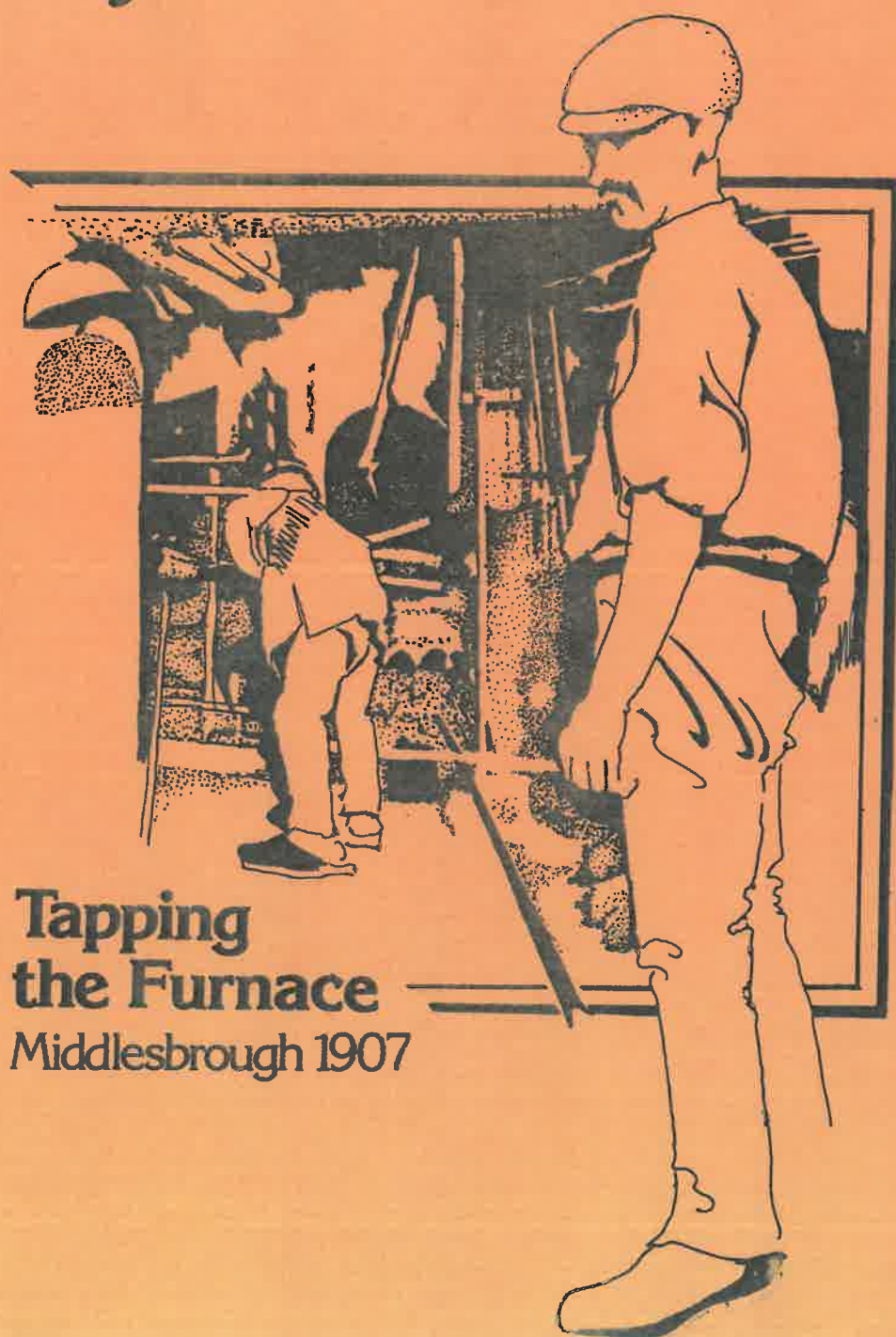


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LABOUR AND POLITICS IN THE NORTH EAST 1903-1957

