



Leadership and Change: Prime Ministers in the Post-War World -

Harold Wilson

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I will begin, if I may, by saying how saddened I am by the fact that Professor Ben Pimlott is not here today, sitting in the front row looking quizzical or, better still, up on the platform delivering this lecture instead of me. Ben's widow, Jean, is happily here today, but though I have heard her deliver one of Ben's lectures when his voice had totally failed him, I can hardly expect her to take over from me on this occasion. Ben and I worked on Harold Wilson at the same time. He was about a year ahead of me and, for obvious reasons, I did not read his book until my own was with the printer. When I did, I was unsurprised to find that his biography was highly intelligent, well-written and well researched. I was relieved to find that, on every important issue, we took a similar view. And I was delighted to find that, while Ben was interested above all in the minutiae of Labour Party politics, I was much more concerned about Wilson's foreign policy. The two books complemented each other admirably. Ben's displayed that combination of scrupulous scholarship with an acute understanding of human nature which marked all his work. He was our leading political biographer and for that reason as for so many others is sorely missed today.

When I told Roy Jenkins that I had been asked to write the official biography of Harold Wilson he thought the task well worth undertaking. If he had to invest in the reputation of a twentieth century prime minister, he said, he would choose Wilson as a good growth stock. That was in 1991, some fifteen years later I cannot say in all honesty that my investment in Wilson has shown any dramatic appreciation. In a recent poll professing to measure the public's assessment of a prime minister's success, he and John Major came equal bottom. Whether this was in any real way representative of public opinion and what criteria were adopted in deciding what constituted "success" remains uncertain: one cannot pretend, however, that the conclusion was encouraging to anyone concerned for Wilson's reputation. Students of the period have for the most part treated him with indifference if not contempt. It would, indeed, be difficult to claim that his years as prime minister were radiantly successful: I would maintain, however, that given the problems he faced and the atmosphere in which he was required to solve them, he deserves to be treated with far greater respect than is customarily allowed him.

It is hard today to recall the euphoria which greeted Wilson's accession to power after the election of 1964. In that campaign he had brilliantly, if largely unfairly, characterized his opponent, Alec Douglas-Home, as an amiable but tweedily ineffective aristocrat, wholly out of touch with the contemporary world. He had set out his own stall at the party conference at Scarborough in October 1963. For forty-five minutes he kept a hard-boiled, sceptical and jaded audience enthralled as he set out his vision of the future. Under Labour there would be a second industrial revolution, creating ten million new jobs by the mid 1970s by: "Planning on an unprecedented scale to meet automation without unemployment; a pooling of talent in which all 'classes' could compete and prosper; a vast extension of state-sponsored research; a completely new concept of education; an alliance of science and socialism." Only by central planning could the full potential be realised: 'Because we are democrats, we reject the methods which Communist countries are deploying in applying the results of scientific research to industrial life but, because we care deeply about the future of Britain, we must use all the resources of democratic planning, all the latent and under-developed skills of our people, to ensure Britain's standing in the world.' The Tories had proved themselves incompetent to

meet this challenge. They said Britain would have all the scientists it needed by 1965: "Of course we shall – if we do not use them. We shall have all the bull-fighters we need by 1965." They believed in amateurism at a time when even the MCC had abolished the distinction between amateurs and professionals, "in science and industry we are content to remain Gentlemen in a world of Players." But Labour too must be prepared to rise to new challenges: "There is no room for Luddites in the Socialist Party.The Britain that is going to be forged in the white heat of this revolution will be no place for restrictive practices or for outdated methods on either side of industry."

That speech, in effect, provided Wilson's platform for the 1964 election. It caught the nation's imagination and won their votes. An overall Tory majority of over 100 was turned into a Labour majority of five. But though the result was impressive, it left no room for over-confidence. The big winner in the election had been the Liberals who had secured two million extra votes. Mainly these had been taken from the Conservatives, but the Labour vote was still down in comparison with 1959. A majority of five, even though the Liberals were unlikely to make common cause with the Conservatives in the immediate future, was uncomfortably, even unmanageably small. Wilson knew that he was only marking time until the moment seemed propitious for him to go back to the country. A sensible rule for any incoming prime-minister is to introduce as quickly as possible any measure which is necessary but is likely to prove unpopular with the electorate. Wilson had no such period of grace; from the start he knew that another election might be just round the corner, at the most round the next corner but one. He could not afford to alienate even a small part of the electorate in case a snap election was forced on him and there were enough extra malcontents to wipe out his majority.

