Government, then he was ready. Wilson's skill as a parliamentarian would have been an asset to him in any event: but events conspired to give him a bright opportunity. (Howard and West, 1965: 28)

In his memoirs, Wilson himself recalled that, during the campaign, he and other Labour MPs had attended Gaitskell's memorial service. Later that day (31 January), he had spoken in a debate on defence in which Prime Minister Harold Macmillan had quoted a speech of Gaitskell's in March 1960, apparently supporting the case for Britain possessing its own independent nuclear deterrent. This was seen as political point-scoring by many Labour MPs and as being in 'exceedingly bad taste'. Wilson had then intervened to remind Macmillan that Gaitskell had also balanced the remarks he had just quoted by outlining the opposite case in the same speech. In his memoirs, he recalled that his intervention 'for once, had Macmillan flurried. He did not have the reference and had no possibility of checking it. I always think that this exchange is what really won me the leadership, because what the Labour Party wanted was someone who could put Harold Macmillan down' (Wilson, 1986: 191–2).

As Heppell notes, a desire to stop Wilson and concerns about whether Brown was a suitable candidate for this task led to a fracturing of the right and it was 'assumed amongst political journalists at the time that the consequence of Callaghan entering the [contest] was to the advantage of Wilson, as the candidate for the left, and to the disadvantage of Brown' (Heppell, 2010b: 160).

During the campaign itself, Brown's conduct was flawed and self-defeating. After Wilson had let it be known that he would accept Brown as his deputy if he won, Brown issued a strong denial that he had agreed to do the same in return. In so doing, he appeared to be positioning himself against party unity, in contrast to his more conciliatory opponent. The Brown camp was also accused of engaging in 'strong-arm tactics'. 'Tales spread of [MPs] being bludgeoned with threats or bribed with rewards; there were stories of thirty-eight cabinet ministers having already been appointed, to say nothing of five law officers' (Howard and West, 1965: 26). As one Wilson supporter, Benn, recorded in his diary, 'George Brown's arm-twisting produced a strong reaction and helped to contribute to Harold's success' (Benn, 1987: 5). In contrast to the aggressive approach of Brown and his supporters, Wilson and his team deliberately sought to avoid giving the impression that a campaign was being undertaken at all:

> The strategy was not to 'whip' votes, but to 'seek disclosure' of intended voting … the Wilson team could then use this as a 'guide to action where appropriate', such as making Wilson available for consultation with those who were undecided, or in need [of] reassurance. Adopting a low-key approach was appropriate given the reputation (i.e. for duplicity) that Wilson had. Consequently, they attempted to play down his associations with the left so as to draw in centrists, and by presenting Wilson as a moderate centrist they highlighted how Wilson was capable of uniting the Party, and winning the General Election. (Heppell, 2010b: 161–2)

In short, Wilson's election in February 1963 can be attributed to the following factors. First, the fact that the left of the PLP elected to nominate a single candidate (Wilson) ensured that its support coalesced around him. Second, the fact that the right could not agree on a single candidate, and thus fractured in two, backing Brown and Callaghan respectively, gave Wilson a substantial lead after the first ballot and crucial momentum going into the second (and final) ballot. Third, the astute campaigning strategy of the Wilson team and the naïve approach of the Brown camp meant that Wilson was seen as better equipped to offer first, party unity; second, political and governing effectiveness; and third, electoral appeal and the characteristics of a potential prime minister in waiting (Heppell, 2010b: 166; see also King, 1966: 31–2).

From Wilson to Callaghan

Wilson would lead the Labour Party for thirteen years, serving as prime minister from October 1964 to June 1970, and again from March 1974 until his

resignation in March 1976. Of his possible successors, two had been told of his intentions in advance. As he revealed in his autobiography, Callaghan received a telephone call in late December 1975 from Harold Lever, to whom Wilson had given a roving commission as a cabinet minister, to arrange a meeting. As Callaghan recalled, when Lever arrived, he emphasised that what he was about to say must be treated in the strictest confidence:

> His news was both dramatic and unexpected. The Prime Minister had made a firm decision to resign in March 1976, and I must prepare myself to take over … I was initially disbelieving … even if this was Harold's present turn of mind, there would be plenty of time before March in which the Prime Minister could change his opinion. Not so, said … Lever, the decision was firm and I must make ready. (Callaghan, 1987: 387)

