

PROFILES IN POWER

# KEIR HARDIE

SOCIALISM



## HARDIE'S CONTESTED LEGACY

The February 2000 edition of *Inside Labour*, a Labour Party journal, was largely given over to celebrating the Party's centenary. The cover of the journal carried twin portraits of Keir Hardie and Tony Blair, obviously designed to convey the impression of continuity of outlook between the leader of the Labour movement

This poster, by Walter Crane, dates from around 1890. Hardie too believed in fraternity, though he sometimes used the language of class warfare.

around the start of the twentieth century and today's Labour Prime Minister. Later that year John Prescott, the Labour deputy leader, asserted: 'the values that motivated Keir Hardie

Roger Spalding examines the continuing controversy that surrounds one of the key figures in the history of the Labour Party.

are the same ones that motivate Tony Blair'. This claim subsequently produced a public denial from Roy Hattersley, a former deputy leader, that Tony Blair's policies had anything in common with Keir Hardie's socialism. What this exchange illustrates is that Hardie's legacy is a contested one. This is an interesting example of how history can be used to fight the battles of the present. In this dispute the two sides are seeking to legitimate their views by aligning them with their versions of Hardie's politics.

The same kind of division may be found within the biographies of Hardie. According to Caroline Benn, whose biography appeared in 1992, an earlier biographer, K.O. Morgan, had a 'hidden agenda', which was to bring about a 're-evaluation of the historical extremist Keir Hardie as a true moderate'. Benn is much more inclined to see Hardie as open to a range of radical ideas, including Marxism. Indeed, in many ways Benn's Hardie resembles her husband, former Labour minister and MP Tony Benn. Both Morgan and Benn argue that their version of Hardie's legacy has an enduring significance for the Labour Party.

These debates clearly indicate that Hardie has a continuing importance, particularly for members and supporters of the Labour Party.

'The Independent Labour Party is in league with life, and works for liberty that man may live.'

#### HARDIE'S EARLY LIFE

Hardie, the illegitimate son of Mary Keir, a servant, was born in 1856. The name Hardie came from David Hardie, a ship's carpenter, whom his mother married some time after Hardie's birth. His early years were characterised by grinding poverty. All his biographers tell how in the 1860s, at a point when his stepfather was unemployed and his mother pregnant, he took a job as a baker's delivery boy. They also tell how he was dismissed for arriving late. He had spent the previous night helping his mother attend to his dying brother.

At the age of 11 Hardie found work in the Lanarkshire coalfields. Despite working 12 hours a day Hardie, who never attended school, found time to learn to read and write. He even taught himself shorthand by scratching the characters onto slate with wire in slack moments in the pit. This drive to acquire an education was indicative of a strong desire for self-improvement. In the late 1870s he joined the Independent Order of Good Templars, a Temperance organisation, and also converted to Christianity; his mother and stepfather were both atheists. At this time religion and Temperance were both seen as movements that provided worthy individuals from the working class with the self-discipline and support to rise above their circumstances.

Hardie was also closely involved in mining trade unionism. At the age of 21 he became secretary of the Hamilton District branch of the Lanarkshire Miners' Union. In 1879 he emerged as a militant leader in the so-called 'Tattie Strike' (a reference to the potatoes that strikers were forced to subsist on) called to resist wage-cuts. In the aftermath of this bitter and defeated strike, he was blacklisted in Lanarkshire pits and never worked underground again. In 1881 he was invited to become paid secretary of the Ayrshire Miners' Association. Taking up this post Hardie moved, with his new wife, to Cumnock, which was to be his home for the rest of his

life. When the Ayrshire Miners' Association collapsed, about a year after Hardie's arrival, he found work on a local newspaper and supported his family in this way until 1886. The Hardie of this period was more a moderately successful example of individual self-improvement than an apostle of socialism. He was a member of the Congregational Chapel and continued his association with the Good Templars.

The following extract from the *Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald*, 1883, gives a good indication of his attitude towards the working class at this point:

Thousands of these men and women never enter a church door or hear the Gospel preached from one end of the year to the other ... The wives ... are slatternly and untidy, having nothing to encourage them to make their dwellings tidy ... The men have no ambition and, beyond getting a drink occasionally, have no amusements. They are completely alienated from all refining or elevated influences.

