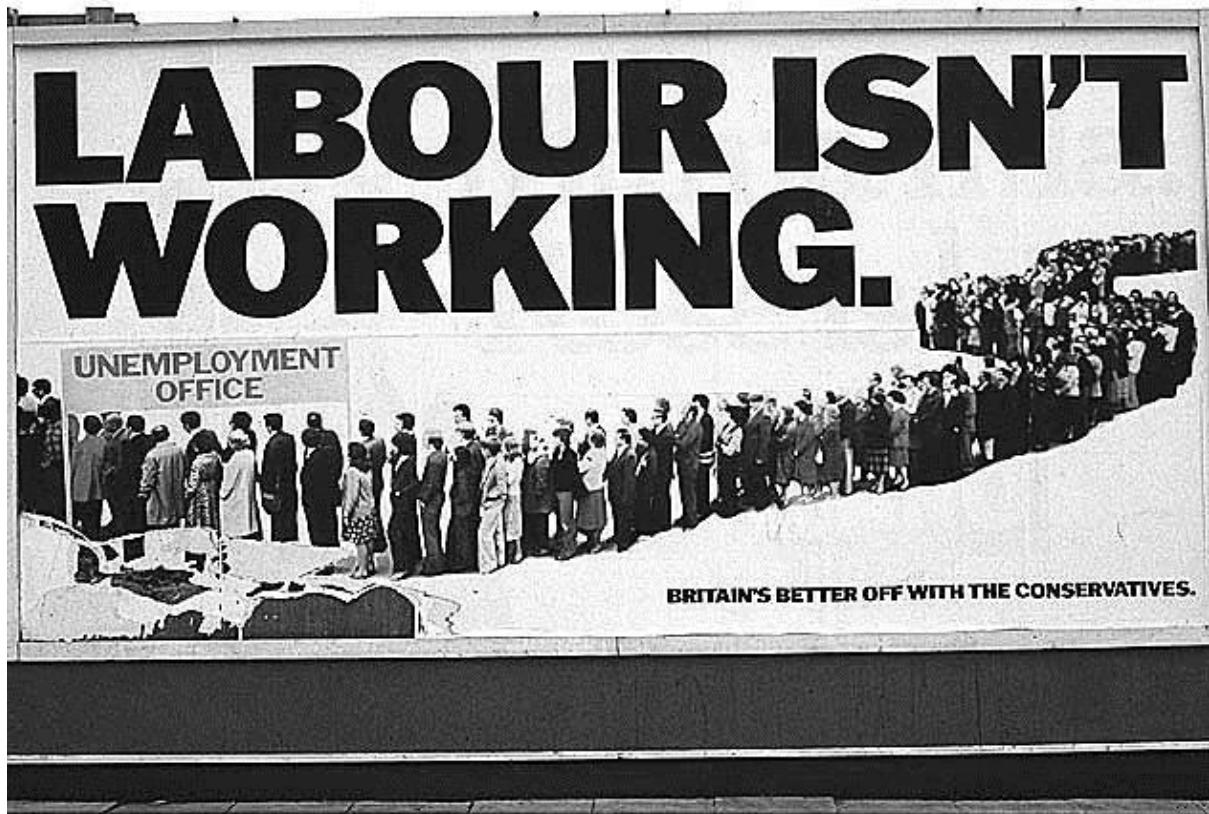


Section 9: The Labour Governments 1974-79



The famous Saatchi & Saatchi ad. How fair was it? Did it work? Perhaps it addressed a more fundamental concern: the old order wasn't working, and were Labour the party to change it?

It is also true to say that Wilson's second spell as PM in the 'seventies was far less successful, and that tainted his reputation. His 'sixties governments are perhaps now best remembered for their liberal social reforms and for keeping Britain out of Vietnam.

THE POLITICS OF THE WILSON AND CALLAGHAN GOVERNMENTS 1974-79?

Use **Flagship**, pp 33-41

How was the Wilson of 1974-79 different? Some believe his powers were failing even then (he would later be diagnosed with Alzheimer's); he had certainly become paranoid. Understand the right-left split in the party, and how Wilson sought to keep the balance between them; also understand how Europe divided the party.