A second potential candidate, Healey, later disclosed in his autobiography that Wilson had told him three years earlier, in 1972, that he did not intend to serve another full term as prime minister. As Healey also recalled:

> In December 1975 Harold Lever told me he thought Wilson would soon announce his resignation. Unknown to me, Lever [relayed] the same message to Jim Callaghan, but much more specifically: Wilson would resign in March, and Jim must prepare himself to take over. Wilson himself told Callaghan after his sixtieth birthday party on March 11th – the very evening of my row with the Left over their abstention in the debate on public expenditure. He told me in the lavatory outside the Cabinet room just before informing the whole of the Cabinet on 16th March; so I was as flabbergasted as nearly all the rest of my colleagues. (Healey, 1989: 446)

As we noted earlier, Labour's rules made no provision for its leader to be formally challenged or required to seek re-election when the party was in government. Consequently, as Kellner and Hitchens note, the leadership contest precipitated by the announcement of Wilson's resignation was without constitutional precedent:

> Technically, [Labour MPs] were choosing a new Party Leader. In fact, of course, they were electing a new Prime Minister as well. All previous Labour and Conservative leadership ballots had taken place in opposition; now a ballot was being conducted by a party in power. This gave Callaghan an immediate advantage. Internal party battles in opposition are usually about policies and sometimes about principles. In government, these considerations tend to be subordinated to the more practical matter of staying in power. Callaghan could not market a strong line in policies or principles: he offered himself specifically as the [candidate] who could hold the Party together and give it the best chance of winning the next General Election. (Kellner and Hitchens, 1976: 168)

In addition to Callaghan, who was Foreign Secretary, there were five other candidates: Secretary of State for Employment Foot; Chancellor of the Exchequer Healey; Home Secretary Jenkins; Secretary of State for Energy Benn and Secretary of State for the Environment Crosland. During the ensuing three-week campaign, Benn released daily policy statements on subjects ranging from economic strategy to open government. Callaghan, for his part, said nothing. He issued 'no statements about the contest, made no speeches about it, and gave no interviews' (Kellner and Hitchens, 1976: 169). Instead, he behaved in a 'detached, quasi-presidential' manner and simply carried on his work as Foreign Secretary (Morgan, 1997: 470).

As his official biographer notes, Callaghan's campaign was 'the most professionally organised of them all' (Morgan, 1997: 470). Merlyn Rees, a close friend and Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, was his official campaign manager. Other supporters included cabinet ministers Lever, Fred Peart and John Morris, Attorney-General Sam Silkin and junior ministers John Smith and Roy Hattersley. The mastermind and chief organiser of Callaghan's campaign was his principal private secretary Dr Jack Cunningham. As Kellner and Hitchens explain, Callaghan's campaign team reflected the coalition of party factions which he had marshalled during his long career:

> John Golding and Tom Urwin were strong members of the trade union group of Labour MPs … Cunningham was the son of Andrew Cunningham who had at one time been an important ally of Callaghan on the Labour Party NEC. Ted Rowlands was the MP for Merthyr Tydfil, in the heart of Callaghan's Welsh power base; Edmund Marshall was a left-wing MP who thought Callaghan would stand up to the right; James Wellbeloved was a right-wing MP who thought Callaghan would stand up to the left … The significant point about this group is that it was so heterogeneous. [Its] members did not represent a theory of what the Labour Party was about, or where it should be heading; instead they represented a series of credits that Callaghan had built up—in Wales, with the unions, in the Party, and among individuals. The time had now come to cash these credits in. (Kellner and Hitchens, 1976: 169)

In the first ballot, Foot received the most votes (ninety), six ahead of Callaghan's eighty-four, but only because there were fewer candidates who appealed to the left of the PLP (Foot and Benn) than to the centre and/or the right (Callaghan, Jenkins, Healey and Crosland) (Stark, 1996: 119). Jenkins, Benn and Crosland received fifty-six, thirty-seven and seventeen votes respectively, so Crosland was eliminated automatically under the rules, while Jenkins and Benn withdrew after the first ballot. As Jenkins recalled in his memoirs:

