

I 125 anni della società fabiana

[Next Left](#)

ieri 4 gennaio 2009, 14.46.03

## Happy 125th birthday

ieri 4 gennaio 2009, 14.45.16 | [sunder.katwala@fabian-society.org.uk](mailto:sunder.katwala@fabian-society.org.uk) (Sunder Katwala)

The Fabian Society is 125 years old today. On the evening of Friday January 4th 1884, around fifteen people met at the home of Edward Pease to inaugurate an association whose ultimate aim shall be the reconstruction of Society in accordance with the highest moral possibilities".

The details and minutes can be read online in [extracts from the history](#) written by founding member Edward Pease. They agreed "That the Society be called the Fabian Society (as Mr Podmore explained in allusion to the victorious policy of Fabius Cunctator)", a motion carried by nine votes to two, committing themselves to no definite policy but agreeing to continue to hold meetings, discuss papers and reports, and to delegate members to "attend meetings held on social subjects, debates at workman's clubs, etc" to report back to the Society on these discussions and, as occasion served, to put forward their own views.

From that small beginning, the world's first think-tank and political society was formed. Fabians have produced many of the ideas which have shaped modern politics.

In considering how to draw on this historic legacy today, I think that it is important to remember that Fabians, and especially the early Fabians, have been future-oriented: I have written of Fabianism as a tradition of [practical utopianism](#), believing that new political ideas and institutions can change what is politically possible, and which has been consistently capable of revision and renewal, consistently asking how to apply the values of the political left to new challenges and contexts - just as we need a 'next left' today.

Here are some links to previous reflections on Fabianism: an essay on the [complex legacy of George Bernard Shaw](#); a piece on the '[constructive left](#)' (which began a response to Nick Cohen's What's Left); and a short [response in The Guardian](#) last year to Phil Collins and Richard Reeves' [attack on Fabianism](#) as a "poisoned well".

The weakness of that piece was not just that it chose to make [GDH Cole](#) the standard-bearer of their anti-Fabian assault, when he was among the most active Fabians of the century. (Our basement seminar room in Dartmouth Street is called the Cole Room!). More substantively, this was to miss the pluralism of Fabianism in contrast to the 'grey on grey' caricature. Cole's challenge to top down statism was part of an ongoing argument within Fabianism about mechanical and moral reform, as with [Crosland's famous challenge to the Webbs](#) in The Future of Socialism, or David Piachaud's 1990s Fabian pamphlet '[What's Wrong with Fabianism](#)' in the 1990s. (Perhaps it could be said that Fabians can take fair minded self-criticism almost to the point of parody).

Barack Obama's successful campaign to win the United States Presidency has sparked a renewal of ill-informed conspiracy theories in the madder and darker corners of the internet about the secret Fabian agenda to create a new world order. The truth is quite the opposite. The strength of Fabianism has been its commitment to publicly contesting ideas and political arguments. (The US conspiracy theorists very often [conflate Fabianism with Marxism](#), not realising that Fabianism was created, as Cole explains, as an explicitly [anti-Marxist political tradition](#), whose influence has done much to explain the historic weakness of Marxism within the British left).

As we mark this anniversary, the LSE and Fabian Society will publish online the full series of Fabian tracts and pamphlets from 1884 to 1997. (More details will be available in the Spring). We will also be engaging Fabian members in a discussion of Fabian vision and values, to inform the Executive and staff's planning of our future strategy and programme, between now and November's Annual General Meeting. To help us to kick this off, the current mailing invites the membership to contribute short statements on what Fabianism means to them, by providing statements of up to 200 words **I am a Fabian because ...** (Members can write in or email the office at [debate@fabian-society.org.uk](mailto:debate@fabian-society.org.uk); and of course [non-members can join](#) us and become Fabians too).

2009 is a year of several significant political anniversaries, offering a chance to take the long view on the ebb and flow of political ideas in influencing politics and society.

It is the centenary of two landmark progressive moments in British history. Beatrice Webb's 1909 Minority Report to the Royal Commission on the Poor Law, in challenging the principles of the workhouse, first put the idea of a modern welfare state and the agenda later advocated by the Beveridge Report into mainstream public debate. The Fabian Society will hold a [centenary conference](#) at the LSE on Saturday 21st February to mark the centenary, as part of a [major research project](#) in association with the Webb Memorial Trust.

And Lloyd George's People's Budget of April 1909 led to one of the most important democratic advances in British politics - as the aristocratic veto of the all but fully hereditary House of Lords to reject legislation was challenged and defeated.

Finally, May 3rd is the 30th anniversary of the 1979 General Election which brought Margaret Thatcher to power, a major turning point in post-war political history which did much to shape the politics of the past thirty years. Does the anniversary coincide with a turning point in the dominance of free markets and individualism?