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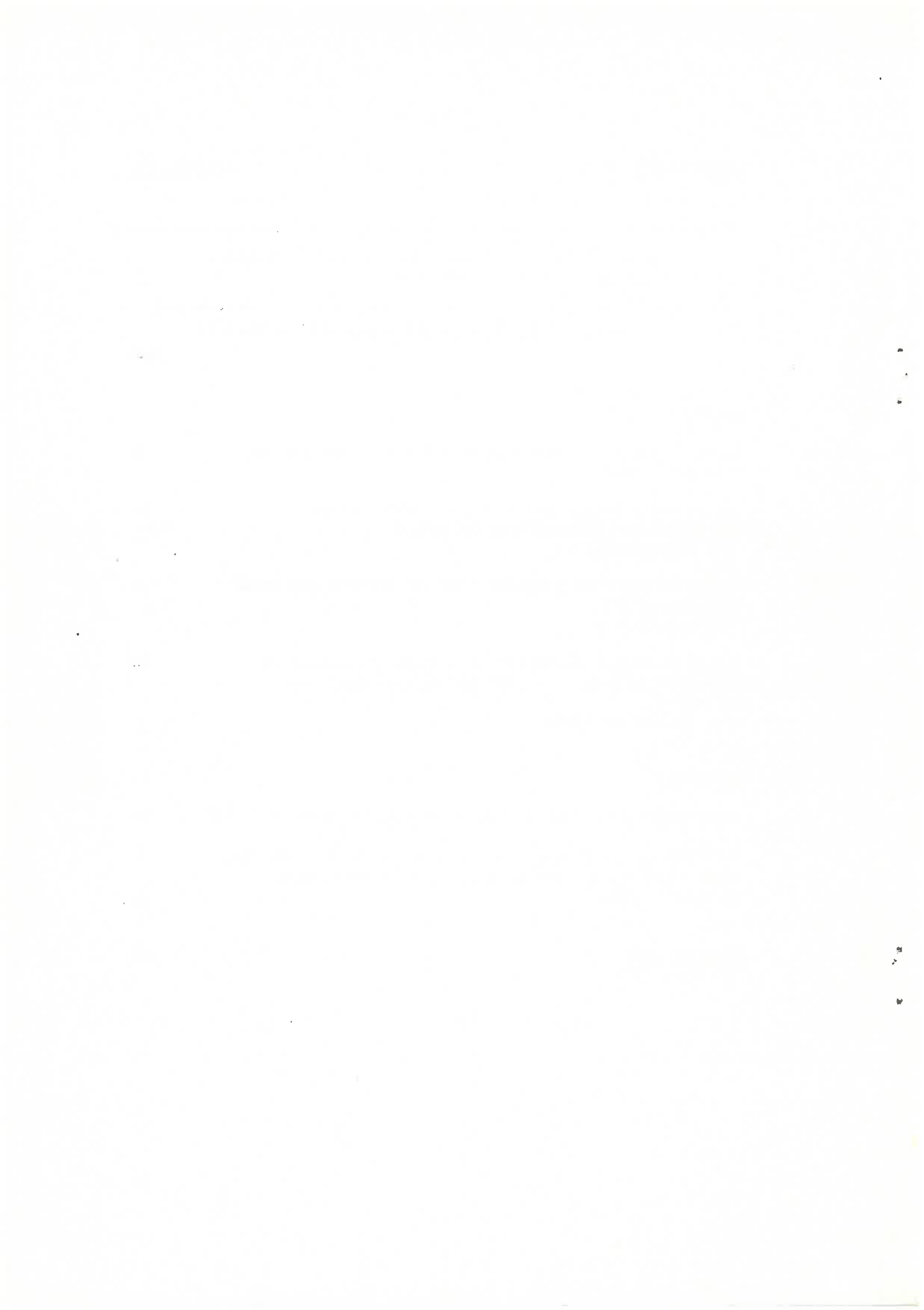
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ISAAC MITCHELL AND THE "PROGRESSIVE" ALLIANCE 1903-06

The tacit electoral agreement which the Labour Representation Committee concluded with the Liberal Party in the autumn of 1903 ⁽¹⁾ and in accordance with which the two parties fought the general election of 1906 formed the basis of Labour's electoral breakthrough of that year. Although the election of twenty-nine ⁽²⁾ LRC MPs in 1906 bears witness to the wisdom of Ramsay MacDonald's policy of electoral alliance yet the effect of the alliance upon the LRC was to be by no means totally benign. Both organisationally and ideologically the LRC was rather a loose coalition than a united political party and the Liberal-Labour alliance had the effect of further exacerbating the deep divisions within the party.