> Foot's lead was not of primary importance. He could be comfortably overhauled, even with the transfer to him of most of Benn's vote, by whichever of Callaghan or me got into the position for a run-off. It was the relative positions of Callaghan and me which were therefore the news headline. And Callaghan's lead while not overwhelming was nonetheless enough to settle the issue. The country, I thought, needed a new Prime Minister quickly, and not the long-drawn-out agony of a third, or even a fourth, slow round, and from fifty-six votes that Prime Minister was not going to be me. I therefore immediately decided to withdraw. (Jenkins, 1991: 436)

In his diary, Benn recorded that 'Foot did extremely well, Jim less well than he expected, Roy Jenkins got twenty less than he expected, I got twenty more than many people thought, Healey did very badly and Crosland did marginally better than the disastrous result that had been forecast' (Benn, 1989: 544). Healey, with a mere thirty votes, had finished fifth, but elected to contest the second ballot, and was widely criticised for it. In the second ballot, he received thirty-eight votes and was eliminated from the contest. Foot received 133 and Callaghan, who now led the field, 141. In the third and final ballot, Foot secured only four of Healey's votes, whereas Callaghan's tally increased by thirty-five votes to 176. Led by Rees, his team had campaigned primarily by reacting and avoiding mistakes. As front-runner, Callaghan had most to lose from a vigorous and aggressive campaign. His team understood this at the outset and the 'general desire to keep the Government together played into their hands. So too did the obvious contrast between the inexperience of the Conservative front bench and Labour's experienced team' (Drucker, 1976: 392).

As Heppell (2010b: 62) notes, Callaghan won the contest for the following reasons. First, he had received prior notice of Wilson's impending resignation and was therefore better prepared than his opponents were. Second, he was ideologically acceptable to the majority of the PLP. In the final ballot, he merely had to secure the loyalty of the centre and right of the PLP, whereas Foot needed to attract support beyond his natural constituency on the left. Third, compared to the other three centre and right-wing candidates, Callaghan was both more experienced, having served as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary, and less divisive. In short, Callaghan was seen by most of his parliamentary colleagues as superior to Foot on all three of the essential criteria for selecting party leaders in parliamentary systems: acceptability, electability and competence (Stark, 1996: 127–8).

From Callaghan to Foot

Callaghan served as Prime Minister until Labour's defeat in the general election of May 1979. Instead of resigning immediately, he chose to continue as leader for another seventeen months. On 15 October 1980, he suddenly announced his resignation. The question of who should succeed him was complicated by the fact that while Labour's constitution provided that the party's leader and deputy leader were elected by the PLP alone, the party conference of October 1980 had agreed to extend the franchise by setting up an electoral college, the configuration of which would be decided at a special conference in January 1981. As one MP later recalled:

> The Left in the PLP were keen to postpone the election of a new Leader till then by appointing the current Deputy Leader, Michael Foot, as a caretaker for the short period up to the constitutional conference. The Right, by contrast, wanted the election held at once by the PLP alone, because they could be expected to elect the Right's favoured candidate, Denis Healey. (Mikardo, 1988: 201)

On 28 October, the PLP 'considered whether the contest should be postponed, but rejected the proposal by 119 to sixty-six (though with eighty-three MPs not voting). The selection of Callaghan's successor thus proceeded as a "normal" contest under the established rules' (Punnett, 1992: 91).

Following Callaghan's resignation, three candidates had immediately declared their intention to stand. Healey was the clear favourite and it soon became apparent that he would be the only candidate from the right. Callaghan, while refusing to offer any public endorsement, backed Healey and expected him to win (Jones, 1994: 447). Initially, Healey's main challenger was the shadow foreign secretary, Peter Shore. A third candidate, John Silkin, the shadow secretary of state for industry, was seen as more consistently left wing than Shore, but was thought to have little chance (Drucker, 1981: 385). The most obvious prospective candidate on the left was Benn, but he declined to stand, preferring instead to bide his time until the next contest that would operate under the new selection procedure.

