

Shapurji Saklatvala: Labour's First MP of Colour

In 1922, Shapurji Saklatvala was elected as Labour's first MP of colour. He was a fighter against colonialism and war – and for an international socialism that could unite the world's working-class.



Shapurji Saklatvala was the Labour Party's first MP of colour. A largely forgotten figure today, he was a card-carrying member of the [British Communist Party](#) and champion of both colonised peoples and the global working class. Sitting awkwardly in the history of the British left, Saklatvala offers an example of an [anti-imperialist](#) parliamentarian agitating at the [heart of empire](#).

A lone voice in the halls of Westminster, Saklatvala saw no contradiction between the interests of British workers and those elsewhere. The achievement of socialism depended on the victory of both. "Of course, socialism means the destruction of the British Empire," Saklatvala wrote in a pamphlet from 1926. As the ghost of the colonial past continues to cast its shadow on Britain's political and cultural life, Saklatvala's example offers lessons to new generations of socialists intent on reimagining Britain's place in the world today.

Path to Parliament

Sharpuji Saklatvala was born in Bombay on March 28, 1874, the son of a wealthy Parsee merchant. His uncle was Jamsetji Tata, the owner and founder of India's largest commercial empire. Clashing with his family over the direction of the business and with a growing political consciousness, he was forced to depart for Britain in 1905.

Saklatvala slowly became more politicised, joining the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in 1909. Rajani Palme Dutt — one of Britain's leading twentieth century black British intellectuals — described his friend's conversion to international socialism: Traveling all over England, he saw the slums and unemployment, the ruthless exploitation of the industrial and agricultural workers ... he came to realise that poverty was not just an Indian problem, but an international problem of the workers all over the world, and that its solution required the international fight of the working class against class society and for socialism.

The horrors of the First World War and the aftermath of the [Russian Revolution](#) drove Saklatvala into full-time political organising. After becoming a prolific activist and orator in the ILP, Saklatvala was adopted as the Labour candidate for the London constituency Battersea North in 1921. In same year, he joined the nascent British Communist Party. His candidacy was supported strongly by both the local labour movement and by many of his former ILP comrades — such as Ramsay MacDonald — who were now in the leading ranks of the party.

At the time, there wasn't a proscription on individual communists having membership of the Labour Party. As long as he accepted the Labour "whip" (the internal discipline expected of MPs in parliament), Saklatvala was able to fight in the 1922 election under "Labour's United Front." He fought the campaign on Labour's manifesto of widespread nationalisation, state-led house building schemes, increases to welfare benefits, women's rights, and full adult suffrage. It was the first and only time that the Labour Party endorsed a Communist Party member for a parliamentary seat.

Saklatvala doubled the vote of the previous Labour candidate in the constituency, winning over 50 percent of the vote. He was reelected as a communist in 1924 with the backing of the local Battersea Labour Party (though without national endorsement), retaining his seat until 1929. After his electoral defeat, he committed himself completely to the communist and anti-colonial struggle until his death in 1936.

Rebel in Westminster

Saklatvala did not fit the mould of a revolutionary in parliament. Like [Tony Benn](#) after him, he came from a wealthy family and attended an exclusive private school in Bombay. Living in a large house overlooking Parliament Hill Fields in Hampstead, he had little or no direct experience of working-class life or industrial militancy.

Compared to the thoroughly proletarian intake that characterised the early Parliamentary Labour Party, his family and educational background made him culturally much closer to [the Tories](#).

Being born into wealth and privilege, however, didn't stop Saklatvala identifying with the historic mission and creative potential of the oppressed. A renegade from his class, Saklatvala was driven — like Benn — not by material necessity, but by moral conviction. Never haughty or patronising, Saklatvala refused either to talk down to those without his privileges or see working-class struggles as a vehicle for his own personal advancement.

