

The Resilient Radicalism of Barbara Castle

Born on this day in 1910, Barbara Castle became an icon of the labour movement – and a thorn in the side of those outside and inside her Party who sought to suppress her unabashed socialist politics.

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The Labour Party conference in Morecambe in 1952 was one of the most dramatic in the party's history. *Tribune* editor [Michael Foot](#) described it as 'rowdy, convulsive, vulgar, splenetic; threatening at moments to collapse into an irretrievable brawl'. In one case, actual fisticuffs were recorded, involving the redoubtable Liverpool MP Bessie Braddock.

Tensions ran high, in part due to the inauspicious surroundings. The weather was appalling. It pelted down with rain all week. One Labour MP recalled, 'By the end of the Conference, everyone had streaming colds, as well as heartache'. The Morecambe Winter Gardens, which served as the conference hall, were too small. The lighting was too dim. Labour leader Clement Attlee complained, 'I have just got back from Morecambe. Architecturally it ranks a good second to Blackpool, the [latter] beats it in the atrocious ugliness of its buildings, but Morecambe pulls up on complete absence of planning'. Another Labour MP agreed, 'It's a minor Blackpool, dumped down on mud flats'. The Labour Party never returned.

For the Right of the Labour Party, the Morecambe conference held an additional trauma. They were completely routed by the Left in the party's internal elections. The 'Keep Left' faction of MPs, led by Nye Bevan who had resigned from the Cabinet in protest over the Chancellor Hugh Gaitskell's budget cuts the previous year, were all elected to the National Executive Committee (NEC) by constituency delegates. Leading right-wingers Hugh Dalton and Herbert Morrison were chucked out after years of service on the NEC.

The largely right-leaning trade union leadership was apoplectic. One union official started screaming, 'After this, there'll be no more bloody money for this bloody party!' So enraged was he that he inadvertently spat out his false teeth. NUM leader Will Lather compared Nye Bevan and his followers to the treacherous Ramsay MacDonald. When interrupted by a delegate, Lather spat back, 'Oh shut your gob!' TGWU leader Arthur Deakin waved his fists at the Bevanites and told them to 'abandon their vituperation and their carping criticism'.

Castle The Conspirator

Coming second to Bevan on the NEC ballot was Barbara Castle, seen toasting her victory (in furs) in Morecambe's fashionable art deco Midland Hotel. Born in 1910 and first elected MP for Blackburn in 1945, Castle came from a middle class, but socialist, family. Her father was a tax inspector, although, as she told Sue Lawley on *Desert Island Discs*, 'I like to keep that dark, dear.'

In the recently defeated Attlee government, Castle had served as a parliamentary private secretary (PPS) for the left-wing Cabinet members Stafford Cripps and Harold Wilson. Denied a ministerial position in her own right, which she believed was partly due to her gender, Castle had begun to acquire a reputation among the party faithful for her stirring platform oratory. Castle would be re-elected to the NEC by conference delegates every year for next 27 years.

While earning the admiration of the party membership, Castle would receive the ire of the new Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell (1955-63). From her perch on the NEC, Castle proved a thorn in Gaitskell's side, especially when it came to foreign policy. Gaitskell 'really loathed her', one contemporary reported. Gaitskell told a journalist, 'I could strangle her with my own hands.' In his more indifferent moods, Gaitskell simply dismissed Castle as a 'Third Class mind', a reference to her underwhelming performance as a PPE student at Oxford. Castle admitted that as a student, 'I didn't work. I flirted a lot, and I took part in a lot of politics.'

Castle enjoyed playing the role of conspirator. During the Gaitskell leadership, she would join other Bevanites in the grand Oxfordshire home of Lord Faringdon—the camp, left-wing, hereditary Labour lord who was known to address his fellow peers as 'My Dears' rather than 'My Lords'—plotting the

Left's strategy. Later, she and her husband Ted would host a 'husbands and wives' dining club with other left-wing political couples, including Michael Foot and Jill Craigie, Tony and Caroline Benn, and Peter and Elizabeth Shore.

