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Labour's Sixth Generation: governing in a world transformed.

Keir Starmer's Labour Government came to power in 2024 with history rhyming around it. Labour's first election victory in almost two decades shared the year with two sharply contrasting anniversaries: the centenary of Labour's first government in 1924 and the fortieth anniversary of the 1984-5 miners' strike.[1] Together, these two anniversaries symbolise a history of hope and frustration, achievement and disaster, that defines the dynamic of British labour history and forms a context for the new government.

One way to understand the current government in historical terms is as the outcome of an inter-generational political project with its roots in the late-nineteenth century. Exactly what constitutes a 'generation' is open to debate, but it might be suggested that Starmer's government is the work of the sixth Labour generation.[2] The first, born in the mid-nineteenth century, founded the Labour Party and took it into government in the 1920s. The second, born between the 1880s and the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, was the generation of the much-celebrated 'forward march', whose great achievement was to create the 'New Jerusalem' after the Second World War. The third might be characterised as the generation of the 'scientific revolution'. Born in the years around the Great War, many of its members served in the Second Word War, and its leaders held power in the 1960s and 1970s. Their greatest achievement was, perhaps, to accommodate the liberalisation of British society, but they also struggled to deal with the inherent tensions within the labour movement as 'labour's forward march' began to falter. The fourth Labour generation could be viewed as a 'lost labour generation'. Born between the 1920s and 1940s, its older members tasted power briefly in the 1970s, but spent most of their careers in opposition observing the Thatcher

[1] Both were marked by significant publications: David Torrance, *The Wild Men: The Remarkable Story of Britain's First Labour Government* (London, 2024) and Robert Gildea, *Backbone of the Nation: Mining Communities and the Great Strike of 1984-85* (London, 2023).

[2] For an overview of discussions on what defines a 'generation' see Alexandra Popsecu, 'The Brief History of Generation: Defining the Concept of Generation. An Analysis of Literature Review', *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*, 10/2 (2019), 15-30.

governments reversing many of the achievements of the second Labour generation. The following generation, its leaders almost all born in the 1950s, benefitted from the political exhaustion of the Tory Party in the 1990s, and became the most electorally successful Labour generation to date. In return for electoral success, however, this fifth, or 'New Labour', generation redefined the meaning of Labourism, leaving intact (and in some cases extending) the legacy of the Thatcher Revolution. The current, sixth, Labour generation (or perhaps the second 'New Labour' generation), whose more senior members were born in the early 1960s and its younger ones as late as the 1980s, must contend with the legacy of the five generations that went before it. How it does so will define the way it is characterised by future historians.[3]

Some clues as to its intentions may already be divined. Starmer's first major achievement was the resolution the internal party faction struggles that lay latent for much of the New Labour generation. These re-ignited during the 'Corbyn moment' of 2015-19, when a previously marginalised but tenacious socialist left-wing managed to win control of the party, temporarily frustrating the ambitions of a rising generation of Labour M.P.s who considered themselves the party's natural inheritors. A combination of factors, which needn't be examined here, allowed the right of the party to take back control of the party after 2019, a process marshalled by Starmer with impressive ruthlessness, and which left the party's left wing severely, possibly permanently, emasculated.[4] If, on one level, the ascendancy of 'Starmerism' represents a process of inter-generational change, it is also the latest act in a drama that has been central to the history of the Labour Party through each of its five previous generations, and which has its roots in the party's pre-history. Founded on the basis of compromise between the ideational vision of late-Victorian socialism and the pragmatism of trade unionists and Liberal progressives, the party's history has been shaped by successive swings between

[3] Recent surveys that bring out the inter-generational nature of Labour Party politics well include: Douglas Beattie, *How Labour Wins (And Why it Loses) From 1900 to 2024* (London, 2024); John Cruddas, *A Century of Labour* (Cambridge, 2024); Patrick Diamond and Giles Radice, *Labour Civil Wars: how infighting has kept the left from power (and what can be done about it)* (Haywards Heath, 2022); Mark Garnett, Gavin Hyman and Richard Johnson, *Keep the Red Flag Flying: the Labour Party in opposition since 1922* (Cambridge, 2024).

[4] First drafts of the history of this period are provided by Owen Jones, *This Land: The Struggle for the Left* (London, 2020) and Gabriel Pogrund and Patrick Maguire, *Left Out: The Inside Story of Labour Under Corbyn* (London, 2020).

these two impulses. The left has tended to reassert itself in the wake of the failure of the generally dominant right: under George Lansbury after the debacle of the National Government in the early-1930s, in the 1980s, after the collapse of the Callaghan government, and again after the demise of the 'New Labour' project. Each time, the right has wrestled back power, sometimes after protracted and bitter struggles. What is striking about the latest act of the drama is the rapidity and totality of the right's re-ascendancy. It is difficult to see the left re-asserting itself again, given the expulsion of leading left-wing members, the exodus of the left's rank and file and changes in the leadership election rules. If this is the end of a dynamic that has shaped Labour Party history for more than a century, however, it presents a problem. Labour's most creative and transformative periods in government – in the 1940s and 1960s - have been achieved by the generations that managed to forge a working relationship between the party's two wings. It might also be observed that many of Labour's defining ideas have come from the its left wing. If Starmer's Labour Party has genuinely and permanently banished the left, it will need to find another source of transformative thinking from which to craft a vision.

