

Before Jeremy Corbyn, There Was Michael Foot

Michael Foot was a giant of Labour Party politics. The attempts by Labour centrists to diminish his legacy after his death only reveal the extent to which his socialism, like that of Jeremy Corbyn, threatened the British establishment.



British Labour Party politician Michael Foot in 1974. (Central Press / Hulton Archive via Getty Images)

It is not a usual tactic of ambitious politicians to flee the country on the eve of a leadership election. Yet, two days after Jim Callaghan informed the Labour Shadow Cabinet in October 1980 of his intention to resign as party leader, Michael Foot left for Dublin. From the pulpit of St Patrick's Anglican Cathedral, Foot gave a lecture on the eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish writer Jonathan Swift. Foot said little of contemporary politics. He had all but ruled himself out from the forthcoming party leadership election, telling the press his candidacy was "highly improbable."

Yet, back in London, left-wingers were scuttling about to identify the strongest candidate to stop the heir apparent, Denis Healey. Healey was rated by Callaghan as the strongest member of the Shadow Cabinet, yet his tenure as chancellor of the exchequer from 1974 to '79 had proved highly controversial. In order to curb inflation, Healey sought wage control and a humiliating loan from the International Monetary Fund. Healey explained at the 1976 Labour Party conference in Blackpool that the IMF loan "means sticking to the very painful cuts in public expenditure on which the government has already decided." He was shouted at by furious conference delegates, with calls of "Resign!" Behind Healey, members of the National Executive Committee (NEC) looked on, shaking their heads in disgust.

It was these same NEC members, as well as union leaders and assorted left-wing MPs, who showed up at Foot's house in Hampstead upon his return from Dublin. Their mission was to persuade the

shadow leader of the House to change his mind. Among their number included the Yorkshire area president of the National Union of Mineworkers, Arthur Scargill. One of the conspirators was seen carrying a crate of wine through the front door. Foot's father, Isaac, a Liberal MP of the dissenting tradition, had been a strict teetotaler. Michael Foot had no such scruples. Foot's talented filmmaker wife Jill Craigie provided further encouragement and refreshment.

Peter Shore, the shadow foreign secretary, had already announced his intention to stand for leader. Foot had offered his support to Shore, regarded as the most likely left-wing candidate to take on Healey. However, Shore was unacceptable to some on the Left. He had changed his mind in favor of nuclear weapons over the course of his thirteen years as a frontbencher, making him anathema to those who regarded "the Bomb" as the greatest-ever threat to civilization. Foot, a fixture at antinuclear demonstrations, was much more acceptable.