In his letter of resignation from the ILP published in *Labour Leader*, Saklatvala criticised “the new life on which the ILP members are launching out, namely of seeking municipal and parliamentary advantages at the sacrifice of the spirit of true socialism.” Instead, Saklatvala chose an ethic of service. He chose to fight with rather than simply in the name of the [working class](#). One of Saklatvala's Liberal opponents in Battersea recounts Saklatvala's political ethic:

[He would] turn up at a street corner meeting on the coldest of nights and by sheer personality and his wonderful eloquence, would rivet the attention of the audience so completely that they soon forgot their discomfort. One of the great secrets of his success was the humility of mind he displayed to the humblest member of the audience.... He knew how to time his arrival at a meeting to the minute and, with a few witty sentences and excruciatingly humorous remarks, very quickly had his audience spell-bound by his oratory.... His rage on the platform could be frantic in its expression if he found himself discussing any piece of legislation hostile to his ideals. Every fibre of his frail body seemed to quiver with an overwhelming indignation which, irresistibly seemed to transmit itself to his audience.... He never indulged in personalities nor did he ever hit below the belt.

Although always polite and humble even to his most bitter opponents, he became the bane of those who took seriously the pretences of parliament. While other Labour MPs were enchanted by the gentlemanly culture of their bourgeois-aristocratic surroundings, Saklatvala remained unperturbed. He was the first (and possibly the last) to call the Speaker of the House of Commons “comrade” and regularly lampooned the monarchy.

In a parliamentary debate discussing a £2,000 grant for the Prince of Wales to visit Africa and South America, Saklatvala mocked the hollow Labour criticism of the proposal: “If they want an Empire and a ‘Royal nob’ at the head of it [Loud cries of ‘Order’ and ‘Withdraw’]...The Royal head, I mean.” Years later, Nye Bevan described the mesmerising power of parliament on MPs from proletarian backgrounds as like “a social shock absorber placed between privilege and the pressure of popular discontent.” Ahead of his time, Saklatvala's position as a Marxist MP of colour allowed him to question the parliamentary procedure and aristocratic sensibilities that others took for granted.

Cutting against the grain of twenty-first-century parliamentary culture, Saklatvala refused to see the primary role of the MP as that of a representative of his local constituency. In an interview to a local newspaper before the 1924 general election, he pledged to “not devote himself to the welfare of the local cricket club.... Local affairs, he holds, are for local bodies. Parliament's concern is that of nation and empire.” As MP, he largely ignored his local authority and never raised borough-wide council

issues.

Anti-Colonial Struggle

Saklatvala followed Marx in linking Britain's role as a colonising power and the weakening of the "native" working class. In an 1870 letter to Meyer and Vogt, Marx describes how the antagonism between English and Irish proletarians was "the secret of the *impotence of the English working class*, despite its organisation." For Saklatvala, like Marx, the question of Irish freedom was not some ancillary question to the British workers' movement: it was a condition for their own emancipation. Saklatvala was only one of two MPs to vote against the partition of Ireland, arguing for a united country free from British control. He spoke up for Irish men and women who had been deported back after the troubles following the Treaty, predicting that the new accords would not bring peace. As Saklatvala wrote in a letter to Gandhi in 1927:

I was just walking down the main street of Dublin last night. I saw around me a new Ireland with a new Irish soul arising out of the ashes of their 1916 rebellion for independence. I can send you no better message from the Irish heart than the one that I saw in this street, carved on the Parnell monument, and once uttered by Parnell himself: "No man has a right to fix the boundary to the march of a nation. No man has a right to say to his country, 'Thus far thou shalt go and no further.' We have never attempted to fix the *ne plus ultra* to the process of Ireland's nationhood, and we never shall.

Arguing against the Irish Free State Constitution Bill in 1922, Saklatvala predicted that "it will be the Labour party sitting on those benches which will have to afford real freedom to Ireland." The failure of the 1924 Labour government to take these internationalist political principals seriously — failing to institute any political, civic, or even labor reform in the colonies — led to his increasing break with the party. Although he was one of a tiny number of Labour Party members to know even a cursory amount about the empire, his expert advice was rarely listened to on the three Labour Party Advisory Committees of which he was part. The "dogmatic" loyalty of the Labour Party to the British parliamentary system noted by [Ralph Miliband](#) also involved a commitment to maintaining the British Empire and its underpinning ideology of peoples "fit" and "unfit" (or "not yet fit") to rule.