After Callaghan had announced his resignation to the shadow cabinet on 15 October, four shadow ministers (Albert Booth, Stan Orme, Silkin and Shore) adjourned to Silkin's room to discuss what to do next. Two others on the left, Foot and Benn, were unable to attend. The four who were present agreed that their objective must be to stop Healey. Shore said that he thought he had a good chance of doing so. Silkin went much further and claimed that he would defeat

not just Healey, but anyone else who might stand (Mikardo, 1988: 201–2). As the veteran left wing MP Ian Mikardo later recalled, the urge to stop Healey was one he shared in full:

> When the leadership election loomed … my friends in the Tribune Group and many other people in the Party and the trade unions wanted to stop Healey because he was way out to the Right and was likely to go even further than Wilson and Callaghan in leading the Party away from its socialist principles. But even though I shared that view I had an even stronger motivation for frustrating [Healey's] leadership bid. I had seen at first hand his emery-paper abrasive manner, his crude strong-arm all-in-wrestling ways of dealing with dissent, his undisguised contempt for many of his colleagues, his actual enjoyment of confrontation, his penchant for pouring petrol on the flames of controversy, and I was thoroughly convinced that if he became Leader of the Party it wouldn't be long before these aggressive characteristics of his would split the Party from top to bottom; and that was a prospect which scared me. (Mikardo, 1988: 202–3)

On his return to London on 17 October, Mikardo's immediate reaction to the buzz of intrigue, speculation and calculation reverberating around Westminster was 'to wonder how anyone could possibly imagine that either Peter Shore or John Silkin had any chance whatever of defeating Healey'. The next morning, he telephoned Foot, and urged him to stand (Mikardo, 1988: 203–4). Foot received similar representations from trade union leaders, notably Clive Jenkins, and others. Two days later, on 20 October, Foot confirmed his decision to stand. As Drucker explains:

> Two immediate effects of Foot's decision were to scupper Shore's chances of doing well and to force Healey's camp to concede that they now had little chance of a first ballot victory. But ultimately more important may have been the appreciation that a slim Healey victory on the established rules might not be authoritative. Foot, narrowly defeated in the PLP, could honourably stand again under the new rules and have the decision reversed. (Drucker, 1981: 385)

Four days earlier, one of Healey's supporters had noted in his diary, 'It is clear that Denis is likely to get at least 120–125 votes on [the] first ballot and should beat Peter Shore, though Peter is likely to do very well' (Radice, 2004: 19). On 20 October, the same day that Foot announced his decision to stand, his assessment of Shore's (and Silkin's) prospects was very different:

> Michael Foot enters the fray, the last fling of a vain old 'Bollinger Socialist'. By doing so, he effectively dishes both Peter Shore and Silkin, because the left-wing vote will unite behind Michael. I fervently hope that the candidature of a man who will be over 70 at the next election will not also undermine Denis. A lot of

> talk about Foot yielding to 'overwhelming pressure'. The reality is that the left, particularly the Bennite left, are desperate to stop Denis. (Radice, 2004: 20)

Superficially, the campaign that followed was similar to the previous contest of 1976, in that the four candidates rarely appeared on television, fearing they had more to lose than gain in so doing. Like Callaghan in 1976, Healey, as the front-runner, was 'particularly reticent' (Drucker, 1981: 385). In other respects, however, the campaign this time was different from the last:

> Then the PLP chose a Prime Minister. Members acted with that fact in the front of their minds. In 1980 the PLP trimmed; it ran away from a fight with the rest of the Party. Few MPs mentioned the ability to be a good Prime Minister first when asked why their colleagues voted as they did. Had Foot remained out of the race it might well have been different. But once Foot entered the race, his team had a strong suit which they could, and did, repeatedly play to advantage: Healey as leader would exacerbate the tensions within the Party while Foot would not; [moreover], a Healey victory would further enrage the unions and CLPs and unite them against the PLP while Foot's victory would reassure the Party that the PLP could be trusted … A Foot victory was preferred by one or two who might have otherwise preferred Healey because a Foot win in the PLP was seen as a way of ending an argument with the Party which might just conceivably end up forcing Benn on the PLP. (Drucker, 1981: 386)