Most of all, Labour were a minority government in February 1974, then had a majority of just three in October, and then lost that majority in 1975. The story of these years is told in a **blog article**: <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/05/19/the-joy-of-small-majorities-labour-1974-the-end-of-consensus/>

Tides of History has a timeline:

<https://tidesofhistory.wordpress.com/2017/06/16/callaghans-minority-government-divided-labour-for-18-years-so-what-chance-does-the-maybot-have/>

And an account of the 1974 minority government:

<https://tidesofhistory.wordpress.com/2017/06/11/the-shortest-parliament-labour-1974-and-a-doomed-minority-government/>

There is another excellent timeline, created to accompany James Graham's play *This House*:

<https://headlong.co.uk/ideas/house-timeline/>

Also, be aware of the deals Labour cut to survive as a minority government: the Lib-Lab Pact (1977-78) and with the nationalists (see below). Most of all, the simple business

Then, understand the change that came under Callaghan. In particular the way in which Callaghan sought to address what he saw as fundamental problems in the British economy and society, and understand the pivotal role of Denis Healey.

- Outline the scale of the economic problems Wilson and Healey faced in 1974: inflation, unemployment, stagflation
- Wilson introduced the Social Contract (1974-77). After that, Callaghan and Healey continued to try and impose/encourage wage restraint, with some success. However, having successfully restrained wages in the aftermath of the 1976 crisis, Callaghan over-reached himself in 1978, and forced Healey to try and impose a 5% norm. See the [blog, Union History](#):
- <http://www.unionhistory.info/britainatwork/timeline/1974-1979.php>
- Why was there a sterling crisis in 1976? Outline the cuts demanded by the IMF. Why did Healey and Callaghan impose them?

One reading of 1976 is that Healey and Callaghan both believed that public spending and wages needed to be reined in: in short, the nation was paying itself more than it earned. The abandonment of Keynesian tax and spend economics, and their embrace of sound money, was not forced on them (note Callaghan's 1976 speech, [Flagship, p36](#)); rather, they believed it to be necessary

- Is it fair to say that those policies were successful? ([Flagship, p35](#))
- Strikes continued to bedevil Britain, among the most important were:
 - The firefighters strike of 1977 led to a state of emergency and the use of the famous Green Goddesses (old military fire engines)
 - The Grunwick strike (at a film processing plant in North London) was mass-picketing and violent clashes with the police
 - The Ford strike of September 1978 drove a coach and horses (or at least a Ford Cortina) through the new 5% pay norm (see below): they settled for 17%
 - A threatened lorry drivers' strike (January 1979), which would have threatened the nation's food supply, was called off when a 20%
 - Then came the public sector unions, and the Winter of Discontent ([Flagship, pp 36-37](#))
- How far was the Winter of Discontent a self-inflicted wound? ([Flagship, pp 36-37](#))

Crisis? What crisis? That's what Jim Callaghan was supposed to have said upon returning to the country as from the Guadeloupe summit in January 1979. What he in fact said was, 'I don't think other people in the world would share the view there is mounting chaos', but it

might it be fair to say the Callaghan government was never quite able to shake the air of crisis off

- Outline how the rise of the left saw bitter criticism of the government's economic policy rise in the late '70s (Flagship, pp 39-41)
- There were reforms:
 - The Health and Safety at Work Act, 1974, created the Health and Safety Commission and the Health and Safety Executive, and imposed statutory responsibilities upon employers
 - The Sex Discrimination Act, 1975, outlawed discrimination on grounds of gender and created the Equal Opportunities Commission
 - The Race Relations Act, 1976, created the Commission for Racial Equality
 - Home Secretary, Merlyn Rees, appointed a commission to reform police procedure (whose reforms would eventually be implemented under Thatcher)
 - In 1976, Callaghan gave a speech at Ruskin College, Oxford., which set the agenda for much of education reform henceforth
- Northern Ireland continued to lurch from crisis to crisis (Flagship, pp 255-56)
 - IRA terrorism continued (and the Birmingham Pub Bombings killed 19 and injured 182)
 - The Sunningdale agreement collapsed, after a general strike in May 1974, by the (Protestant and Unionist) Ulster Workers' Council, brought the Power Sharing Executive down. Famous for Ian Paisley saying 'Never, never, never'.

In the face of political stalemate, Labour relied upon improved security:

- Diplock Courts
- Roy Mason's security campaign

Outline how the Glover Report believed that the IRA could not be defeated militarily. Britain was now in for the long political haul, and militarily committed to what was a de facto war of attrition.

- In 1975, Wilson held an in-out referendum on the EEC, and won (Flagship, pp 183-86)
Why a referendum happened, in a [blog article](#):
<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2016/03/04/1975-referendum-1-how-it-even-happened/>
Why and how Yes won, in another [blog article](#):
<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2016/03/09/britain-and-europe-5the-1975-referendum/>

In the 1974 elections, the SNP had won 11 seats, and Plaid Cymru 3. They did a deal with the nationalists. In return for referendums to introduce devolution in Scotland and Wales, they would support the government in the Commons. Unfortunately, devolution was opposed by some Labour MPs, including the young Neil Kinnock and the MP for West Lothian, Tam Dalyell, who framed the famous West Lothian Question (Enoch Powell gave it the name, by the way):

'For how long will English constituencies and English Honourable members tolerate ... at least 119 Honourable Members from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland exercising an important, and probably often decisive, effect on English politics while they themselves have no say in the same matters in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland?'