On the one hand the alliance aroused suspicion among those, often but not exclusively members of the Independent Labour Party, who desired complete independence from Liberalism and had little sympathy with the notion of a "radical" or "progressive" alliance while, alternatively, many of those in the LRC, whose affinities were close to Liberalism and who saw the LRC as rather a pressure group for trades unionist interests than a new political party, espoused the alliance with Liberalism so enthusiastically that they were in danger of adopting a traditional Liberal-Labour position.

The preservation of an independent identity became increasingly a problem for the LRC after MacDonald had reached his understanding with the Liberals. So many of the members of the LRC had been members of the Liberal Party, or had had close connections with it, that in a climate of co-operation they were likely to become quasi Liberals. Richard Bell was, by 1904, virtually a Liberal MP, while Shackleton, Henderson and Crooks moved close to a Liberal-Labour position especially when they spoke in support of the Liberal candidate at Devonport in June 1904. The appeal of a "progressive" alliance, assiduously promoted by much of the Liberal press, was strong for many LRC parliamentary candidates now that so many of them were not to be opposed by Liberals. One candidate who represents the most extreme Liberal-Labour or "progressive" wing of the LRC was Isaac Mitchell, LRC candidate for Darlington.

Isaac Mitchell, as well as being a member of the Amalgamated

(1) For accounts of the negotiations which led to the electoral agreement see F Bealey, 'Negotiations between the Liberals and the LRC before the 1906 election', Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research, November 1956 and 'The Electoral Arrangement between the LRC and the Liberal Party', Journal of Modern History, December 1956.

(2) Thirty if we include J W Taylor, who was elected for Chester-le-Street and who took the Labour whip as soon as Parliament met.

Society of Engineers, was the President of the General Federation of Trade Unions. He was also a London County Council Alderman. He had in the past been a committed Socialist and had indeed been, according to Pete Curran, a De Leonist. In Curran's own words, "In fact while he was working in New York eight years ago he joined the De Leon gang"⁽¹⁾ By the time he was adopted for Darlington in 1903, he had, however, moved a long way to the right and was totally opposed to Socialism and to the ILP. Even before the Gladstone-MacDonald understanding, therefore, he was an unwilling follower of any policy which served to demarcate the LRC clearly as a separate political party. He was reluctant to agree to the resolution moved by Pete Curran and passed by the Newcastle Conference of 1903 that members of the executive and officials of affiliated organisations should not identify themselves with, or promote the interests of "any section of the Liberal or Conservative parties".

Even before the Gladstone-MacDonald understanding Mitchell was too ready to identify with Liberalism and a constant battle had to be waged by his supporters to prevent him embracing Liberal allies too closely, but in the climate created by that alliance Mitchell's "Liberal-Labourism" was to bloom more luxuriantly.

He was formally approved by the National Executive Committee as candidate for Darlington in March 1903 but on 8 January 1903 G N Barnes, secretary of the ASB had written to MacDonald: "I may say that Mr Mitchell was written sometime ago in regard to general compliance with the decisions of the LRC Annual Meeting and warned that if he did not comply therewith he must accept the consequences".⁽²⁾ After the "Newcastle Resolution", Mitchell found it very difficult to come round to signing the constitution of the LRC. By December 1903, he had still not signed⁽³⁾ and on 11 February 1904 a letter from him was read at a meeting of the National Executive Committee asking for certain phrases in the constitution to be interpreted.⁽⁴⁾ It was only after the National Executive Committee resolved to complain to the Engineers' Executive that Mitchell fell into line.

In addition to his innate sympathy with Liberalism, there were good, practical reasons why Mitchell should be chary of offending local Liberals. There was always the danger of a Liberal candidate. Indeed it would appear that the Liberals gave up a real opportunity in Darlington. The sitting member, H Pike Pease, was a Liberal-Unionist. His family had long dominated both the economy and the politics of the town. Among the most prominent industrialists of Durham, with

(1) Pete Curran to J R MacDonald, 16 January 1905. Labour Party Letter Files, Transport House.

(2) G N Barnes to J R MacDonald, 8 January 1903, LPLF.

(3) LRC National Executive Committee Minutes, 17 December 1903, PC.

(4) LRC National Executive Committee Minutes, 11 February 1904, PC.

interests in railways and mines, the Pease family, originally Quakers, had been solidly Liberal until they had split up over Home Rule; and Arthur Pease, Pike Pease's father, had captured Darlington for Liberal-Unionism in 1895, although other branches of the family remained Liberal. In the circumstances of 1906, a Liberal candidate would have had a considerable opportunity.