Gaitskell's sudden death in 1963 resulted in the election of Harold Wilson, a fellow member of the 'Keep Left' slate at the infamous Morecambe conference. Wilson and Castle had been close friends since she had served as Wilson's PPS. As Labour leader, Wilson recognised Castle's talents and kept her in his Cabinet for his entire premiership. Castle was regarded as Wilson's conscience, an ideological canary in the Cabinet room, who would warn colleagues when they had strayed too far from their socialist principles. Wilson once told Castle, 'You and I must keep together. I am the only friend you have, and you are the only friend I have.'

Castle in Cabinet

Between 1964-70 and 1974-76, Barbara Castle led four major government departments and served as First Secretary of State (1968-70), informally regarded as the second-in-command to the prime minister. Before the elevation of Margaret Thatcher as Conservative leader, Barbara Castle had a good claim to be the most powerful woman ever in British politics outside of royalty.

Castle's ministerial achievements are manifold. Her first ministerial appointment was to lead the newly created Ministry for Overseas Development (1964-65) after the 1964 election. For Castle, a lifelong anti-colonial campaigner, it was the perfect choice. In the 1950s, Castle had called on the Labour Party to 'denounce the hideous colour bar' and 'liquidate the last remnants of colonialism'. She argued that Labour should never be tempted 'in the scramble for votes' to abandon the core socialist principle 'I am my brother's keeper – and his friend.'

On a trip to South Africa in 1956, Castle first met Nelson Mandela, beginning a friendship which would last the rest of her life. 'You felt there was a man of steel there, who would never give up his objectives, could never be bent', she later reflected. In the early 1960s, Castle led a 72-hour vigil protesting South Africa's apartheid policies during the Commonwealth heads of government conference. 'This was a heaven-sent opportunity for the anti-apartheid movement', she described. Standing outside Lancaster House wearing a sash commemorating the Sharpsville massacre, day and night, her pressure paid off: South Africa was ejected from the Commonwealth. The following year, she was elected president of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement.

Castle spent her year as Overseas Development Minister establishing the core principles of non-colonial aid. The vision set out in her White Paper was a genuinely socialist ministry that defied the fusty pretensions of previous British foreign policy, partnering with the emerging nations of the Global South as equals. She was determined to commit one percent of GDP on aid, almost double the 0.65 percent under the Conservative government. Yet she was constantly thwarted by the Chancellor Jim Callaghan, an animosity which would fester for years to come.

After just a year in post, Castle was moved [onto Transport](#). Her fellow Cabinet colleague Dick Crossman believed Castle was a casualty of her anti-racist principles: 'I am sure Barbara has paid the price for her pertinacity in taking the black African point of view.' Castle had been the lone member of the Cabinet to argue against any compromise with the white regime led by Ian Smith in Rhodesia. At one point, Castle nearly resigned over the matter.

Wilson shuffled Castle to Transport (1965-68), an unglamorous department but one where Castle perhaps left her most durable marks. Her introduction of compulsory seatbelts for new vehicles, alcohol limits for drivers, the 70mph national speed limit, and the breathalyser, in the face of fierce and sometimes quite sexist opposition, gives Castle plausible claim for being directly responsible for saving more lives than nearly any other minister. When Castle introduced breathalyser tests in 1967, she was condemned for infringing personal liberties. Castle reflected, 'I was interfering, the opposition said, with people's civil rights. I said I do not recognise anybody's civil right to kill somebody else.'

The most difficult period of Castle's time in government was her two years as Secretary of State for Employment (1968-70). In 1969, Castle tried to reform the power of trade unions by, among other devices, ensuring that strikes needed to be preceded by a full ballot of union members. For some, the idea that a Labour government would seek to curb union power was anathema. 92 Labour MPs, mostly sponsored by trade unions, rebelled against the proposals in her white paper *In Place of Strife*.

Cabinet colleagues, led by Jim Callaghan, spiked the legislation, which was never passed. Joan Lester, a left-wing MP, ruefully told her friend, 'the sheer misery and dismay with the rank and file here and in the country cannot be overestimated'.