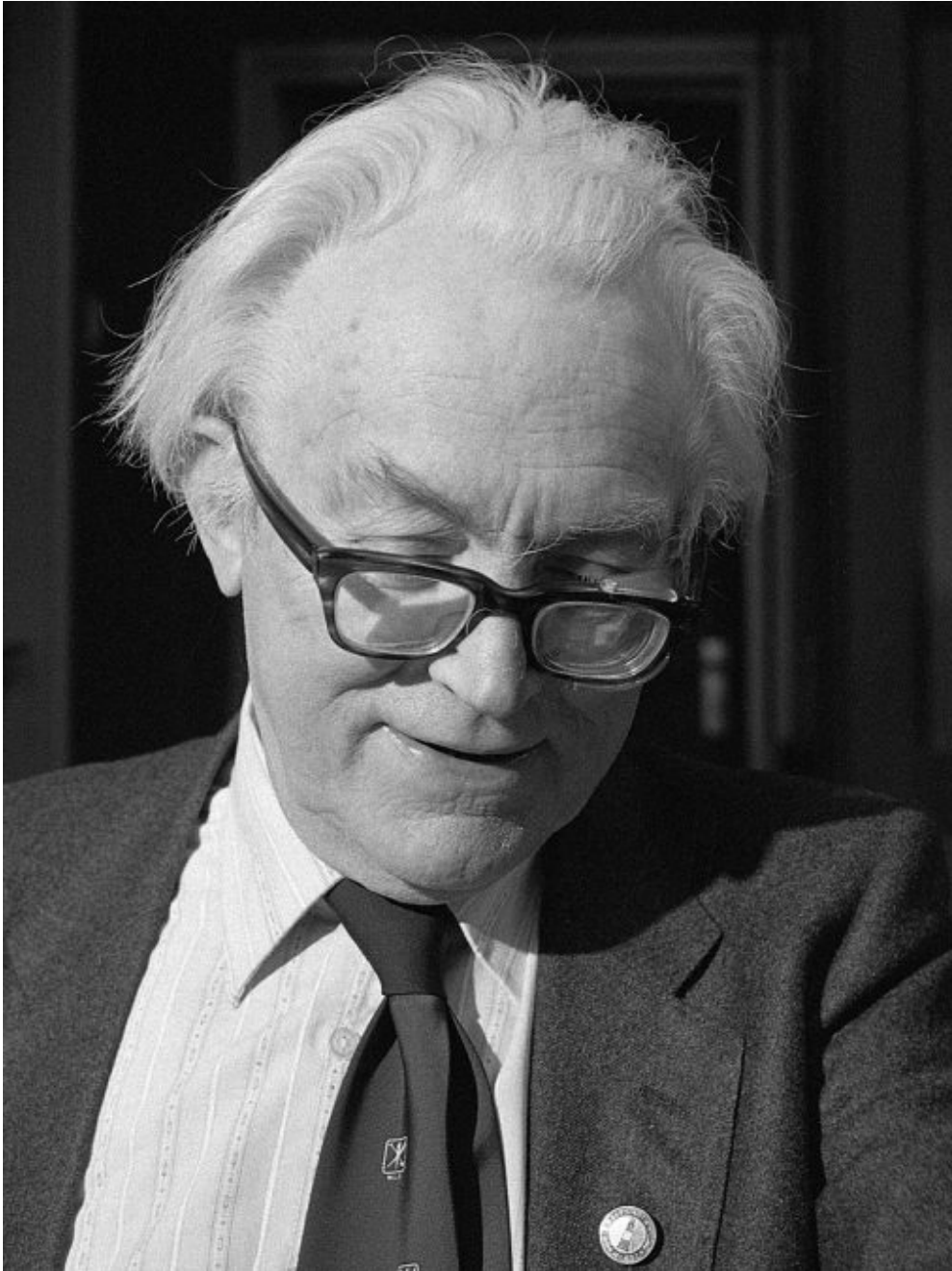
"Michael Foot is remembered today for a defeat."

Ultimately, Foot relented, "overwhelmed by the sheer weight of the pressure." After the final ballot, the two contenders were handed a scrap of paper revealing the results. Healey forced a smile. Foot was described as looking depressed. "He's got it," the shadow chancellor conceded. By a majority of just ten, in the last ever leadership election in which the Parliamentary Labour Party comprised the entire electorate, MPs had just chosen to be led by a scruffy, romantic left-wing intellectual who didn't really want the job.

Foot's reaction was muted. He tried to offer a few words for posterity, managing to utter, "Comrades, this is an historic and unique occasion," before being interrupted by an outburst from one of his supporters, Neil Kinnock, who roared, "Yes, we bloody won!" Foot, a great orator before crowds, was personally shy and self-effacing in smaller settings. He scuppered off to the Gay Hussar to toast his victory with his erstwhile rival Peter Shore. The men occupied a table on the first floor of the restaurant and could be heard singing socialist anthems well into the night. Foot pleaded with journalists who crept up to see the triumphant leader not to take any photographs.

Foot on the Frontbench

Michael Foot is remembered today for a defeat. The 1983 election, in which Labour won just 27.6 percent of the vote, has become a shibboleth among those on the right of the Labour Party as evidence of what happens when wild left-wingers are put in charge of party policy. Indeed, the entire Blair reformation — and the 2016 challenge to Jeremy Corbyn's leadership — was predicated on the idea that Labour must never again experience "another 1983."