There had early been the possibility of a Liberal candidate⁽¹⁾ and, though this came to nothing, a Liberal challenge remained a danger. No wonder, then, that Mitchell strove for a "progressive" front and looked with alarm at the growing number of LRC candidates in South Durham which seemed likely to antagonise local Liberals. On 6 May 1903 Mitchell wrote to MacDonald:

... I find that in the County of Durham there are already five LRC candidates, one miners' candidate with the prospect of two more, and the possibility of another Labour candidate at Middlesbrough, of these four adjoining constituencies and in two the candidates are members of the same society ... I am totally opposed to this indiscriminate placing of candidates regardless of the consequences to those in neighbouring constituencies ... of the four constituencies of Barnard Castle, Darlington, Middlesbrough and Stockton I am strongly of the opinion that only two should be contested ...⁽²⁾

Later in the year, Mitchell was obviously working too closely with the Liberals to please his LRC supporters. P Harrison of the Darlington Trades and Labour Council, while reporting to MacDonald that Mitchell's candidature was making good progress and that he had made a good impression on the trade union branches, wrote:

... Isaac Mitchell has expressed a very strong wish to approach the Liberals here and only within the last day or so I have seen a letter from him stating that he is making arrangements to meet the Executive of the Liberals some time in November. Now that is very delicate ground in a place like Darlington where the Tory has such a strong hold of the working class. Understand I am not afraid of him sinking any of our principles only I am afraid if it gets out it will do us a lot of harm.⁽³⁾

(1) G N Barnes to J R MacDonald, 29 April 1903, LPLF.

(2) I Mitchell to J R MacDonald, 6 May 1903, LPLF.

(3) P Harrison to J R MacDonald, 4 October 1903, LPLF.

This letter, passed on by MacDonald to G N Barnes, provoked an immediate response from the Engineers' Secretary and Mitchell was firmly told that such a liaison with the Liberals was inadmissible:

The matter of your intimation as to addressing the Liberal Executive at Darlington has been the subject of discussion today by the EC, and such intimation has been considered in the light of decisions communicated to you last January, and also in the light of this constitution of the Labour Representation Committee subsequently fixed at Newcastle. As a result I have to write to you pointing out in a friendly way that addressing a private meeting of the Liberal Executive is somewhat a dangerous proceeding, tending as it will to divest your candidature to a certain extent of that element of independence upon which the movement is based and also tending perhaps to antagonise men on the other side of politics from whom of course we must hope to draw recruits as well as from the Liberal side. At the time when our conditions were drawn up as you will remember last January, we had not then the terms of the constitution of the LRC as determined upon in the month following, and it is thought by the council, that being an integral part of the LRC, we must have regard to its decisions and constitution.(1)

Mitchell, however, was adamant that he would address the Darlington Liberals and this disagreement, combined with his difficulty over signing the LRC constitution, led him to offer his resignation to the Darlington LRC in October 1903:

... I think the only course open to me is to ask the Committee to relieve me of the position I now occupy as Lab. Cand. I have come to this decision after very anxious thought and because I believe my continuing to be the candidate would only create further misunderstandings and distrust.

Kindly place this before your committee at the earliest poss. moment as I desire to cancel all the engagements wh. I have made and of course I can do nothing until you intimate that I can make my decision public.(2)

A few days later Pearson Harrison, the secretary of the Darlington LRC, suggested to MacDonald that it might be necessary to replace Mitchell as candidate by H H Hughes, the agent for the Darlington LRC.(3)

(1) G N Barnes to I Mitchell, 7 October 1903, LPLF.

(2) I Mitchell to the Darlington LRC, October 1903. An undated copy of this letter was sent by H H Hughes to J R MacDonald on 21 October 1903, LPLF.

(3) P Harrison to J R MacDonald, 25 October, 1903, LPLF.

