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UNITED KINGDOM

James Harold WILSON

Prime Minister and First Lord of the Treasury

Harold Wilson at 48 became the youngest British Prime Minister in this century when the Labor Party won a narrow victory in the October 1964 election. Party leader only since February 1963, he successfully united Labor's diverse elements within a few months, bringing it back into power after 13 years in opposition. He showed the same managerial skill in his government appointments, placing "moderates" in key cabinet posts, and assigning safe spots to "leftists." Labor's slim majority in Parliament and the serious British economic situation have forced Wilson to keep in abeyance much of his party's program to reform and reshape basic national policies and institutions. His support of the US action in Vietnam, and the essentially conservative measures he has taken to deal with Britain's problems have cost him Labor support, particularly from the left wing, and he now faces a more aggressive Conservative leadership. Wilson appears confident that the Labor Party can continue to govern, and predicts that the year ahead will see the breakthrough to a just and powerful Socialist Britain.

A former economics don and statistician, Wilson has a brilliant mind, organizational ability, debating skill and a cutting wit, and unusual political acumen. Since he entered Parliament in 1945, he has held a series of important posts: President of the Board of Trade in the Attlee Government (1947-51); Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer (1955-61); and Shadow Foreign Secretary (1961-63). While always a hero to the more militant local Labor Parties, he was not personally popular with the Labor MP's but was respected for his talents. The center and right wing in particular accused him of overweening ambition, opportunism, deviousness, and shifting political loyalties. Most damaging was his lack of support for Gaitskell (then party leader) during the bitter intra-party fights over nationalization and defense policies, plus Wilson's subsequent bid for the leadership in 1960. He was elected party leader after Gaitskell's death apparently because he was the only Labor MP with the necessary qualities for a potential prime minister. Although he has "flirted" with the left, Wilson is not a doctrinaire socialist. He is above all a pragmatist, well aware of the realities of power. His commitment to close Anglo-US relations is not based solely on sentiment. Wilson has made many trips to the US (both in and out of Office), and Moscow, and in 1958 visited Peiping.

The son of an industrial chemist, Harold Wilson was born on 11 March 1916 in Yorkshire, won scholarships to secondary schools and to Jesus College, Oxford, where he had a brilliant academic record. He taught economics at his university until World War II when he was drafted into the Civil Service. Raised as a Congregationalist, Wilson is a man of simple tastes and habits, and takes little interest in ordinary social life, music or the arts. Married in 1940, he has two sons.

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