Michael Foot attends a meeting of Scandilux in 1981 in the Hague. (Marcel Antonisse / Anefo)

This misunderstands the events of the early 1980s and misjudges Foot's abilities and contributions to the Labour Party. Foot was first elected to Parliament in 1945 as MP for his native Plymouth. The thirty-five-year interlude between Foot's first election as a backbencher and his elevation to party leader is the longest in Labour's history. It is the breadth of these contributions which are required to give Foot a full appraisal.

Michael Foot was not born into the Labour Party. Influenced by his father's beliefs and still teetotal, Foot's first-ever published article was entitled "Why I Am a Liberal" when he was twenty-one. It was time spent working at a shipping firm not long afterwards that converted Foot to socialism in about 1935. He later explained, "I first joined the Labour Party in Liverpool because of what I saw of the poverty, the unemployment, and the endless infamies committed on the inhabitants of the back-streets of that city." Foot's first encounter with Labour councilors would have included the formidable Bessie Braddock and the principled Sydney Silverman.

Foot fell in love with the Labour Party and the organized working class. He came to believe passionately in the words of his hero Nye Bevan, “I tell you, it is the Labour Party or nothing. I know all its faults, all its dangers. . . . [But] I am by no means convinced that something cannot yet be made of it.” Foot believed in loyalty — indeed he wrote a book on the subject — but with the possibility of sincere dissent. It was in this spirit that he operated simultaneously as a Labour MP and editor of *Tribune* in the late 1940s and 1950s when the paper didn’t hold back from criticizing the Labour government for perceived shortcomings.

Foot was a romantic, but not a hopeless one. He understood the realities of politics and the dangers of ideological impotence. When he joined Labour, Foot’s father told him if he was going to be a socialist, he better read the eighteenth-century essayist William Hazlitt. It was the start of a lifelong affinity. Foot enthused, “He was an idealist who knew that present enemies must be fought here and now, tooth and nail, on their own ground.” In words that could have described his own politics, Foot wrote that Hazlitt knew “society could be transformed . . . but the deed would not be done by utopians who would never soil their hands, nor by an arid appeal to reason alone.”

It was through his contributions as a Labour minister where Foot most vividly demonstrated this ethos. Foot refused an offer from Harold Wilson to serve in his first government in the 1960s, but when Labour returned to power in February 1974, he accepted the appointment from Wilson to be employment secretary. Within months of his appointment — and in a hung Parliament — Foot passed one of the most important bills for workers’ rights in British history: the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, which still stands as the basis for workplace safety and has been deployed to defend safe workplaces in the coronavirus pandemic.

Foot’s tenure as employment secretary was prolific. It is where he left his most substantive legacy. Foot is responsible for the creation of the independent body Acas, which oversees employment dispute resolution. In the Employment Protection Act 1975, Foot protected against dismissal for pregnancy and provided for maternity pay. Foot also led the repeal of Ted Heath’s anti-trade-union provisions in the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act 1974, ending the legal concept of “unfair industrial action” and removing unions’ liability to civil action for damages connected to strikes.

After Wilson resigned in 1976, Foot stood for leader, partly, it is said, because he knew he would lose. Jim Callaghan, who’d never been to university, ultimately saw off five Oxford graduates (Roy Jenkins, Tony Benn, Denis Healey, Tony Crosland, and Michael Foot) in the election, but Foot’s performance was impressive. He won on first preferences in the initial ballot and came just eight MP votes short of defeating Callaghan in the second round. This secured Foot’s status as the most influential Labour frontbencher after the prime minister. While he could have asked for any job from the new prime minister, Foot surprised Callaghan by being asked to be made leader of the House, not usually regarded as one of the most significant cabinet posts.

Like his hero Bevan, Foot passionately believed in the power of the House of Commons to implement socialism in Britain. It was at the heart of his ardent Euroskepticism, also shared by Bevan, who denounced the Treaty of Rome in *Tribune*, calling it “the result of a political malaise following upon the failure of Socialists to use the sovereign power of their Parliaments to plan their economic life. . . . There is in fact no Europe in that sense to which the abrogated sovereign rights could be entrusted.”