For Saklatvala, the logic justifying imperialism and colonialism was the same which the ruling class used to justify their rule at home. To struggle for socialism and against racism both in Britain and the world implied the total rejection of the myth that there are those born to rule and those born to obey. In its place, socialism contends that workers of all lands can manage the world themselves. As Saklatvala remarked in a 1928 parliamentary address, edited into a pamphlet titled *Socialism and "Labouralism"*:

The workers in Great Britain should realise that God has not created man to be ruled dictatorially and autocratically by another man. Through self-determination and mutual consent we should elect somebody to rule who is not a socialist boss, but a helper and adviser. If that is our essential belief, how can the people of this country

believe that God has created the British Labour Party to rule the Indians and the Chinese, “We are ruling you; we are sending Commissions to your countries because you are less experienced and we are more experienced, and we want to be kind to you and tell you how you should live your lives.” That is exactly what the capitalist masters and bosses are saying to the workers in this country. They say to them, “We are more experienced in directing industry than you are, and we keep an Army, a Navy, and an Air Force to protect you, because you are less experienced than we are.” Socialism believes that that sort of incapacity is not inherent in human nature. How can the Labour Party say that they are preaching socialism and collecting the majority of voices in favour of socialism when they are pursuing such a policy as I have described? The Labour Party supports expeditions to China, the Colonies and the Gold Coast.... How can those things go on?

For Saklatvala, appeals to internationalism were not just empty rhetoric. Fighting for socialism meant actively challenging national-chauvinist attitudes existing inside the labor movement. After the unsuccessful Bombay Cotton Strike in 1923, Saklatvala sought to link the struggles of competing jute workers in the factories of Bengal and Dundee. Addressing the Scottish TUC, Saklatvala argued that “unless there was a uniform standard of wages in the Jute Industries of Bengal and Dundee, the black worker terrorised in Bengal would deprive the Scottish worker and his children of the necessities of life.... They must be unions of human beings in the trade without geographical barriers.”

He asked the delegates to “set aside all their little quibbles and arguments amongst themselves and to understand that International Trade Unionism was not the ultimate development, but the first essential.” E.D. Morel — Labour MP for Dundee — rejected the overtures for common cause and called Saklatvala’s intervention “communist propaganda.” Not afraid to challenge the narrow nationalism of his fellow members, Saklatvala was often left a lone voice for his internationalist politics. Given his family background and the centrality of the colony to the British Empire, it is unsurprising that Saklatvala gave much of his parliamentary time to agitating on [the question of India](#). He was so prolific that in 1925 the *Daily Graphic* referred to him, not unfairly, as the “Member for India.” Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, called Saklatvala “a brave and intrepid soldier of freedom” for his work fighting for India’s independence. As in the case of Ireland, Saklatvala saw the impact of colonialism not solely through its effects on the colonised but on the ability of workers in Britain to act. His presence did much to bolster the nascent labor and anti-colonial movement in an extremely successful speaking tour around India as an MP in 1927. He condemned British rule in India as the lynchpin of “our people’s perpetual starvation, ignorance, physical deterioration and social backwardness.”

British rule in India means a standing curb on Egypt, Iraq, Persia, and Afghanistan. British rule in India means an overpowering militarism by the British that compels the rest of the world to weigh itself down under the cursed burden of armaments. British rule in India mean the continual menace to the wages, to the work, and the living standard of the British masses, and an actual frustration of their trade union rights and socialist aims. British rule in India means a constant unseen war upon the rapid

development of the masses in all the nations of Europe and America.

Saklatvala's success did not go unnoticed by the British colonial authorities and the Foreign Office, who successfully agitated to remove his passport to prevent him traveling again. Much to the disappointment of his comrades in India, this was upheld even by the Labour Secretary of State for India in the 1929 government, William Wedgwood Benn — Tony Benn's father.

For Saklatvala, the struggle for socialism also meant [the liberation of women](#). The first political demonstration he attended was organised by Sylvia Pankhurst in 1908.

Minnie Bowles, then secretary for Harry Pollitt and member of Young Communist League, remembered canvassing with Saklatvala when he was beckoned from the top story of tenement building near Battersea Park Road. Confronting a domestic fight, Bowles remembered that "Sak stood inside the door and said, quietly, 'Now why do you beat your wife. She is not your enemy. You have real enemies. Think of the landlord who charges you rent for this slum; or your boss who pays your wages, hardly enough to keep you alive.' And he went on in this quiet way until the man was weeping and his wife was comforting him." The liberation of women was not an afterthought but a necessary imperative.

