

# A short history of the labour party



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**Book Review**

Henry Pelling wrote the book, *A Short History of the Labour Party*. This book talks about the rise of the Labour Party from the beginning foundation up to Tony Blair's second term as Prime Minister. It describes the events that led to the beginning of the party, the role of the trade unions within the party, the successes and failures of the twentieth century up to 1970. The Labour Party is a political party in the United Kingdom. The Labour Party's beginnings started in the late 19th century, around which time it became clear that there was a need for a new political party to represent the interests and needs of the urban workers. Some members of the trade union movement became interested in moving into the political field, and after further extensions of the voting franchise in 1867 and 1885, the Liberal Party endorsed some trade-union sponsored candidates. In addition, several small socialist groups had formed around this time, with the intention of linking the movement to political policies.

In their first meeting after the election the group's Members of Parliament decided to adopt the name "The Labour Party" formally (15 February 1906). Keir Hardie, who had taken a leading role in getting the party established, was elected as Chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party (in effect, the leader), although only by one vote over David Shackleton after several ballots Labour first surpassed the Liberal Party in general elections during the early 1920s. The 1923 general election was fought on the Conservatives' protectionist proposals but, although they got the most votes and remained the largest party, they lost their majority in parliament, necessitating the formation of a government supporting free trade. Thus, with the

acquiescence of Asquith's Liberals, Ramsay MacDonald became the first ever Labour Prime Minister in January 1924, forming the first Labour government, despite Labour only having 191 MPs (less than a third of the House of Commons).

Because the government had to rely on the support of the Liberals it was unable to get any socialist legislation passed by the House of Commons. The only significant measure was the Wheatley Housing Act, which began a building program of 500, 000 homes for rental to working-class families. The government collapsed after only nine months when the Liberals voted for a Select Committee inquiry into the Campbell Case, a vote which MacDonald had declared to be a vote of confidence.

Since then, the party has had several spells in government, at first in minority governments under Ramsay MacDonald in 1924 and 1929-1931, then as a junior partner in the wartime coalition from 1940-1945 and ultimately forming majority governments under Clement Attlee in 1945-1951 and under Harold Wilson in 1964-1970. In the 1906 election the LRC won 29 seats— helped by a secret 1903 pact between Ramsay MacDonald and Liberal Chief Whip Herbert Gladstone that aimed to avoid splitting the opposition vote between Labour and Liberal candidates in the interest of removing the Conservatives from office.

The Labour Party won a majority in the 1997 general election under the leadership of Tony Blair, its first general election victory since October 1974 and the first general election since. The book also concentrated on the problems of the parliamentary leadership and its relations with the union. It

also talks about the past experiences upon which Harold Wilson and his colleagues have been based on their policies and in government and in opposition. There is not a bibliography, endnotes or footnotes, which was weird because I would have thought since there was so much information. This book was very informational and the author, Henry Pelling, put the book into a chronological order.

This book would clearly be put into a category of political history. The book is well written. It flowed well and except for a certain words, it was very easy to read. I could not really enjoy the book because it contained so much information, that I had to personally take notes to keep up with the chronological events that were happening. The book did not seem bias or did not have any underlying values. I believe that the book best quality is that it is very descriptive and gave a clear picture of the events that was happening during that timeline. The book broke down the timeline by chapters, which helped me understand what events were happening at which time. The book's weakest quality is that it very informative, keeping information coming right after another; so if you didn't understand one event, then you would be lost in the history. I believe Henry Pelling did a unbelievable job on creating a book that broke down the Labour Party.