Foot was once asked by a journalist if he still believed in leaving the European Economic Community (EEC) if the likelihood was that it would make the country poorer. Foot dismissed the question out of hand, stating, “I don’t see how we can solve our economic problems by weakening our democratic institutions.” Foot also distrusted the judiciary, arguing that the working class “would have precious few freedoms left in this country” if their fate had been left to judges.

Foot demonstrated the unique power of the British House of Commons in his three years as Leader of the House. Within a year of Callaghan’s election, the Labour government lost its majority due to a

series of by-election defeats. In the hung parliament, in the midst of an economic crisis, Foot shepherded bills of great importance through the Commons: increases in pensions and benefits, the establishment of the Police Complaints Board, expansion of comprehensive education, a statutory responsibility to provide housing for the homeless, universal child benefit, grants to inner cities, further workplace safety legislation, grants to insulate houses, the Consumer Safety Act 1978, the creation of credit unions, nationalization of the shipbuilding industry, phasing out pay beds in NHS hospitals, and housing security for agricultural workers.

Sometimes these bills were passed by very narrow margins — on occasion by just one vote. Foot's effective and sometimes unconventional manner as Leader of the House infuriated the Conservatives. Nigel Lawson called Foot "Leader of the Reichstag." Airey Neave said Foot reminded him of "Hans Frank, Hitler's legal expert." William Rees-Mogg, editor of the *Times*, saw fit to publish: "The question is not therefore *Is Mr Foot a fascist?* but *does Mr Foot know he is a fascist?*" "Foot passionately believed in the power of the House of Commons to implement socialism in Britain."

Their grotesque hyperbole revealed a key truth: Michael Foot expertly kept the ship of socialism afloat amid very choppy waters. One observer wrote, "His energies quite possibly did as much to keep the Labour government in two years longer than its parliamentary support might indicate, though it is unlikely that historians will ever give him the full credit."

Foot's efforts eventually came unstuck when the Scottish National Party's fury over the government's refusal to implement devolution in Scotland saw the nationalists team up with the Conservatives and Liberals to vote to bring down the government by just one vote. Only weeks after the so-called Winter of Discontent, the Labour Party was destined for defeat.

Foot's speech in the No Confidence debate is one of the finest orations in parliamentary history, preserved as an [audio recording](#), which had been introduced by the Callaghan government the previous year. We will never know if things might have been different had Labour been able to hold out for an October election.

A Leader's Legacy

There was no sense when Michael Foot became Labour leader eighteen months later that he was destined to lead the party to defeat. With the exception of Hugh Gaitskell, who almost certainly would have become prime minister had he not died tragically, every Labour leader of the previous forty-five years had gone on to become prime minister. In January 1981, Labour was polling 13 points ahead of the Conservatives.

Part of the reason Foot had been elected leader was the belief that he would be better able to hold the party together, winning him the vote of Harold Wilson, who was perhaps the most skilled Labour leader in this regard, in the leadership election. Foot was not afraid of rebellion. He cherished the individual right of MPs to dissent. He was not interested in driving away Labour members, believing in the "broad church." Foot would spend time in Commons tearoom, making himself available to MPs of all persuasions.

Yet, Foot's leadership was marred by treachery. Within months of his election, four people who had once sat around the cabinet table with him — Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams, David Owen, and Bill Rodgers — announced that they would be forming a new Social Democratic Party (SDP). Foot regarded the three men as pompous irredeemables, but he felt particularly hurt by the departure of Shirley Williams. The SDP split cast a pall over the rest of Foot's time as leader. By-election defeats, including the infamous homophobic campaign run by the SDP in Bermondsey against Labour's Peter Tatchell, contributed to the sense of impending doom.

Foot also suffered from caricature in a hostile press. Foot was presentationally shambolic. His first

television interview as leader was conducted in a wheelchair because two days after being elected Labour leader, he fell down the stairs and broke his ankle. Most infamously, he was condemned for wearing a “donkey jacket,” a tartan tie, and brown shoes at the Cenotaph at the 1981 Remembrance Sunday commemorations. One newspaper also claimed that Foot dropped his wreath “as if putting out the rubbish.” The reality was that the coat had been bought by his wife, Jill, from Harrods and it had won the admiration of the Queen Mother, who said, “Oh hello, Michael. That’s a smart, sensible coat for a day like this.”