Wilson announced proudly that he would not allow his precarious position to deter him from pushing forward with the promised programme. The Queen's speech at the opening of Parliament in November 1964 showed that he was going to be - or at least was going to try to be – as good as his word. Prescription charges were to be abolished, the iron and steel industry was to be nationalised, a major review would be launched in the field of social security. It was a full-blooded socialist programme, but introduced by a government which claimed that it could work with business, that it understood and could ride with the tide of international economics in a way unknown to the Conservative amateurs who preceded it. A few people might be temporarily worse off because of the government's activities, but in the not-so-distant future the country would be vastly more prosperous. Everyone would benefit from Labour's policies.

Wilson might have got away with it. The first few months of his administration did show a welcome energy and efficiency. But almost before he had taken possession of 10 Downing Street the economic storm was beginning to rage, driving the ship of state disastrously off course and threatening to swamp it altogether. The most immediate problem was the trade deficit which seemed to be running at £800 million a year, twice as bad as Wilson had deemed likely in his most gloomy moments. Some economists have questioned these figures, but Wilson himself believed in them and convinced not only his colleagues but the foreign bankers and investors that Britain was in a desperate plight. There were various ways of tackling the problem. The most dramatic would have been devaluation. Before the election this option had been firmly excluded. "There will be no devaluation. You would water the weeds as well as the flowers," Wilson declared. If the economy was really in as dire a state as now appeared, it seemed clear that the possibility would have to be reconsidered. It was, but only to be dismissed again. Wilson concluded that the certain risks were greater than any possible gains and that "socialist" policies could cure the balance of payments problem.

It has often been maintained that the rejection of immediate devaluation, when it could plausibly have been presented as the result of thirteen years of Tory misrule, was an egregious blunder. At least as many doubt whether devaluation would have achieved the hoped-for result. The Bank of England opposed the move both in principle and because it feared that a Labour government would squander whatever benefits there might be. To the layman it seems as if the balance of economic argument tips narrowly in favour of devaluation but that the point is anyway academic since politically such a step was inconceivable. Wilson was haunted by the fact that he had been involved in the last devaluation in 1949, and that if he did the same thing in 1964 Labour would be for ever stamped as the party of the easy option. He saw sterling, said

Denis Healey, “as a sort of virility symbol”; to let its value fall would be proof of British weakness. Discussion of the possibility was banned, even in the most privy conclave.

If Britain was not to devalue it must deflate; that at least was the judgment of the Treasury and the Bank of England. Up to a point Wilson accepted the logic; but he could not tolerate the price that society would have to pay, particularly in unemployment. He sought a third way, holding the economic line by a series of stop-gap measures such as curbing imports and cancelling a few ambitious and expensive programmes, but sticking to his guns over the main items in his projected social revolution. Callaghan’s first budget a week after the Queen’s speech increased social benefits and national assistance as well as introducing a capital gains tax. The results were damaging, verging on the catastrophic. The international bankers panicked at what they saw as Labour’s improvident and inflationary policies. Lyndon Johnson, the American President, who was temperamentally well disposed towards the new government, was almost equally alarmed. “The British decision has shaken us some,” he admitted. There was a hectic run on sterling and the reserves were dangerously depleted. Lord Cromer, the Governor of the Bank of England, managed temporarily to extricate the government from its difficulties by raising a guarantee of \$3,000 million to protect sterling, but the first fine careless rapture of Wilson’s administration had been for ever dispelled. From now on, until he finally resigned nearly twelve years later, he was doomed to live from hand to mouth, perpetually strapped for cash, peering apprehensively into an uncertain future, forced to chop and change his policies to suit the dismal economic circumstances which prevailed.