Universalism

Saklatvala's political commitments came at a great personal cost. His electoral opponents falsely accused him of using "terrorist tactics" and denying free speech. Police regularly raided his house and he had his correspondence tampered by the secret services. Crucially for his political interventions, he was banned by the Foreign Office from visiting Egypt, America, Belgium, and India.

In 1926, he was imprisoned after a speech in Hyde Park at the start of the General Strike. He was sentenced to two months in prison for sedition, having called on soldiers not break the strike. Hours after he had been released from Wormwood Scrubs prison he was again on a tour, addressing solidarity meetings up and down the country. Rejecting all inducements to temper his politics, Saklatvala was offered the Under-Secretaryship for India if he would give up his communist ideals. Unlike many parliamentarians blinded by personal ambition, he refused. For Saklatvala, the callous response of the authorities was neither incidental nor motivated by personal dislike.

As he recalled:

The open and concealed persecution carried out by Government Officials against me was largely due to their desire that a Parsee taking part in a bona fide and unadulterated anti-imperialist communist politics should be ruined to the finish to make an example to others.

Saklatvala's failure to fit the "national" mould allowed a more natural identification with the universal interests of the world working class. As a member of the small Parsee (Zoroastrian) religious minority and a British Indian in the heart of empire, he was in a better position to see the contradictions in viewing politics through a narrow national gauge. Although a militant inside a movement which professed to be atheistic and materialist, Saklatvala's religion played a critical role in shaping his internationalism.

He accepted the Communist Party's condemnation for initiating his children into the Parsee faith, and justified it by saying the "circumstances were outside his control and due entirely to the peculiar position of his people." The Communist Party condemned Saklatvala because his decision would encourage "religious prejudices," particularly in India, which the British authorities "made use of" by divide and rule. What the party didn't recognise was that remaining loyal to his religion was not incidental to Saklatvala's politics. His people's existence as a minority on the borderline of various cultural and national boundaries had shaped his wider commitment to the universal interests of the oppressed across the world.

The fact that Saklatvala is little known today tells us more about the [British left](#) than it does about the significance of his pioneering life. Not mentioned in Ralph Miliband's *Parliamentary Socialism*, even radical and critical histories leave him absent. A communist and anti-colonial militant being the first Labour MP of colour is hard to integrate into traditional narratives of Labour Party history, often politically mobilised as an untainted struggle on the side of progress. The bitterness, recrimination, and repression that Saklatvala faced from the party makes hagiography a harder proposition than silence.

Yet Saklatvala's awkwardness in Labour Party history emanates less from his dual commitments to the Labour and Communist Parties than the [British left's](#) firm and often unspoken division between "national" and "foreign" issues. The latter has tended to be sacrificed for efficacy in the former. But Saklatvala's commitment to the internationalist potential of the British labour movement shows that the choice is one Labour MPs need not and should not make. Issues deemed to be "national" or "foreign" are, Saklatvala would argue, mutually constitutive. A ruling class that can make war around the world is better able to make war on working-class living standards at home. The logic which allows imperial and neocolonial powers to divide the world between those who decide and those who acquiesce is the same used by bosses to justify workers' powerlessness in the metropole.

As imperialism and settler colonialism continue to tarnish our world today, Saklatvala's version of internationalism is something some in the Labour Party would still rather forget. As new generations of socialists question their country's past and assert a different future, speaking these silences and confronting these pasts is more useful than the search for easy heroes.

As Nicolas Klein of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America remarked in a speech in 1918: "In this story you have the history of this entire movement. First they ignore you. Then they ridicule you. And then they attack you and want to burn you. And then they build monuments to you." Stuck at the first stage, Saklatvala has no statues standing in the heart of London; his portrait doesn't appear on banknotes nor do films eulogise his name. The former imperialists he committed his life to fighting stand in his place. If "Comrade Sak" — as his friends and admirers called him — were alive today he may be unsurprised at the continuing ability of the question of empire to shape Britain's political imaginaries.

Exorcising the shadow of the empire where the sun never set and the blood never dried — to quote the radical Chartist Ernest Jones — is not an expendable accessory

to be thrown at the first hurdle for more pressing “national” issues. The need to confront the past implies reimagining the kind of role Britain should play in the world today. The struggle for a socialist Britain — in Saklatvala’s time as today — depends on the success or failure to embody an internationalist politics in deeds as well as words.