A first bill was talked out in 1977 after the government failed to win a guillotine motion (to cut short debate). However, a second was introduced in 1978. It came with a rider, inserted by Labour a Labour MP, George Cunningham: devolution did not require a mere majority, but the support of at least 40% of the electorate. In Scotland, 51.6% voted Yes, but on a turnout of just 64% that amounted to just 33% of the Scottish electorate. The SNP thus intimated they would vote against the government.

In the Commons, MPs are paired: thus, when an MP is unavoidably absent for a division (a Commons vote), his or her pair do not vote. In the vote on the 1976 Aircraft and Shipping Bill, the Labour MP Tom Pendry voted when his pair was absent: Labour won the division by one vote. Famously, Michael Heseltine furiously brandished the Mace as the chamber collapsed into disorder. From then on, paring ceased, making it far harder for both sides to win votes: many sittings went on very late in or even all through the night, and all MPs had to be present. When the 28th March 1979 vote of no confidence came, the Labour MOP for Batley, Dr Alfred Broughton, was at home recovering from a heart attack. Broughton offered to come in: however, the whips believe it might kill him, and Callaghan declined the offer. The government lost by one vote.

Callaghan, with a narrow lead in the polls and a personal rating well ahead of Thatcher's, contemplated going to the country in October 1978. In the end, the thought of another minority government so terrified him that he balked at the idea. He famously recited the old Marie Lloyd music hall song at the party conference in the September, 'Can't get away to marry you today'. He then added: 'I have promised nobody that I shall be at the altar in October, nobody at all.'

This story is well told in [Tides of History](https://tidesofhistory.wordpress.com/2017/09/05/waiting-at-the-church-why-callaghan-failed-to-call-the-1978-general-election/):

<https://tidesofhistory.wordpress.com/2017/09/05/waiting-at-the-church-why-callaghan-failed-to-call-the-1978-general-election/>

With the election was forced on him in May 1979, Callaghan famously told an aide:

'You know there are times, perhaps once every thirty years, when there is a sea-change in politics. It then does not matter what you say or what you do. There is a shift in what the public wants and what it approves of. I suspect there is now such a sea change and it is for Mrs Thatcher.'

Perhaps that, above all else, explains why Thatcher won, and Labour lost, in 1979.

FURTHER READING, LISTENING & VIEWING

Sixth form history needs you to do reading of your own. Already, this guide had given you references to the Flagship textbook, and some other resources. You need to take steps beyond that both online and, of course, by resorting to another revolutionary technology, the book. For modern British history, there is a dizzying array of printed and online resources, of startlingly variable quality. If you do find something not on here that's good, let the rest of us know through the Facebook page or email s.tilbrook@rgs.newcastle.sch.uk and we'll add it.

For each topic or area, we have colour coded each book or article:

- Blue is essential
- Yellow means if you want to develop a deeper understanding you should read one or all of these
- Green means this is a monograph, or a sophisticated or highly detailed account. Learn how to dip into real history books, a vital study skill; you might sometimes find full books actually become more engrossing
- Pink is for choices that are more loosely related, and have grabbed someone's interest at some point. Try one or two, they might be fun

A WORD ABOUT ONLINE RESOURCES

Three of the best resources are, of course, the History department's very own Blog, Facebook page and Twitter feed.

The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (DNB)

Beyond that, for the British history course, get used to using one of the best resources available, and for free; the DNB. Any local library card will get you in: anyone can join the City Library via this link <https://eforms.newcastle.gov.uk/popup.aspx/RenderForm/?F.Name=JVpTDqdaf2o>. Once you have a library card number, got to <http://www.oxforddnb.com/> and fill in your number, or the city one you need to go via their portal. You then have access to it all. They vary in quality from the good to absolutely excellent, and they are all written by leaders in the field. The best have a particularly good last section, dealing with how history has viewed these men and women, and their historiography. There are also the **Themes**.

History Today

Beyond that, another invaluable resource is ***History Today***. We have institutional access to the entire archive, here: <http://www.historytoday.com/user/login>

Username: Tilbrook

Password: historian

You can search at your leisure, and find all sorts. These guides will flag some up for you.