“The image of Foot as some wild man of the Left belies the reality of his leadership.”

But the image of Foot as some wild man of the Left belies the reality of his leadership. He gave an excoriating speech in defense of the Falkland Islanders in 1982, condemning Margaret Thatcher for having “betrayed them.” The Labour MP Tam Dalyell chastised Foot in a Parliamentary Labour Party meeting for his bellicosity. Foot retorted, “I know a fascist when I see one.” In 1940, Foot had been one of the authors of the famed *Guilty Men* pamphlet which exposed the moral bankruptcy of fascist appeasement. Here again, he felt, in General Galtieri’s expansionism, he had found another such enemy.

When the Argentinians were pushed back, it was Margaret Thatcher who claimed victory. In the glow of her military success and facing the vicious attacks of the SDP, Labour’s position as it faced the 1983 general election looked grim. Sensing the inevitable, the Right of the party vacated responsibility of drawing up the party’s manifesto to the Left. Its foreign policy offer — unilateral nuclear disarmament, US troops out of Britain, and immediate withdrawal from the EEC — were all policies which Foot deeply believed, but in the midst of the Cold War, they made Labour an easy target for the “Iron Lady.” Labour’s manifesto, entitled *The New Hope for Britain*, was characterized unhelpfully by the Labour MP Gerald Kaufman as the “longest suicide note in history.” On this, Foot can perhaps be accused of refusing to compromise with the electorate. On Boxing Day 1982, he, Jill, and their dog Dizzy went to the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp to give Christmas presents to the protestors.

Labour’s campaign was not centered around foreign policy. It was focused on unemployment, which had reached a staggering 12 percent under Thatcher. One poll showed 79 percent of voters regarded unemployment to be the biggest issue of the election. Foot’s speeches attracted mass audiences. He addressed one rally of sixty thousand trade unionists.

He had some endearing moments: for example, giving an impromptu lecture on Jonathan Swift on a walkabout in Chorlton. Yet other aspects of the campaign were disastrous. The former prime minister Jim Callaghan renounced Labour’s foreign policy. Denis Healey accused Margaret Thatcher of “glorying in slaughter,” which misread the room in the wake of the Falklands victory. Jill Craigie suggested that her husband would retire soon after the election, which implied either that Labour lacked confidence in itself or that Foot lacked commitment to the role.

The election was a disaster, but Labour was saved by the first-past-the-post electoral system which suppressed the SDP vote. Labour won 209 seats on 28 percent of the vote, whereas the SDP secured just 23 seats on 25 percent of the vote. Foot tried to remain optimistic, saying, “It’s only a setback,” but already there were maneuvers to remove him from the leadership. Some of the very same union leaders who urged Foot to stand for leader in 1980 were now telling him to fall on his sword.

“Foot refused to change his appearance or his habits for the sake of the media.”

Were it not for the formation of the SDP in 1981 and the invasion of the Falkland Islands by Argentina in 1982, it is impossible to say whether Michael Foot could ever have become prime minister. In his first few months in the role, Labour enjoyed double-digit leads over the Conservatives. While the major setbacks of his leadership were external, there is no doubt that Foot did not help

himself either. His principled beliefs made it hard to compromise on key matters of foreign policy. He refused to change his appearance or his habits for the sake of the media.

The Labour Party learned some hard lessons from the Foot leadership. Foot's successor and onetime loyalist, Neil Kinnock, made it his mission to abandon the policies which he believed resulted in Labour's defeat. He introduced a far slicker political operation, enlisting Peter Mandelson and others to change the party's image for a new time. There is a real risk, though, that Kinnock and his successors in New Labour overcorrected. When Michael Foot was elected leader, Tony Benn said Foot "will put new heart into the party." Was the price of electability to undertake a heart transplant, or could a more cosmetic surgery have done the trick?