It was because such tactics were forced on him that he acquired the reputation of a trimmer, a man without principles or convictions who would abandon any friend or policy without hesitation if it seemed to him expedient. Clearly, the charge has some validity. Wilson believed that it was his prime responsibility to keep the Labour government in office; any conduct that seemed likely to defeat this object, however commendable in itself, must therefore be eschewed. A prime example of what to him seemed the merest prudence yet to others appeared a betrayal of principle was his attitude towards the nationalisation of the steel industry. This piece of legislation was enshrined in the manifesto and Wilson could therefore not discard it, but privately it seemed to him unlikely that it would contribute much towards the nation’s prosperity. Certainly it was not worth going to the stake for. Yet it looked as if that was where he might end up, because a handful of Labour MPs, notably Desmond Donnelly and Woodrow Wyatt, were strongly against the project. In normal circumstances they could have been ignored and crushed if they stepped out of line. So small was the Labour majority, however, that the rebels, if they persisted in their opposition, could bring down the government. Wilson devoted endless time and energy to the search for a compromise which would satisfy the rebels while not alienating the rank and file of the party. It proved a thankless task, which earned him little credit with anyone involved. Wyatt claimed to have found him “totally cynical”. Wilson kept repeating that he was a pragmatist and insisted: “I don’t think there are ten votes in the country in steel one way or the other but I’m stuck with it.” When Wilson told the cabinet what he had been doing Crossman accused him of being “without a touch of vision – no Kennedy touch, not even the dynamic of Lyndon Johnson.” The Queen’s Speech of November 1965 omitted any reference to steel; proof that no compromise had been discovered. In the eyes of much of the parliamentary Labour party this meant that the government had shirked its clear responsibility.

Steel was only one of a myriad of problems which beset him during his three administrations. Wilson recorded his years as prime minister in two volumes of memoirs which are notable for their crushing tedium even in a branch of literature not renowned for its liveliness. Yet at the same time they are among the most valuable and, in their own way, most fascinating records ever left by a senior minister. They report, in often otiose detail and with a flatness memorable for its refusal to distinguish between the important and the trivial, the permanent and the ephemeral, the events of each day as they happened. When, for instance, the developing crisis in Rhodesia deserved all his attention, Wilson would find himself grappling simultaneously with a run on sterling, a furious Minister of Defence complaining about a projected cut in spending, a left-wing revolt over the nuclear deterrent, an American President demanding support for his policy in Vietnam, not to mention a row between his political and his private secretaries, a scandal involving an MP’s improper use of inside information and all the routine matters that by themselves fill the life of a prime minister to overflowing. Worse still, these problems were inter-related: if he made no concessions to the left wing over the deterrent they would be more likely to revolt over Vietnam; if he did not do what the

American President wanted over Vietnam the run on sterling might become a stampede. Wilson could, of course, have left some at least of these problems to other members of his government, but, like so many prime ministers, he found it hard to delegate, being confident that on every issue there was a significant contribution which only he could make. The consequence was that each day, and all too often a great part of each night as well, was spent on a roller-coaster of recurrent crises which left no opportunity for calm reflection, let alone serious strategic planning.

This was the more to be regretted because the administration over which he presided was crowded with exceptionally able ministers who, if only he had felt able to trust them, were well capable of looking after their designated fields. A government which was led by a prime minister who could boast, and frequently did boast, that he had been awarded the most distinguished First in PPE of his year, perhaps of his decade, and which included such men as Roy Jenkins, Denis Healey, Anthony Crosland and Richard Crossman, was intellectually streets ahead of anything the Tories of the day could offer. James Callaghan and, when he was sober, George Brown were outstandingly efficient administrators capable of arguing a case with eloquence and conviction. Tony Benn and Barbara Castle threw themselves into whatever task they had been allotted with a passion and energy that ensured they would leave a mark, if not always precisely the mark that Wilson had envisaged when he appointed them. The problem was that two at least of these felt that they should have been at Number Ten instead the present incumbent; Crossman was a professional trouble-maker and plotter who could never resist a chance to stir up dissent within the Cabinet; and as for the others, loyalty and a readiness to toe the party line were not conspicuous among their attributes. Wilson believed in “creative tension”, a healthy rivalry between ministers and the evolution of policy by rational argument and the eventual victory of the stronger case. Unfortunately, given the personalities involved it was inevitable that the tension would often be destructive rather than creative and that victory would be won not by those who had the stronger case but by those who were most unscrupulous in their tactics and who possessed the bigger guns and the louder voices when the issue came to Cabinet.

Though Wilson eventually found it necessary to entrust the Foreign Office to George Brown and then to Callaghan, it is noteworthy that the Foreign Secretaries of his first choice, Patrick Gordon Walker and Michael Stewart, were not among the more dynamic of his appointments. The reason was that he saw foreign affairs both as providing a global stage on which he would rejoice to star and as posing problems on which he had strong views which he was determined to impose upon his colleagues. The country would probably have been better served if he had devoted more of his time and energy to economic affairs and the development of Britain’s industrial base and less to such issues as Vietnam, Rhodesia or the British presence East of Suez. That, however, was not how he saw his responsibilities. The tragedy for him was that, on almost every major issue, political, economic and military realities forced him to follow a course almost directly contrary to his deep convictions.

Churchill once remarked that he had not been appointed prime minister to preside over the dissolution of the British Empire. By the time that Harold Wilson found himself in Downing Street the process of dissolution, irreversible even when Churchill stated his position, had been far advanced. Logically and emotionally Wilson was prepared to accept, indeed enthusiastically agree, that the day of empire was over, but he did not accept that this necessarily entailed any marked diminution of Britain’s status in the world. He had not been elected, he would have maintained, to preside over the exclusion of Britain from the table of the great powers. So far as he was concerned, the “Great” was still in Great Britain and ever more would be so. When left-wing – or just realistic - members of his party argued that it was folly to waste vital resources keeping forces in such far-flung relics of empire as Hong Kong or Singapore, he retorted that such people “would like to contract out and leave it to the Americans and Chinese, eyeball to eyeball, to face this thing out It is the surest prescription for a nuclear holocaust I could think of.” In another context he would have substituted Russia for China and allotted Britain the same mediatory role. He was ridiculed for absurdly over-stating the role that Britain could play in resolving, or at least palliating, any dissension between the great powers, not to mention his own personal influence with the leaders of Russia, China or the United States. And yet he was not being entirely foolish. He was surely right in thinking that there was a real contribution to be made, if only as a conveniently positioned honest broker, and that the potential to serve in that role should not lightly be discarded.

Two underlying considerations were always in Wilson's mind: the need to keep the Commonwealth united and the vital importance of the Anglo-American alliance. That these two aims sometimes seemed incompatible was an additional, vexatious strand in the complex web of commitments and responsibilities. One point, however, on which the two were entirely compatible and yet over which Wilson eventually found himself reluctantly compelled to disoblige them both was the British military presence East of Suez. When Lee Kuan Yew told him that the retention of the British base in Singapore was essential for the survival of democratic socialism in the area; when the Australians used such words as "treachery" and "betrayal"; when the American Secretary of State threatened dire consequences if Britain reneged on its commitments: Wilson found himself entirely persuaded that they were right. Britain's frontier was on the Himalayas, he once pronounced grandiloquently. It took three years of economic crisis, three years in which the ever more straitened British armed forces became more and more obviously unable to perform the tasks imposed on them, to convince Wilson of the harsh reality. Either Britain must pull out of the Far East and the Persian Gulf or it must drastically reduce its commitment to the defence of Germany: any other course would lead to national bankruptcy. The first choice was infinitely disagreeable, the second - with the Cold War still at its most dangerous - was impossible. Later Wilson was to say that he felt clinging on to the East of Suez role had been one of his worst mistakes as prime minister: he was, he said, one of the last to be converted, "and it needed a lot of hard facts to convert me. Others of my colleagues, left-wing and pro-European alike, were wiser in their perceptions." The occasion was memorable as being almost the only time in a long and not wholly unblemished career that Wilson admitted he had been wrong. This is, it is only fair to say, once more than is the case with certain other prime ministers who come to mind.

By withdrawing from East of Suez Wilson knew that he would incur the displeasure of the Americans. This was a particular cause for lamentation. As is not entirely unknown among leaders of the Labour Party, Wilson invested the special relationship with almost mystic significance and consistently believed that by staying close to the President of the day he could exercise a significant influence on the evolution of American policy. He assured the American Ambassador, David Bruce, that Britain "solidly supported" US policy in Vietnam, though hoping that military action would be matched by willingness to negotiate. Left to himself, I think it perfectly possible that he would have manifested that support more overtly, possibly even by committing British forces to the campaign. Mercifully, he was not left to himself. The left wing of the Labour Party, indeed a majority of Labour moderates, believed that it was not enough merely to refuse to support American military action; their policies should be roundly denounced and attacked in the United Nations. When Wilson visited Washington at the end of 1964 President Johnson took him for a walk in the rose garden of the White House and in these seductive surroundings pressed him to send the Black Watch to Vietnam; even a single piper would be better than nothing. Wilson did not respond. The talks had been "very successful", he told George Brown, he had accepted no new commitments as regards Vietnam. For the rest of his time as prime minister he conducted a singularly skilful operation designed not to cause undue offence to the Americans while throwing a sop from time to time to his left-wing. His strength lay in his weakness: the Americans knew that he was under genuine threat from his left-wing and that anyone who replaced him was bound to be more hostile to their interests. When the aerial bombardment of North Vietnam and American use of gas and napalm exacerbated Labour disapproval still further, Wilson told his Foreign Secretary, who was in Washington, that the Americans should be left in no doubt about the strength of feeling in Britain and about the difficulties he was facing. There was, he said, a danger of widespread anti-Americanism and of America losing her moral position. "Should the President try to link this question with support for the pound," he added menacingly, "I would regard this as most unfortunate". Such behaviour would "raise very wide questions indeed about Anglo-American relationships". In the end the Americans accepted the unpalatable fact that no Labour Government could be expected to lend them military assistance in Vietnam. It is curious to reflect that if Tony Blair had only had a more vociferous and independent minded left-wing he might now be able to share with Wilson the credit for keeping Britain out of an ill-considered and unnecessary war.

But no amount of left-wing huffing and puffing was able to affect Wilson's support for that ultimate virility symbol, the nuclear deterrent. Before he became prime minister Wilson told the American Secretary of State for Defense, Bob McNamara, that while he was not a nuclear disarmer he was all for integrating the British deterrent with a common, European effort. The trouble was, he said, that the issue had become "highly electoral" and the idea of a British deterrent had "an emotional appeal to the man in the pub". Once

he was in power it soon became apparent that the issue remained “highly electoral”, in his eyes at least and, what is more, that when it came to the point he shared with the man in the pub an emotional attachment to the deterrent. The fact that Britain’s continued possession of what was somewhat hopefully described as an “independent” deterrent was entirely dependent on American goodwill and continued technological support was, of course, an extra reason for Wilson to tread carefully when affronting American susceptibilities in other fields. In defiance of the strongly expressed opposition of his left-wing, Wilson contrived to retain four out of the five Polaris submarines commissioned by the Conservatives without any significant changes being made to the chain of command by which they were controlled. Even more dexterous, he managed so to present this as to leave the impression that he was itching to place the deterrent under multilateral control and had indeed to all intents and purposes achieved this laudable end. It was, said his admiring Chief Whip, Ted Short, “sheer wizardry. He was the cleverest politician for many a long year – by far.” Regretfully, the Americans accepted the inevitable. The British deterrent had escaped the economy axe, the President was told in mid 1966. The reason given was simple: the nuclear deterrent was the most important of the great power symbols still in British possession. Although Wilson was theoretically committed to giving it up, the President’s briefing went on, he had so far shown no disposition to do so. He was still showing no such disposition when he finally retired.

Wilson as champion of the Commonwealth was a familiar figure; Wilson the ardent pro-American was almost as well known; Wilson the European remained an enigma until almost the end of his period in office. Between the election of November 1970, when Labour had been defeated by a Conservative party led by Edward Heath, and Wilson’s return to power at the head of a minority government in February 1974, Heath had taken Britain into Europe. Would Wilson now take it out again? His line when Britain entered the Common Market had been that, quite apart from the issue of principle as to whether Britain did or did not belong in Europe, on which he kept an open mind, the terms accepted by Heath were damaging to British interests and must be renegotiated. Only then should the issue of British entry be put to the electorate – probably in a referendum. Formally, this remained his position when he again became prime minister. As late as July 1974 he remarked in Cabinet that he thought the odds were against staying in the Market. Nobody took him seriously, and with good reason. By then Wilson was clear in his own mind that he wished Britain to remain in Europe; that the only way this would be acceptable to the Labour Party would be if a clear majority of the British people had shown that such was their wish; that since both parties were split on the issue an election would achieve nothing and a referendum was essential; that he proposed to recommend British membership when the time came for a vote to be taken; and that the only way he could reconcile this attitude with the line he had adopted while in opposition would be by ensuring that the terms for British membership were in some way varied so that he could plausibly maintain that the balance of advantage had changed.

It was a hand that had to be played with much patience and consummate skill. At the time of entry a large majority of the parliamentary Labour Party had been strongly opposed to British membership; by the time renegotiation began hostility to Europe was less pronounced but most Labour members would probably still have favoured withdrawal. They had somehow to be convinced that things had changed. Barbara Castle was sceptical whether any new terms could possibly match up to the requirements in the party manifesto: they would end up, she predicted, with “a messy middle-of-the-road muddle”. “I’m at my best in a messy middle-of-the-road muddle” retorted Wilson. He meant it as a joke but he knew that the joke contained a lot of truth. The middle of the road, messy or not, was indeed where he felt most at home. When I was discussing with him the possibility of my writing his official biography I said that I was perhaps unsuitable because, though over the previous twenty-five years I had more often than not voted Labour, I was far from being a committed or doctrinally pure supporter of the party. “That’s lucky,” said Wilson. “Nor am I.” Again it was a joke; again it contained much truth. In the case of Europe, however, he contrived until close to the end to give the impression of being in the middle of the road while in fact being totally committed to the continuance of British membership. Renegotiation, wrote Roy Jenkins balefully, “was a largely cosmetic exercise, producing the maximum of ill-will in Europe and the minimum of result (except for a smoke screen under which both Wilson and Callaghan could make their second switch of position of Europe in five years.)” Some significant gains were in fact achieved, though not nearly enough to win over the hardened Europhobes. It was enough for Wilson, however; his last doubts were stilled when Michael Manley, the Jamaican prime minister, without overmuch prompting, made a statement to the effect that continued British membership of the Common Market would be in the best interests of the Commonwealth as a

whole. This declaration immeasurably eased Wilson's conscience. The prime minister had never previously been able wholly to reconcile his almost atavistic respect for the Commonwealth with his new-found faith in Europe. Now the two could be happily harmonised. He returned to the battle with renewed heart and vigour. When 67% of the electorate finally voted to stay in, even the Daily Telegraph admitted that the result was "quite frankly a triumph for Wilson".

He could legitimately take pride in this achievement but he would not have described it as his finest hour. If there was one success story during his time in office which gave him unequivocal satisfaction, it was the Open University. This was a bold attempt to give a chance of higher education to those who had missed out on university. Wilson had told Callaghan even before he became prime minister that this was going to be one of his priorities and that he would need money for it, and he jealously defended it when every other sacred cow was suffering in the crises of 1965 and 1966. Aneurin Bevan's widow, Jennie Lee, was put in charge of the enterprise. Without her energy and enthusiasm it would have got nowhere, but without Wilson's continued support she would have had no chance to do what she did. It is easy to see why it appealed so strongly to Wilson: his reverence for academic achievement and his genuinely egalitarian instincts both attracted him to a project which would extend the joys of Oxbridge – however much diluted – to a class which had hitherto been denied them. The fact that the most conspicuous beneficiaries turned out to be under-employed middle-class housewives surprised and mildly disappointed him, but never led him to doubt that his initiative had been worth while.