Philip Allan Resources

Another good resources is Philip Allan Magazines Online, aimed very much at sixth-form students: here <http://my.dynamic-learning.co.uk/default.aspx?ReturnUrl=%2farchive.aspx>

Username: j.richardson@rgs.newcastle.sch.uk

Password: rgs1

The archive is then searchable

FURTHER READING: textbooks and student introductions

There is a range of series aimed at sixth form history students. None make for exciting reading, and they vary in quality, but you should always aim to read at least one.

Michael Lynch, *Britain 1945-2007 (Access to History)* (Lon 2008)

Malcolm Pearce & Geoffrey Stewart, *British Political History 1867-2001* (3rd ed, Lon 2002)

Here are some other overviews:

John Charmley, *A History of Conservative Politics 1900-1996* (Lon 1996)

A breezy account from a Conservative point of view, highly opinionated and very much focused on party politics

Chris Wrigley (ed), *A Companion to 20th Century Britain* (Oxford 2003)

Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-1990* (Lon 1996)

TO Lloyd, *Empire, Welfare State, Europe: English History 1906-92* (4th ed, Oxford 1993)

Dominic Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun* (Lon 2013) is very readable

Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out* (Lon 2010) is also excellent

Martin Pugh, *State & Society: Britain 1870-1997* (2nd ed, Lon 1999)

The story of these years is told in a [blog article](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/05/19/the-joy-of-small-majorities-labour-1974-the-end-of-consensus/>

And an account of the 1974 minority government on [Tides of History](#):

<https://tidesofhistory.wordpress.com/2017/06/11/the-shortest-parliament-labour-1974-and-a-doomed-minority-government/>

There are also two blog timelines

[Tides of History](#):

<https://tidesofhistory.wordpress.com/2017/06/16/callaghans-minority-government-divided-labour-for-18-years-so-what-chance-does-the-maybot-have/>

And created to accompany James Graham's play *This House*:

<https://headlong.co.uk/ideas/house-timeline/>

The DNB entries on Wilson, Callaghan and Jenkins are essential, but others are also worth a look
Peter Hennessy, *The Prime Ministers* (Lon 2000)

Ian Cawood, *Harold Wilson: a reappraisal* (2006)

<http://www.historytoday.com/ian-cawood/harold-wilson-reappraisal>

Also read Edward Pearce's review of Ben Pimlott's biography:

<http://www.historytoday.com/edward-pearce/harold-wilson-biography>

Jim Callaghan died in 2005, this is his [Guardian obituary](#):

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2005/mar/28/guardianobituaries.politics>

On the centenary of his birth, there was an excellent reappraisal of Callaghan by Kenneth O Morgan in the *Guardian*, *James Callaghan: a great PM who, 100 years on, still stands tall*

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/mar/27/james-callaghan-prime-minister-centenary>

Denis Healey died in 2015. This is his [Guardian obituary](#):

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/oct/03/lord-healey#img-2>

And here an excellent reappraisal by Michael White:

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/oct/03/denis-healey-one-of-best-prime-ministers-britain-never-had>

The February 1974 election is covered in this [blog article](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2016/12/11/1974-part-one-the-february-general-election/>

It also gets a mention on the [blog here](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2017/04/22/snap-elections-we-have-known-1923-1931-1951-1966-and-1974-october-oh-yes-and-2017/>

Tides of History tells the story of the 1974 minority government, here:

<https://tidesofhistory.wordpress.com/2017/06/11/the-shortest-parliament-labour-1974-and-a-doomed-minority-government/>

John Shepherd, *Labour Wasn't Working* (2009)

History Today: on the Winter of Discontent

<http://www.historytoday.com/john-shepherd/labour-wasnt-working>

The history of the 1975 EEC referendum is covered in two [blog articles](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2016/03/04/1975-referendum-1-how-it-even-happened/>
<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2016/03/09/britain-and-europe-5the-1975-referendum/>

You can read [Callaghan's Ruskin College speech on education](#), here:

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/thegreatdebate/story/0,,574645,00.html>

Callaghan's decision not to run in 1978 is covered by [Tides of History](#):

<https://tidesofhistory.wordpress.com/2017/09/05/waiting-at-the-church-why-callaghan-failed-to-call-the-1978-general-election/>

There is an outstanding BBC documentary on the fall of the Callaghan government, [The Night the Government Fell](#): <https://youtu.be/-dFXEPUb2-E>

There is a slightly more contentious Channel *Secret History* documentary, [Harold Wilson: The Final Days](#): <https://youtu.be/Y8WWyZmY8fU>

Episode 4 of [Andrew Marr's The History of Modern Britain](#) on the 1970s is worth a watch

This was [Anthony Howard's BBC obituary of Wilson](#):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjTyFeAslpE>

There is also a very good [BBC documentary on the rivalry between Wilson and Heath](#):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYNcLjWylWU>