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UNITED KINGDOM

(James) Harold WILSON

Prime Minister

Labor Party leader and Prime Minister Harold Wilson successfully led his party to victory in the general election held on 10 October 1974. For the previous 7 months he had headed Britain's first minority government in more than 40 years. A Labor Member of Parliament since 1945, he also served as Prime Minister during 1964-70. He is a consummate politician—skillful, shrewd and subtle.



(1974)

Wilson has long been a favorite of Labor's left wing. He is not a doctrinaire socialist, but rather he is a pragmatist who is keenly aware of the realities of power. He has shown great skill in persuading the diverse and sometimes conflicting elements within his party to work together. He has a serious problem of maintaining discipline within the rambunctious Parliamentary Labor Party—the Laborite Members of Parliament—and has had to take a firm stand to control the extremists in his government.



his position on British membership in the European Communities (EC) eventually he was forced to voice his support for continued membership. His party was deeply split over EC membership in the 1970's: The anti-Marketeters argued that Britain would ultimately lose control over its own affairs; the pro-Marketeters argued that without membership, the British economy would flounder and the country's already muted voice in world affairs would diminish further. To keep his party together, Wilson devised the plan of negotiating better terms for Britain's membership and letting the voters decide whether they wanted continued membership. Following the referendum in June 1975 in which the voters overwhelmingly endorsed continued membership, Wilson moved the most vocal opponent to another Cabinet position.

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Wilson's political survival is apparently a measure of his resourcefulness and a reflection of the inability of his party opponents to mount a broad-based challenge to his leadership. There is no readily recognized heir apparent and the party would be hard pressed to find another leader so highly skillful and resilient.

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Harold Wilson
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(James) Harold WILSON

The Prime Minister has made some progress in correcting Britain's economic problems, but admitted in October 1974 and again in January 1976 that "it will indeed be a hell of a slog for the next couple of years."

Because of economic restraints, the government passed a 10-year defense review which pared defense spending. Wilson has asserted, however, that Labor will continue its support for NATO as an instrument of detente as well as of defense.

The keystone of Labor's foreign policy has been good relations with the United States, and Wilson proudly states that Anglo-US relations are now better than they have been for some years. He is personally friendly toward this country and unhesitatingly admits that US-UK relations have top priority in his government.

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Wilson has visited the United States often during the past 10 years. He met former President Richard Nixon several times during 1974 in European capitals. On a state visit to Washington in January 1975, he met President Gerald Ford; the two leaders also met in London and elsewhere in Europe several times in 1975.

Early Life and Career

The son of an industrial chemist, James Harold Wilson was born in Yorkshire on 11 March 1916. He won scholarships to secondary schools and to Jesus College, Oxford, where he graduated with first class honors in philosophy, politics and economics. In 1937, at the age of 21, he became a lecturer in economics at New College, Oxford, and the following year he was a fellow of University College.

During 1940-41 Wilson was economic assistant to the War Cabinet Secretariat, and in 1942-43 he served as secretary of the Greene board of investigation into miners' wages. In 1943 he was appointed director of economics and statistics in the Ministry of Fuel and Power.

Wilson was first elected a Labor Member of Parliament in 1945. He represented the Ormskirk Division of Lancashire until 1950 and has represented the Huyton Division of Lancashire ever

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since. He was appointed parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Works in 1945 and transferred to the Trade Ministry as secretary for overseas trade in March 1947. In October 1947 he received his first Cabinet-level post as President of the Board of Trade, at the unusually early age of 31. Wilson resigned that post in April 1951 in protest against the heavy cost of the government's rearmament program. Later, while in opposition, he served as his party's chief spokesman on financial affairs, and then on foreign affairs, until his election as leader in 1963.

Prime Minister (1964-70)

Wilson became the youngest British Prime Minister in this century when he led the Labor Party to a narrow victory in the October 1964 general election. During his first year in office, he successfully met a series of financial and political crises and established himself as a national leader. His party was returned to power with a substantial majority in the general election of March 1966, and he formed his second government.

Beginning in 1967, political and economic setbacks at home and abroad seriously reduced the morale and prestige of Wilson's government and its standing before the electorate. A series of strikes, defeats in by-elections, failure to gain Common Market membership, and a reduced loyalty among leading Cabinet members all combined to create a "crisis in confidence" in his leadership. He called a snap election in June 1970, a year before his term of office formally expired; and in spite of consistently favorable polls throughout the 3-week campaign, his party was defeated.

The defeat was attributed to a combination of overconfidence, Labor Party apathy and an unexpectedly strong consumer revolt over continuing inflation. The single most important issue, however, was the dispute between the Wilson government and the trade unions over Wilson's attempt to establish a strong legal framework to bring some order to Britain's fractious industrial relations. Wilson's position within the party remained unchallenged, however, and in July 1970 he was overwhelmingly reelected as leader by the Labor Members of Parliament. He served as opposition leader in Parliament during 1970-74.

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Since 1974

In February 1974 Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath called an election to determine, as he said, who really rules Britain—the government or the trade unions. (His government was unable to reach a negotiated settlement with the coal miners and trade unions, and the resulting shortages forced him to implement a 3-day work week and other austerity measures.) After the election, in which neither the Conservatives nor the Laborites gained a majority, Heath resigned. Wilson's Labor Party won fewer popular votes but more seats in Parliament—301 to 296 for the Conservatives and 38 scattered among other parties—and the Queen charged him with forming a minority government. In the October 1974 general election, Wilson's party won 319 seats in Parliament, resulting in a 3-seat margin. Since then, because of deaths, resignations and by-elections, Wilson's working majority has been reduced to one.

Personal Data

Wilson's colleagues regard him as more of a compromiser than a man of strong convictions. He likes to listen to all views on a subject and then try to make the decision that will satisfy the most people. His brilliant mind, political acumen and phenomenal debating skill and wit are offset, in the eyes of his critics, by a record of opportunism, deviousness and shifting loyalties. He inspires admiration and, at times, respect—but not affection.

[Redacted] His deftness in parliamentary maneuvering and persuasion [Redacted]

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A short, stocky man, Wilson smokes a pipe constantly, enjoys plain food, and drinks moderately (lager or bourbon). He shuns social life, keeps his personal life private, and apparently has no close political cronies. Raised as a Congregationalist, Wilson is a man of simple tastes and habits, [Redacted]

[Redacted] Apart from his family and politics, reading and an occasional round of golf are his only known relaxations. He follows soccer, dislikes cocktail parties and shows no interest in music or the theater.

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Family

In 1940 Wilson married Gladys Mary Baldwin, the daughter of a Congregationalist minister.

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The Wilsons have two grown sons.

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Both Wilson and his wife are authors. Mrs. Wilson's Selected Poems was on the bestsellers list in 1970. The Prime Minister's books include: New Deal for Coal, 1945; In Place of Dollars, 1952; The War on World Poverty, 1953; The Relevance of British Socialism, 1964; Purpose in Politics, 1964; The New Britain, 1964; Purpose in Power, 1966; and The Labor Government, 1964-70, 1971.

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29 January 1976

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