His last year as prime minister was marked by his physical and mental deterioration. His prodigious memory began to fail him; he became obsessed by the conviction that he was being spied on, that the security service which was supposed to guard him was instead working to destroy him. There were probably a few shreds of reality behind his fantasies; a handful of mavericks in MI5 and 6 seem to have concluded that he was a danger to the state and saw it as their duty to bring him down. They were almost entirely ineffective, however; Wilson could well have afforded to ignore them and, in happier circumstances, would certainly have done so. His judgment was no longer what it had been, however; the first traces of the senile dementia which wholly overwhelmed him some fifteen years later were beginning to make themselves apparent. His decline should not be over-stated. Compared with Winston Churchill in the closing stages of his term in office or with Eden at the end of 1956, he was a model of lucidity. But he must have known that he was not the man he had been, and the knowledge preyed on him. Even a year before he would not have prepared, or allowed others to prepare, the infamous Resignation Honours List, in which distinctions were lavished on a range of recipients who were generally deemed unsuitable and whose claim in several cases seemed to be only that they had been or were likely to be financially useful to Wilson or to members of his entourage.

The resignation itself is mainly surprising in the surprise it caused; not just among the general public but in those inner circles where anyone who paid attention should have known what to expect. So many people had been warned, so many hints had been dropped over so long a period, that the secret had been opened as wide as any barn door; yet still when it happened the reaction was stunned incredulity. The main reason for this was a failure to believe that a man as totally wrapped up in politics as Wilson, who had striven so hungrily for office, who had few other interests to pursue, who was under no immediate challenge in his position, should voluntarily surrender power. Nobody ever had. The only prime minister to have resigned in the twentieth century except after electoral defeat, on the insistence of his colleagues or for pressing reasons of health, was Stanley Baldwin, and he was sixty-nine years old, tired and very deaf. Wilson was not yet sixty and apparently fit. When he announced in Cabinet that he was going, the immediate reaction, even among those who should have known better, was that there must be some hidden reason: incipient physical collapse, perhaps, or some hideous scandal which was about to be revealed. Some suggested the whole thing was bluff: Wilson believed that he was indispensable and thought that his colleagues would soon be forced to plead with him to return. In boring fact, when Wilson became prime minister again the first election of 1974 he had told his most trusted intimates that they could not expect him to remain more than another two years in Downing Street. Six months before his resignation he had notified both the Queen and the Secretary to the Cabinet of the planned date for his departure. Minor changes were made to the calendar but substantially he stuck to his plans. His retirement came as a shock to his associates and, still more, to the world at large, but it was long premeditated and certainly unprovoked by any fear of

scandal.

The Open University is a worthy monument to anybody's memory, but Wilson would not have been pleased to think that it was the solitary great achievement of his eight years as prime minister. To have kept Britain out of the Vietnamese war, to have kept it in Europe, certainly mattered greatly to the country but could hardly be classed as dashing political initiatives. His years as prime minister, for reasons, one can argue, largely beyond his control, were singularly lacking in striking achievements. Wilson would have maintained that that was beside the point. The Abbe Sieyès, when asked what he did during the French Revolutionary Terror, replied simply: "I survived." If asked what he had done during his years in office, Wilson might have replied: "I kept Labour in power." After thirteen years in the wilderness he won four out of five general elections and made Labour respectable as the party of government. In so doing he preserved the unity of a party rent by fissures which under his predecessors had seemed unhealable and managed to retain the cohesion of a Cabinet composed of relentlessly warring prima donnas. He did so because party unity was essential if he were to remain prime minister, but he was not actuated by mere self-interest. He believed strongly in social justice. He was resolved that the lot of the poor and the under-privileged should be improved; that education and technical training should increase the chances of all citizens to realise their full potential; that the barriers of class should be whittled down and the right of the employer to ride rough-shod over the employed should be curbed and regulated. He was convinced that movement in this direction was more likely under a Labour than a Conservative government, and that his first duty was therefore to keep Labour in power. If Labour split over some ideological difference, then the Tories would gain or retain power and nothing would be achieved. There might be issues of such significance that this result had to be accepted but on the whole he doubted whether political suicide could ever be a proper course for the leader of a great party. As a style of government, Wilson's perhaps lacked both glamour and nobility, but it worked. A succession of Wilsons as leaders would doom any nation to decline; a Wilson from time to time to let the dust settle while the demolition squads of the radicals gather strength for their next enterprise can be positively beneficial.

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