#### HARDIE AND LIBERALISM

Like many working men involved in the Trade Union movement of the 1880s, particularly if they were also 'chapel' and 'temperance', Hardie looked towards the Liberal Party for political representation. The 1884 Reform Act had extended the vote to a large section of the male working class in the counties. This had particularly benefited the miners, who numerically dominated some county constituencies. In the 1885 General Election 11 Lib-Lab MPs, several of them miners, were returned to Parliament. These were Liberals from working-class, trade union backgrounds, who represented Labour as one of the special interests embraced by the Liberal Party. These MPs were not socialists: they saw their role as bargaining for their working-

HIS SUCCESS AT WEST HAM AND THE CONTROVERSY GENERATED BY HIS ARRIVAL AT THE HOUSE OF COMMONS IN A TWEED SUIT AND CLOTH CAP (A DEERSTALKER, ACCORDING TO K.O. MORGAN), RATHER THAN THE STANDARD FROCK COAT AND TOP HAT, TURNED HARDIE INTO A NATIONAL POLITICAL FIGURE.

class constituents within capitalist society. In 1886 Hardie again became secretary of a rejuvenated Ayrshire Miners' Union. His outlook was that of the Lib-Labs. He campaigned to maintain high wages by restricting output, and also by restricting entry into the industry. He opposed the use of strikes and promoted the 'Friendly Society' side of trade unionism. Friendly societies were early, mutually owned insurance organisations, providing sickness and death benefits to members.

Although critical of the timidity of the Lib-Labs – in 1887 he referred to them as 'dumb dogs that dare not bark' – in 1888 Hardie attempted to join them by seeking the nomination for the Mid-Lanark constituency. Although this was a mining constituency in which he was well-known, the local Liberal Association declined to give him the nomination. In the event Hardie stood, and was defeated, as an independent Labour candidate. Later that year he formed the Scottish Labour Party.

The important point to note is that Hardie's rift with Liberalism was forced upon him by the attitude of the local Liberals. As a result his politics continued to have a strong Liberal tinge. The programme of the Scottish Labour Party included such Liberal staples as stricter control of the liquor

trade and the disestablishment of the state church. Indeed only the demands for the nationalisation of the railways, banks, and mineral rights, and the abolition of the monarchy, set it apart from radical Liberalism. Similarly, Hardie's programme when he contested the 1892 West Ham election contained no explicitly socialist demands. Indeed he publicly declared during the campaign that he belonged to no socialist society.

#### SOCIALISM AND THE ILP

Hardie's adoption as the independent Labour candidate for West Ham followed his decision, taken in the late 1880s, to resign as secretary of the Ayrshire Miners' Union to pursue a political career. At this time there was some confusion as to the meaning of the term 'Labour Party'. For some, like the Lib-Labs, it meant a Labour interest group within the Liberal Party; for others, it implied a distinct and separate political party. It was this blurring of definitions which made it possible for a coalition of radicals, trade unionists and socialists to invite Hardie to become the candidate for West Ham. Hardie, who was known for standing against the Liberal Party in Scotland, won West Ham with the tacit support of the Liberal Party, which declined to put up an official candidate against him. His success at West Ham and the controversy generated by his arrival at the House of Commons in a tweed suit and cloth cap (a deerstalker, according to K.O. Morgan), rather than the standard frock coat and top hat, turned Hardie into a national political figure.

This national standing placed Hardie in a strong position to play a leading role in the formation of the Independent Labour Party (ILP). During the late 1880s and 1890s industrial disputes were making it difficult for workers and employers to support the same political party, the Liberals. During the Manningham Mill dispute in Bradford, for instance, the woollen workers were acutely aware of the anti-union role played by the

local Liberal establishment. As a consequence in Bradford and in other places, particularly Manchester, Independent Labour Groups began to emerge. The term 'Independent' meant independent of the Liberal Party. In 1893 at a conference convened in Bradford these local groups fused to form the ILP. Hardie was elected its first chairman.

The ILP was a socialist party – its programme committed it to the collective ownership of land and production – but its socialism was of a distinctive kind. Unlike the marxist Social Democratic Federation, founded ten years earlier, it did not espouse the idea of class war as a central element of its political outlook. Instead it stressed humanitarian and ethical ideals, such as fellowship, co-operation and personal liberty. The tone of ILP politics is well captured in this 1893 diary entry from Katherine Glasier, a founder member:

'On January 13<sup>th</sup> 1893, the Independent Labour Party sprang into being, and, as a child of the spirit of Liberty, claims every song that she has sung – in whatever land – as a glorious heritage. Life, love, liberty, and labour make liquid music. The Independent Labour Party is in league with life, and works for liberty that man may live.'

Although a socialist party, the ILP decided not to include the word in its title, for fear that it would deter potential recruits. Hardie was completely in tune with these key aspects of the ILP's politics.

From the 1890s onwards Hardie increasingly called himself a socialist, but, like the ILP, he defined his socialism in terms of general human values, not the class struggle. Hence in 1896 he stated:

'I am a socialist because Socialism means Fraternity founded on Justice, and the fact that in order to secure this it is

James Keir Hardie, the Ayrshire miners' leader who first entered the House of Commons in 1892. Is he wearing a cloth cap or deerstalker – and should he be seen as the epitome of Old Labour or the apostle of New Labour?

necessary to transfer land and capital from private to public ownership is a mere incident in the crusade.'

For Hardie the realisation of the values of Fraternity and Justice justified nationalisation, whereas for Marxists the central argument is an economic one, and public ownership is certainly not seen as 'a mere incident in the crusade'. Hardie also rejected the idea of the class struggle. In 1904 he declared: 'Socialism makes war upon a system not upon a class...' This position flowed from his perception of socialism as an inclusive movement that would improve the quality of life for all.

It was a fine sentiment, but not really the product of clear thinking. In the process of struggling against the system of Capitalism, socialists would inevitably come into conflict with its defenders. Indeed, on other occasions Hardie acknowledged this. In 1911, for example, he declared:

... in the end your Liberal Party, just like your Tory Party, is the party of the rich, and exists to protect the rich when Labour and Capital come into conflict ... Make up your mind who you will serve, Labour and socialism or Liberalism and Capitalism.

#### HARDIE AND THE LABOUR PARTY

Hardie wanted the ILP to be a broad and inclusive party. He had, therefore, successfully opposed Robert Blatchford's proposal at the founding conference to commit the party to a policy of abstention in elections that no socialist was contesting. In the years after 1895, when he lost his West Ham seat, Hardie devoted himself to campaigning for the creation of a broad Labour alliance that would include the socialist parties and the trade unions. This work came to fruition in 1899 when the TUC passed an ILP-inspired resolution to call a special conference of trade unions, co-operative societies and socialist parties, to discuss Labour representation. This duly met in February 1900 and established the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) which, in 1906, became the Labour Party. This was a federal body

to which some of the trade unions and some of the socialist groups, like the ILP, were affiliated. The creation of this body did not mean that the Trade Unions had been converted to socialism. It was seen by those trade unions that did affiliate as a way of securing special representation for their interests in Parliament, not as a way of transforming society.

Within months of the LRC's formation it had to fight its first General Election. The new party put up a total of 15 candidates. Of these, only Hardie at Merthyr and Richard Bell at Derby were successful. The results demonstrated the difficulties caused by the continuing Liberal sympathies of many working men. Indeed Bell, a committed Liberal, soon dropped out of the LRC. The election also demonstrated the difficulties that the LRC would have standing against Liberals. Both Bell and Hardie had won their seats in two-member constituencies in partnership with Liberals. It was a recognition of this difficulty that led Ramsay MacDonald, secretary of the LRC, to negotiate an electoral pact with the Liberals, whereby they would not stand against the LRC in certain constituencies. The result of the pact was that the LRC secured 29 seats at the 1906 General Election. The pact, of which Hardie was aware, symbolised the ambiguous position of the Labour Party (as it was now called): it had publicly broken away from Liberalism but, privately, was dependent on it. The same ambiguity was evident in Hardie's 1906 campaign in Merthyr. His Liberal partner was the industrialist D.A. Thomas, later Lord Rhondda. Hardie was quite happy to co-operate with Thomas, and adjusted his rhetoric accordingly. Caroline Benn notes that in the election Hardie:

'had even included 'business men' as part of the Working Class, for he profoundly believed the entrepreneur was as ill-served by giant cartels and monopolies as were working men.'

Later, as he became impatient with Labour's dependence on the Liberals in the period leading up to the First World War, he became rather less inclusive in his outlook.

#### HARDIE IN PARLIAMENT

In 1906 Hardie was elected chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), effectively leader of the Party, but he only held this position for a brief period and resigned in 1908. This decision reflected Hardie's view of his role within Parliament, as an agitator rather than an administrator or organiser. Hence in 1894 he had created a major political scandal by requesting that a message of condolence for the death of 251 miners killed in a pit disaster in Pontypridd be attached to a message of congratulations for the birth of a royal baby. The episode provided Hardie with a platform to make a point about the inequalities of British society. Similarly, when in 1901 he moved a parliamentary resolution calling for 'the inaugurating of a Socialist Commonwealth founded upon the common ownership of land, capital and production', he had little expectation of success in a Conservative-dominated Parliament but every hope of maximum publicity. Hardie seemed to relish the role of lone rebel and once described himself as 'an Ishmael in public life'. Ishmael was a Biblical outcast, and it was typical of Hardie that he should use such a term to describe himself.