As Punnett (1992: 92) notes, the campaign was 'unspectacular', with the 'very real intra-party conflicts that underlay the contest being hidden from the public gaze'. Foot appeared to make little effort to campaign – one supporter described his performance as 'bloody awful' – believing, as he did, that Healey was certain to win. His campaign, however, led by senior figures such as Orme, was 'vigorously conducted by three backbenchers, Neil Kinnock, Peter Snape and Jim Marshall, and made some headway across the Party' (Morgan, 2007: 378–9). Healey's 'right-wing views and abrasive manner, including a talent for abuse, caused several on the centre-right to have doubts about him' and at least one centrist MP, Phillip Whitehead, eventually voted for Foot, following Healey's 'incomprehensible refusal to set out a manifesto in *The Guardian*, as Foot, Silkin and Shore had done' (Morgan, 2007: 379). To some who, like Healey himself, wanted to restore the party to 'something like normality', he appeared too combative; to others who were 'so angry with [the party's] leftward drift that they were ready to leave it', not combative enough (Pearce, 2002: 542). In a major debate in the Commons on industrial policy on 29 October, Foot was generally thought to have performed better than Healey. The candidates' own assessments of their support, based on canvassing undertaken by their campaign

teams, proved to be unreliable. By the eve of the second ballot, Healey had been promised 140 votes and Foot 135 – more promises than there were actual votes (Punnett, 1992: 92). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the opinion polls suggested that, whereas Healey was the first choice of the PLP and Labour voters, Foot was preferred by party activists. As Punnett notes:

> BBC *Newsnight* surveys of Labour MPs early in the contest, and then just before the first ballot, revealed that Healey was supported by about 45 per cent of MPs who were prepared to indicate a preference, Foot by about a third and Shore and Silkin by about a quarter. A Marplan poll just before the first ballot showed that Healey was the choice of over two-thirds of Labour voters and Foot of just a quarter. In contrast, a survey conducted by *The Times* of 131 constituency parties that had tested their members' views showed that 60 per cent supported Foot and just 27 per cent backed Healey. (Punnett, 1992: 92–3)

The result of the first ballot was announced on 4 November. Healey had received 112 votes, Foot eighty-three, Silkin thirty-eight and Shore thirty-two. As Silkin and Shore had received only seventy votes between them, thirteen fewer than the next lowest-placed candidate, Foot, both were eliminated from the contest. Shore, who would probably have secured a respectable second place had Foot adhered to his original decision not to stand and to back Shore instead, immediately pledged his support to Foot for the second (and final) ballot. Silkin did the same. As Drucker notes, Healey's vote on the first ballot came as a considerable blow to his team:

> The fact that he was 29 ahead of Foot was less important than the fact that he was [23] short of the required majority. To gain votes from the defeated candidates Healey's team needed to be in an impregnable position. They had admitted before the vote that fewer than 115 would be worrying. Hattersley had predicted 116. Some extra votes always go to a sure winner as bandwagon jumping occurs, but this time it was particularly important for Healey to appear unbeatable—and to win by a large margin—because a narrow victory would legitimise a subsequent challenge under the new rules. (Drucker, 1981: 386)

The Healey team, Drucker notes, could not regain the initiative after the first ballot and argued in vain that Healey was more popular with the British electorate. 'The contest was not about winning the next election, let alone about becoming prime minister. Even so, both sides were somewhat surprised when Foot's 10 vote majority (139–129) was announced on 10 November' (Drucker, 1981: 386).

Foot's share of the vote in the final ballot (a mere 51.9 per cent) was lower than that received by any of his predecessors. Several factors contributed to

the outcome. First, Foot was a popular and respected figure in the PLP. As deputy leader, he had been consistently loyal to his predecessor, Callaghan, both in office and in opposition. He was a committed and dedicated parliamentarian, an excellent speaker in the Commons and the only candidate who was also, at the time of the contest, a member of the party's NEC. Healey, by contrast, was a loner, and a more divisive figure in the PLP and among trade union leaders. As Defence Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Wilson and Callaghan governments, he had also come to be identified, as one MP recalled, with 'bombs, cuts, incomes policy and the final ignominy of the 5 per cent pay policy. All were crimes against humanity in the eyes of the left' (Mitchell, 1983: 49). More importantly, perhaps, many MPs also recognised that Foot would be more acceptable than Healey to the party outside Parliament:

> The reasoning of many of the right and centre MPs who might have been expected to vote for Healey, but in fact voted for Foot, was that if a left-wing leader was likely to emerge from the Electoral College in due course, it was desirable that he was seen to have been the choice of the PLP in the first place … Foot was aware of this view and sought to capitalize on it, declaring at the beginning of his campaign that 'If I am elected the likelihood of my being rejected by the Electoral College is very small indeed'. This factor was reinforced after the first ballot, when it became clear that the best Healey could hope for was a *narrow* win. Such an outcome would subsequently undermine Healey's prestige as leader and make it even more likely that an attempt would be made to overturn the result when the Electoral College was in place. Thus some MPs felt that if Healey could not win decisively, and be seen to be the overwhelming choice of the PLP, it would be better if he did not win at all. (Punnett, 1992: 94)

As Punnett notes, a further consideration that weighed heavily with some MPs was that if a left-wing leader was inevitable once the electoral college was established, it was preferable for that leader to be Foot than Benn. In this respect, Foot's candidature was strengthened by his declaration that, should he win the contest, he would lead the party into the next general election. In the event, he was re-elected unopposed in 1981 and 1982, and remained leader until his resignation shortly after the 1983 general election. Had Healey been elected leader in 1980, he would almost certainly have been challenged by Benn in the electoral college (as, indeed, he was for the deputy leadership) in 1981 (Punnett, 1992: 95; see Chapter 6).

As Stark explains, 'That Foot was considered the best candidate around whom the Party could unite spoke volumes about the situation in which

Labour found itself in 1980'. Foot, he notes, 'was no neutral figure; he had long been associated with the Party's left wing'. Compared to Healey, however, who was 'clearly from the Party's right wing', Foot 'truly was the unity candidate' (1996: 128). While this was clearly true of the party as a whole, it was much less so of the PLP, in which Foot emerged victorious by a mere ten votes. Of these, four were cast by right-wing MPs – Ron Brown (brother of George, the party's former deputy leader), Tom Ellis, Neville Sandelson and Jeffrey Thomas – who would later defect to the SDP, having apparently 'voted for Foot in the belief that his left wing views and lack of capacity to lead would destroy the Labour Party all the more quickly' (Morgan, 2007: 379).

In the final ballot of the 1976 contest, eight moderate Labour MPs – Leo Abse, Ian Campbell, Tam Dalyell, John Fraser, James Hamilton, Peter Hardy, Whitehead and the outgoing leader Wilson – had voted for Callaghan, not Foot. They did so partly because they were choosing a prime minister, not merely a new party leader. As Kinnock recalls, voting for Callaghan in that contest 'was what "mainstream" people did' (Kinnock, 2018). In the final ballot in 1980, all eight voted for Foot; had they voted for Healey instead, Healey would have won. Most were not members of any campaign group. Instead, they 'occupied the vital centre ground which candidates must appeal to in order to win' (Roe-Crines, 2010: 201). Crucially, it was Foot, not Healey, who was able to garner their support.

In some cases, notably Abse and Dalyell, long-term friendship with Foot and lack of personal affection for Healey were relevant factors (private information). In others, political affiliation may have been decisive. As Kinnock recalled, Fraser was 'always on the "sensible Left" of the PLP and a long-time member of the Tribune Group', while Hardy had 'strong interests in the environment and animal rights. His manner made people think of him as conformist Rightish Labour, but often his inclinations were to the Left' (Kinnock, 2018). Whitehead, as noted above, declined to back Healey following his refusal to contribute a statement of his views to the *Guardian* and voted (twice) for Foot thereafter. Wilson voted for Healey in the first ballot, but switched to Foot in the second. According to Kinnock, Healey was 'a lazy campaigner (a main reason for his defeat – MPs thought that they were being taken for granted) and it's possible that Harold thought Denis should have been more grateful for his support' (Kinnock, 2018). According to one of Healey's supporters, 'at least a dozen uncommitted MPs', including some who went on to lose their seats in the 1983 general election, 'succumbed to

constituency pressure and [voted] for Foot to save their skins' (Radice, 2002: 292–3). Faced with a critical test in the party's last purely parliamentary leadership election, he concluded, the PLP 'lost [its] collective nerve and voted for a prolonged spell in opposition'.