It will need to do so under conditions unimaginable to previous generations of Labour politicians. It is significant that of the two anniversaries shared by the return of Starmer's government, it is the fortieth anniversary of the last great miners' strike that has been most prominently observed in the public sphere.[5] The strike was one of the truly great watersheds of twentieth century Britain, and the subsequent excision of coal mining from the British economy has been the most profound socio-economic change to occur on these islands since the Industrial Revolution.[6] In historical terms, as the immediate memory of mining fades from the coalfields and the cultural-political capital of the labour movement is gradually spent, the current Labour generation finds itself in a fundamentally different position from all of its preceding five generations. The crucial turning point in the once-prolifically debated 'rise of Labour / decline of Liberalism' was surely the decision of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain to affiliate its MPs to the

[5] By, for example, the 'Streic! 1984-5 Strike!' exhibition at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff: https://museum.wales/cardiff/whatson/12346/Streic-84-85-Strike/.
[6] See Huw Beynon & Ray Hudson, *The Shadow of the Mine: Coal and the end of industrial Britain* (London, 2021).

Labour Party in 1908. Since then, the critical mass of every Labour generation was formed around coalfield MPs. The disaster of 1984-5 must be seen as the outstanding failure of Labour's fourth generation, and its long-term electoral consequences were apparent in the reduced majorities in Labour heartlands towards the end of the 'New Labour' period. The full implications of this seismic socio-economic change will, however, be felt by the current Labour generation, the first to exist in a truly post-coal economy. The Brexit vote, the shocking loss of scores of heartland seats in the 2019 General Election and the growth of Reform UK in labour heartlands (disguised beneath Starmer's massive but fragile majority) are all warning signs that the Labour Party is becoming unmoored from the anchors of its traditional, coalfield-centred heartlands. Unless Labour generation number six can find a convincing response it will ultimately face an existential threat. Its position is similar to that of the post-1906 Liberal Government: enabled by a divided and depleted opposition, its ascendancy seems assured, but its position is in reality threatened by deep socio-economic and cultural forces beyond its control. New Labour's second generation would do well to reflect upon the history of the New Liberalism.

The end of mining, and the wider de-industrialisation that went with it, does not just present an electoral challenge. Its geo-political consequences have profound constitutional implications. The Labour project has, across all of its generations, been an overwhelmingly unionist project. The 'National' in Health, Insurance, the Coal Board and other aspects of the post-war settlement was an all-British national. The shock of the 1980s, when the Thatcher government ruthlessly imposed its agenda on communities (or, in the case of Wales and Scotland, nations) that had decisively rejected it at the ballot box, encouraged a re-evaluation of this Labour unionism. The subsequent removal of Britain's heavy industrial base disassembled an essential part of the infrastructure that held the Labour unionist project together. It dissolved the glue that kept not just the Labour base but the United Kingdom intact. The solution of the Blair government – the devolution settlement of 1998 – was arguably the most

successful and far-reaching reform undertaken by Labour's fifth generation.[7] Blair's government was, however, drawing not on the thought of the twentieth-century labour movement, but carrying out work left over from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Liberal-progressive constitutional project. The idea of 'Home Rule All Round', advocated by late-nineteenth century Liberal movements such as the Welsh *Cymru Fydd*, found support within the first Labour generation (even Arthur Henderson, generally seen as a great centraliser, was initially favourable).[8] It was, however, quietly abandoned in the years after the Great War, as administrative exigencies eclipsed cultural aspirations – a process completed during the second Labour generation under the demands of post-Second World War reconstruction. Its resurgence and implementation in the late-twentieth century therefore marks a departure from high-twentieth-century Labour thought and practice, and places the new Labour Government in an unprecedented historical situation. If, as one of its New Labour architects in Wales asserted, devolution is a process rather than an event, we have yet to see its conclusion.[9] How the new government deals with the legacy of the last Labour generation in this respect will have an important influence upon its ability to govern.

To conclude, the first government of Labour's sixth generation inherits an unprecedented confluence of historical circumstances. The decommissioning of heavy-industrial Britian, undertaken over the previous half-century, has closed the engine room of the labour movement. It has replaced a transparent class system, which provided the party with its *raison d'être*, with a more complex social structure (based upon precarity and small units of production) in which the manufacture of communal solidarities essential to Labour politics is more challenging. Meanwhile, the primary means by which Labour governments have traditionally exerted economic and social influence – a strong, centralised UK state – has been significantly modified, partly by the

[7] The historiography of devolution is, by its nature, devolved. A useful collection of essays which brings together analyses of the 1997 campaigns in Scotland and Wales is Bridget Taylor and Katarina Thomson, *Scotland and Wales: nations again?* (Cardiff, 1999). For Wales see John Gibert Evans, *Labour and Devolution in Wales* (Talybont 2019).
[8] The *Cymru Fydd* movement still awaits a full history in English; Dewi Roland Hughes, *Cymru Fydd* (Cardiff, 2006) deals with the topic in Welsh. For Henderson's views on Home Rule for Wales, see *The Welsh Outlook,* Vol. 5 (1918), 184-5.
[9] Ron Davies, *Devolution: A process not an event* (Cardiff, 1998).

dominance of free-market orthodoxies since the 1980s, and partly by the initiative of the last Labour Government in starting the process of devolution. The Labour Party must face this set of circumstances, moreover, having jettisoned its socialist left wing, which has at crucial points in its history provided the party's most transformative ideas. How the new government resolves this conundrum will shape its fate. The current centrepiece of its industrial strategy, the initiation of a new 'green' Industrial Revolution based upon renewable energy, has echoes of Harold Wilson's 'white heat of the scientific revolution' about it. It proposes to take Britain, and the Labour Party, into a new, technologically-devolved but privately-financed, post-carbon age. In so doing, if Starmer's bellicose rhetoric is to be believed, the government will not hesitate to drive a coach and horses through the legacy of previous Labour generations.[10] Whether the Labour Party can step out of its past, yet still retain its fundamental purpose, remains to be seen.

[10] Such as the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act and the 1968 Countryside Act.