It is important to recall that for Castle and other Bevanites, like Wilson himself, the trade unions were regarded as a reactionary force. Castle perhaps still recalled their hostility after her victory at the Morecambe conference in 1952. By limiting the power of the 'labour' wing of the party, Castle was trying to secure steadier footing for the 'socialist' wing of the party, but it was not regarded this way by many. It is still cited by some as evidence of betrayal.

Castle's time as Employment Secretary was by no means a complete failure. It was during this period that she passed one of her most famous policy legacies: the Equal Pay Act. The final law of the Wilson government before the surprise victory by the Conservatives in the 1970 election, Castle had been moved by the plight of women workers at the Ford Factory in Dagenham. Always sensitive to the media eye, Castle invited the sewing machinists to her Whitehall office, where she poured them tea from a homely teapot in front of the cameras. When the cameramen disappeared, the teacups were removed and Castle broke out the 'real drink'.

In spite of this victory, Castle later wished she had never served as Employment Secretary.

Redemption came as Secretary of State for Health and Social Services, after the return of the Wilson government in February 1974. In this role, Castle introduced a variety of transformative benefits for families, the elderly, disabled, and carers. These included the Child Benefit Act, a more generous form of child benefit than the one introduced by the Attlee government, which Castle ensured would be paid to mothers by default. Castle created the Invalid Carers Allowance in 1976, the first carers' allowance in British history, as well as the Mobility Allowance, which provided funding to ensure that disabled people could access cars and other forms of transport such as electric wheelchairs and scooters.

Castle's final policy legacy was the introduction of the earnings-linked pension scheme. She later boasted (with characteristic modesty) that 'the biggest modernisation of the welfare state was carried out by me'. Castle linked the uprating of the basic pension to the movement of average earnings to ensure that the elderly could 'keep pace with the rising prosperity of the nation'.

Out of Cabinet and Into Europe

Harold Wilson's surprise resignation in 1976 was a devastating blow. Permanently damaged by *In Place of Strife*, Castle stood no chance of assuming the leadership herself (but can you imagine the PMQs against Margaret Thatcher if she had?). Castle threw her lot behind her old Bevanite friend Michael Foot, but it was no use. Castle's old enemy Jim Callaghan won the leadership contest and became the fourth Labour prime minister.

Castle recorded that she felt 'a wretched sense of nausea. I cannot shake off my feeling of shellshock... the election of an alien right-winger as leader'. The following day, Callaghan summoned Castle to Number 10. He sacked her, telling her she was too old and needed to stand aside for new blood. Castle refused to accept this excuse. 'I am not doing this voluntarily', she protested. Callaghan was 64; she was 65. He retained Cabinet ministers who were older than her. Callaghan pleaded with Castle to wish him well ('almost desperately', Castle thought). She gave him a stiff handshake, muttering 'Good luck'. Callaghan then awkwardly kissed her, before she turned on her heels and walked out. 'I have been discarded like a piece of old junk', Castle seethed.

The end of Castle's ministerial role was the start of a new adventure on a completely different stage. For years, Castle had been one of Britain's leading opponents of membership of the European Economic Community. The EEC was, in Castle's view, 'a circle of privilege', a club of rich, white countries looking out for themselves. As Cabinet discussed joining EEC in 1967, Castle erupted: 'Let us realise that we are deciding on the destruction of the Commonwealth: not only through the abandonment of [trade] preferences but above all as a result of the immigration priority we shall have to give to the [Europeans]'.

On 28 October 1971, 69 Labour MPs defied the party whip to vote for Ted Heath's plan to join the EEC, giving him a majority. A seething Barbara Castle went up to one of the rebels and denounced him as a 'traitor to the Labour Party' for wanting to join 'a capitalist conspiracy'. She later reflected, 'I described the pro-Market fanatics as sanctimonious, middle-class hypocrites, and I meant it'.

In the 1975 referendum on whether Britain should leave the EEC, Castle was a vocal leaver. Her most famous speech, perhaps of her political career, was at the Oxford Union, opposing the Conservative and Liberal leaders Ted Heath and Jeremy Thorpe. Castle asked, 'And what kind of internationalism is it that says that henceforth this country must give priority to a Frenchman over an Indian, a German over an Australian, an Italian over a Malaysian? This isn't the language of internationalism... It is Euro-jingoism.'

Now that Britain was in the EEC, Castle believed it was important for Eurosceptic voices to be represented. In 1979, she was elected to the European Parliament, where she would serve as leader of the Labour MEPs for the next six years. During this time, she railed against the waste of the EEC, its hamstringing of national industries, and its disregard for the developing world. In an interview while an MEP, a reporter asked, 'Do you think it's worth the money?' 'No, frankly, I don't,' Castle replied. People sometimes assume that because she became an MEP, Barbara Castle abandoned her euroscepticism, but quite the contrary. In 1982 Castle said being an MEP made her more convinced of her euroscepticism: 'My belief in the correctness of... criticism of the [EEC] hotch-potch of free market economics and agricultural protectionism has been strongly reinforced by my first hand experience of how it works.' She respected the referendum result (some could learn from her), but Castle was always a eurosceptic. The year after her retirement as an MEP, a 1990 *Economist* article singled out Barbara Castle, Denis Healey, and Tony Benn as giving the 'only coherent hostile speeches' to European integration at Labour conference. When she was elevated to the House of Lords the following month, Castle used her maiden speech to mock Margaret Thatcher for her role in strengthening the European Single Market.

Old Baggage and New Labour

Barbara Castle was refreshingly forthright. She believed in authenticity. She once said, 'The secret really in public life is to be a person... You've got to be yourself. You've almost got to defy the public: That's me. Take me or leave me.' She condemned those politicians 'cramping themselves with self-restraint'. Neil Kinnock's spin doctors banned him from smoking his pipe, drinking a pint, or giving unscripted remarks. Barbara Castle bitterly observed, they 'made him look like a bank clerk, who wouldn't... make an impromptu speech. He wasn't breathing the oxygen he so desperately needed.'

She could be catty, almost camp. She once joked, 'Am I just God's most arrogant bitch?' Returning to Chequers after four years in opposition, she found that Ted Heath had transformed the place. 'The light wood, the careful display of china treasures, and the urns of flowers in every corner of hall and landings.' She puzzled impishly, 'it made everything look so much more feminine'. For Downing Street, she reserved even greater reproach. 'The first shock was the inside of No. 10,' Castle recorded in her diaries after the February 1974 election. 'Heath must have spent a bomb on having it done up. Gone was the familiar, functional shabbiness. Instead, someone with appalling taste had tarted it up. New old-gold carpeting everywhere; gold moiré curtains of distressing vulgarity; sideboards with flowers on top. It looked like a boudoir.'

These amusing observations aside, Barbara Castle was a principled politician. She once said that the thing she most admired about Nelson Mandela was his 'complete consistency of character, both in adversity and success.' The same could be said for her. Castle believed in power: 'Left-wingism that consists of burying one's head in the sands and avoiding all the awkward choices just makes me sick.' But she did not believe that the price of power meant the abandonment of principle.

In this vein, Barbara Castle was scathing of New Labour. 'New New New, Modern Modern Modern' Labour, she mockingly called it. She remarked in 1998, 'They said, "Oh there's a lot of old ideological baggage we've got to drop." I suppose they're referring to me.'

Castle directed particular ire towards Harriet Harman, who filled Castle's old role as Social Security Secretary after the 1997 election. At one point, being told by an interviewer that Harman had attacked pension figures cited by Castle, 'They're bloody liars, darling.' Castle accused Harman of making up *her* figures: 'She's inflated the figure to £5 billion? She's not gone through the government actuaries, as we have. She can't prove our figures wrong. But I can prove hers wrong... My God, if I got the research help they got, I'd be home and dry.' Castle analysed, 'They're running scared. That's why they're fighting so hard. This is real knuckle-duster stuff.'

Castle's final speech to Labour Party conference in 2001, at the age of 91, involved denouncing the recent budget of Gordon Brown, who was sat behind her. She received a standing ovation. She died the following year, her place in Labour's pantheon secure.