Hardie's support for the militant suffragettes also placed him at odds with some of his colleagues. Women's claim for the right to vote on the same basis as men meant, in effect, a property basis. If such a right was conceded, it would have meant middle-class women would be able to vote but many working-class men would still be disenfranchised. The official Labour position was therefore to demand universal suffrage on a non-property basis. Hardie, however, argued that the lesser demand should be seen as a stepping-stone to universal suffrage. His critics tended to see his enthusiasm for the suffragette cause as flowing from his close personal friendship with Sylvia Pankhurst, a younger member of the famous suffragette family.

#### HARDIE AND WAR

Hardie's last great campaign was against war. He had long been an internationalist, believing that the workers of the world had common

interests against the owners of capital, whatever their nationality. For this reason he had attended the founding congress of the Second (socialist) International in 1889. From 1910 onwards, in the face of a growing danger of war between the Great Powers, Hardie campaigned for a European-wide General Strike to be called if war was declared. When war did break out in 1914 he issued a statement calling on the working class to:

'Hold vast demonstrations against war, in London and in every industrial centre. There is no time to lose. Down with the rule of brute force! Down with war! Up with the peaceful rule of the people!'

The demonstrations failed to materialise; and instead Hardie lived to see the Socialist parties, with some minority opposition, line up behind their national governments in support of the war. He was also howled down by a hostile crowd in his own Merthyr constituency. After this meeting Hardie told friends that he understood how Christ felt in the Garden of Gethsemane (that is, on the eve of his crucifixion). Yet despite this hostility, which was even shown by many of his former colleagues, he continued to campaign for a negotiated peace. The strain was enormous and in September 1915, after a period of illness, he died.

#### CONCLUSION

As we have seen Hardie's legacy is a contested one. In many ways, as K.O. Morgan has pointed out, it is difficult to define because of its ambiguity. Hardie, for example, rejected the concept of class war, but on many occasions used its language. It is also difficult to define because of its intangibility. In the immediate aftermath of his death John Burns, a one-time socialist who went over to the Liberals, declared that Hardie was 'the leader who never won a strike, never organised a Union, governed a



#### "WORKLESS"

A Labour Party poster from 1910, when Hardie was MP for Merthyr. The implication was that a Labour government would ensure full employment.

parish or passed a bill'. This is clearly unfair in some respects, but not in all. Hardie contributed little, for example, to the organisation of the PLP.

It is perhaps more useful to view Hardie in the context of his time, rather than define, in a fixed way, a political heritage. Hardie made himself, with some considerable effort, a member of the late-Victorian respectable working class. Like other members of that class he gave his allegiance to the Liberal Party. His experience, however, was that the Liberals were less and less able, or willing, to meet the needs and ambitions of their working-class followers. Hardie's move to socialism was the product of disappointment with Liberalism. His significance was that he came to represent a process that involved more and more working people. Once Hardie made the break with Liberalism, one should see him as involved in a process of experimentation, continually blending new ideas with elements from his past. In 1907, for example, he claimed: 'Communism is a form of social economy very closely akin to the principles set forth in [Jesus's] Sermon on the Mount.'

Two points flow from this. Firstly, that one should see Hardie's politics as being in a state of constant development; and, secondly, that Hardie's politics were the product of a

specific experience by a specific group at a specific time. They cannot therefore be seen as a usable inheritance.

As a final point though, one might note that Hardie's politics were moving away from Liberalism towards a more thorough-going socialism. Most commentators believe that the contemporary Labour Party is moving in the exact opposite direction.

#### TIMELINE

- 1856** born in Lanarkshire
- 1881** secretary of the Ayrshire Miners' Association
- 1886** became secretary of Scottish Miners' Federation
- 1887** became chairman of the Scottish Labour Party
- 1892** elected MP for West Ham (lost seat in 1895)
- 1893** established the Independent Labour Party and became its first chairman
- 1900** helped to found the Labour Representation Committee; elected MP for Merthyr (holding seat until 1915)
- 1906** elected chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party (resigned 1908)
- 1915** died

#### Further Reading

Caroline Benn, *Keir Hardie* (Hutchinson, 1992)  
 Fred Reid, *Keir Hardie: The Making of a Socialist* (Croom Helm, 1978)  
 Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour People* (OUP, 1992)  
 Roger Spalding 'Spinning History: Labour and its Centenary', *New Politics*, Vol VIII No.2, Winter 2001.

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