



From [Labour Uncut](#):

Thank you very much. It is great to be with you all this afternoon. We are here to celebrate the life of one of the true heroes of the Labour party: George Lansbury. A man who was - to quote the great historian AJP Taylor - "the most lovable figure in British politics".

We as a party are really only beginning to understand the true significance of the man and of his leadership of the party; a process of rehabilitation is underway yet is far from complete.

I think of Lansbury as arguably the greatest ever Labour leader. Not in an empirical sense in terms of elections won - he never faced the electorate in a general election as our leader.

Raymond Postgate wrote after George had resigned - and two weeks later an election was called - that "now they had lost their only popular leader, it was enough to wreck the labour men's hopes of a victory".

Irrespective of this, to have a third Labour government in 1945, or Wilson's and Callaghan's governments of the 60s and 70s - or Blair and Brown's of more recent years - you had to have a party for them to inherit and subsequently lead; indeed from which to govern.

This is part of Lansbury's legacy - to quote George Thomas

"He not only saved the soul of the party, he saved the party. We could have sunk into oblivion and the Liberals could have been reborn".

When I think of George Lansbury I am consistently reminded of the fundamental paradox of the Labour party; the source of great hope whilst consistently being a provider of such profound and indeed bitter disappointments for us all. Its relationship between romance and rationalism.

Consider the events leading to George's resignation. Half of Baldwin's 500 seats were vulnerable. There was a possibility of a newly confident Labour Party gaining a majority and prime minister Lansbury. Contrast that with the party of 1932 - totally and utterly beaten - 50 odd seats left. Broken. In that short space of time he had overseen a profound transformation.

Yet what about military support for the Abyssinians through the League of Nations: on this to quote Postgate: "its leader was beginning to answer no; its members yes". George offers to resign: at the 1934 Stockport conference, at the TUC in 1935 in Margate, Before the party conference in Brighton and finally at the conference itself.

At the conference Lansbury rises to speak to choruses of "for he's a jolly good fellow" throughout the hall. He starts by saying: "I agree with my friends who think it is quite intolerable that you should have a man speaking as leader who disagrees fundamentally on an issue of this kind". He then makes the most powerful statement possible about his Christian socialist convictions.

What follows - as hailstones thundered down on the roof of the conference centre - is Bevin's brutal assassination of George. A "calculated bad temper", according to Mr Postgate - which went beyond politics containing an "odious dimension totally unworthy of British democratic politics" to quote John Sheppard.

Yet George knew his position was unsustainable - he had written earlier to the general secretary stating precisely this. Bevin knew this; it was a calculated and brutal act of political destruction.

He later said "Lansbury's been dressed in saint's clothes for years waiting for martyrdom. All I did was set fire to the faggots". Yet what was so outrageous in George's eyes was not Bevin - it was the failure of any member of the NEC to step forward to clarify the true facts.

This day I believe - 1 October 1935 - is a watershed moment in the history of the party. Bevin's assault was part of a piece directed at the three great prophets of Labour - Kier Hardie, Ramsey Macdonald and George Lansbury. He had continuously made clear it was not Hardie who formed the party; he had seen Macdonald's dilemmas as symptomatic of a middle class capture and intellectualism and subsequently placed Lansbury and Cripps in the same bracket.

Of course, Labour has always been a haven for many different types of "socialism". For example, Tony Crossland identified 12 differing labour types. Yet at the same time Labour - as Tawney once said - lacks a discernable creed; or as GDH Cole famously put it: retains a "socialism without doctrines". Despite this, two broad traditions can be identified: romantic and rationalist.

The romantic tradition driven as a reaction to capitalist dispossession, commodification and rationality building an imaginative, charged, passionate socialism of human virtue, creativity and self realisation dating back to certain artistic and literary movements; of Ruskin and Morris. Creating inspirational, although often lonely, leaders.

To me it is no coincidence that Hardie, Macdonald and Lansbury at critical moments display a sense of loss and loneliness - Bessie had died in 1933 and Edgar passed away on 28 May 1935.

The rationalist approaches; socialism the product of deductive reasoning and enlightened thinking; a question of science and not emotion.

The thirties saw the defeat of the party intellectuals - of Cole and Tawney - again at the hands of Ernest Bevin - and the victory of the professional political figures to replace them - of Attlee, Morrison and Dalton. Yet at the same time the removal of Lansbury in 1935 marked the fundamental change in the character of political leadership. The victory of the pragmatists and political operators over the prophets of Labour.

It is the rationalists, the organisers, the planners and the pragmatists that have consistently won out over the prophets, the utopians and the romantics. Yet it is precisely the latter that have inspired the hope around labour.

The first three great prophets of labour - Hardie, Macdonald and Lansbury. Later with Bevan and Foot; maybe Kinnock. The "apostles of the old faith" to quote Ken Morgan.

The thirties saw the page turn toward the younger - and more middle class- intellectuals - the planners, and economists around Dalton. The unions retreated into organisational issues and it was Bevin who is the critical figure in the removal of Labour's passion and romance; he took responsibility for removing our prophets.

1 October 1935 is arguably the critical moment in Labour's historical move away from a romantic tradition.

So what was it about George Lansbury?

I would pick out a number of factors.

First, George Lansbury was the quintessential Labour moralist; the utopian visionary driven by the search for cooperation and fellowship. Not in the abstract but lived through every day of his life.

A key founder in 1906 of the Christian Socialist League, he became its vice president. His principles could not be compromised; especially his pacifism. Not tribal - witness his early liberalism. Like Hardie and Macdonald, a radical in terms of women's emancipation and the widening of the franchise; driven by fundamental concerns about human dignity and equal worth which at times left him in Brixton and Pentonville prisons.

Second, as I have mentioned, he is arguably the greatest ever leader of labour in opposition. At the darkest moment in its history he became leader and held it together; driven by a sense of obligation to the party.

Third, arguably he was the driver behind the most important public document of the last century - the minority report on the future of the poor laws - but written out in the subsequent history of this story by the Webbs. Beatrice said he had "no brains to speak of". George once said that "the Fabians were much too clever and superior for ordinary persons like myself".

His greatest role - as poor law guardian; his hatred of the workhouse. The minority report was the cornerstone of the future welfare state. George refused to accept the notion of the undeserving poor - a belief the Labour party of today should well remember. It was the 1946 legislation that arguably stands as part of George's real legacy - when part of his life's work - the end of the poor law - came to effect.

Fourth, he led the arguments in favour of a new deal here in Britain and against the proposals of the May committee; again history is unkind to him in its neglect.

Fifth, we can learn from his humility. Four times he tried to resign before eventually being allowed to. Loved, adored yet abused in a totally disingenuous way by Bevin and written out of the subsequent script as Labour was handed over to the middle class planners and managers.

Sixth as a true pioneer of localism - what else was populism?

Seven, as a great journalist - in 1912 he helped found the Daily Herald. Not an insignificant contribution to the world of news the media and popular culture - possibly as great a contribution as that of the celebrated journalist, Michael Foot.

For all of these reasons GL was arguably Labour's greatest leader.

Why has he been neglected?

For example, in his brilliant 1987 book, *Labour People*, Ken O Morgan refracted the history of Labour through the prism of some 30 odd key fixers and organisers, thinkers and philosophers, members and leaders; pragmatists and prophets. Yet barely mentions George.

He describes Labour as too often the victim of ancestor worship, yet ignores arguably Labour's greatest ever leader - what is this paradox about? Where should "good old George" stand in our own history?

His biographer concluded thus: "In 1940 he left a vital legacy for any politician - exemplified in his own political life - the conviction that people matter". We return to the question: why does George not matter more?

Is it because he had no real idea about the extent of evil? His pleading with Hitler? His socialism was preceded by his Christianity; yet of a type resting uncomfortably with Labour's subsequent entry into war time government

Was it because of his hostility to the middle class imperialism towards the poor? Symbolised by Toynbee Hall which rested uncomfortably in the later world of Attlee, Dalton and their ilk? His experiences in both east London and stone breaking in Australia informed an approach to poverty which was not abstract; but built on the day to day working class experience.

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I would suggest he is neglected precisely because he was a romantic - an avid reader of Tennyson, Browning, especially William Morris, and indeed Blatchford. We as a party prefer our rationalists.

Maybe neglected as beyond easy categorisation.

He stood with Ben Tillett at the 1889 dock strike, and active at various times with the Fabians, member of both SDF and ILP. By 1903 he wins a place on Poplar borough council and in 1906, with the establishment of the Christian Socialist League, becomes vice president. He was involved in all elements but owned and therefore promoted by no faction.

One final point I would make. Labour's prophets and romantic figures since the party was formed have tended to be celts - Hardie, Macdonald, Bevan, Kinnock. Lansbury is arguably the Labour Party's greatest English figure. It is precisely that English radicalism that we must rediscover today.

I believe the significance of George Lansbury was his ordinariness; he was embedded in the common people. That is why he was so loved and adored. Dylan Thomas once said that the Labour movement at its best is both "magical" and "parochial". That perfectly describes Labour's greatest leader, George Lansbury - "good old george" - his humanity is both magical and parochial. It is timeless. Tragically, he gave more to us than we gave to him. He deserved so much more.

Thank you very much.

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