At a meeting of the Darlington LRC on Thursday, 5 November, 1903, relations between Mitchell and the committee were patched up and his offer to resign withdrawn. He went ahead with his engagement to speak to the Liberal Association but was not accompanied by any members of the Darlington LRC. He did not, however, go alone but had companions who can scarcely have been congenial to him: John Penny, secretary to the National Administrative Council of the LIP and A Reed, who had formerly been secretary to the Darlington ILP.⁽¹⁾ With such witnesses present, Mitchell may well have been inhibited from going too far in the direction of a complete alliance with Liberalism and he emphasised the independence of his candidature from the Liberal Party. Hughes wrote of the "straightforward manner in which Mitchell conducted himself before the Liberal Executive".⁽²⁾

Relations between Mitchell and the LRC, both nationally and in the North East, continued, however, to be uneasy even after he had signed the LRC constitution. In the autumn of 1904, he was criticised at a public meeting in Darlington by Wilson Hildreth, the LRC agent for Newcastle. The main reasons for Hildreth's attack on the LRC candidate were the enthusiasm which Mitchell continued to show for a "progressive" alliance with the Liberal Party, his close relations with the Darlington Liberal Association and the support he enjoyed from the Northern Echo, a radical newspaper owned by W S Rowntree and published in Darlington. Hildreth was a member of the ILP and that party had initially supported and welcomed Mitchell as a candidate because of his supposed Socialism. Now that he was emerging as almost a Liberal-Labour figure, the ILP turned on him with particular venom and fury. Hildreth stated that the eagerness with which Labour men welcomed allying themselves with the Liberals was due to the fact that were were rewarded with substantial expenses. Mitchell wrote to Hildreth, complaining of this attack by a fellow member of the LRC and asking why the attack had not been made in the press so that he could have had the opportunity of replying.⁽³⁾ An acrimonious correspondence ensued.

Hildreth's reply justified his attack and said that he had made it at a public meeting and not in the columns of the press because he knew something of newspapers and did not write letters to papers like the Northern Echo, knowing its bias:

(1) P Harrison to J R MacDonald, 20 December 1903, LPLF.

(2) H H Hughes to J R MacDonald, 11 December 1903, LPLF.

(3) I Mitchell to W Hildreth, 5 November 1904, LPLF.

The main theme of my Darlington speech, 'Socialism the only way', was to point out to my Socialist comrades how independent Labour movements had been nobbled in the past by the Liberal Party, and so to put them on their guard against the nobbling methods at work today. The "Daily News" and the "Northern Echo" came in for a fair share of criticism ... I have been convinced, much against my will, I believe, that you have deviated from the straight course on which you were supposed to begin and which you might have pursued without any fear ... Darlington may be won by making the Liberals a present of years of Socialists' labours in the town ... and it may not.(1)

Mitchell rejoindered by return post:

When I got over the impertinence of your letter and that takes some doing its colossal conceit made me laugh ... if the indiscretions of your last visit to Darlington are repeated I will take the necessary steps to protect the movement from the vagaries of a self constituted censor. Your action at Darlington has necessitated my making a special journey there next Sunday when I hope to meet the members of the ILP branch ... (2)

Hildreth's sarcastic reply referred to the "greatness of your personality and the importance of your position as reflected in your own imagination".(3)

Considerable differences existed between Mitchell and another LRC candidate in the region, Pete Curran. The two candidates had vastly different attitudes and problems, for, while Mitchell was now sympathetic to Liberalism, Curran remained faithful to the ILP point of view and, while Darlington represented the apotheosis of the "progressive" alliance in the North East, Jarrow was its nadir. Both were members of the executive of the General Federation of Trade Unions, which did not make for harmony on that body. Mitchell was the president of the GFTU while Curran was general secretary.

In the report of the GFTU for the last quarter of 1904, Mitchell launched an attack on the ILP and argued that the LRC should be a purely trade unionist body and should not include the Socialist societies. MacDonald wrote to Curran, complaining of Mitchell's blind and bigotted antagonism" and his "efforts to damage the movement." (4) Curran replied:

(1) W Hildreth to I Mitchell, 4 December 1904, LPLF.

(2) I Mitchell to W Hildreth, 5 December 1904, LPLF.

(3) W Hildreth to I Mitchell, 6 December 1904, LPLF.

(4) J R MacDonald to P Curran, 13 January, 1905, LPLF.

... Yes, Mitchell's article is a spiteful attack on the whole movement but the articles are not the affair of the Federation as they are written on an individual basis. My impression is that the local LRC at Darlington and the EC of the ASE should take the matter in hand as they are responsible for his candidature and it is also my opinion that you as secretary of the National Movement are within your rights in calling the attention of these bodies to this article ... He is anxious to now show that he is not a Socialist but a trades independent only while he claimed to be an extreme Socialist until he got his present position. (1)

Mitchell's relations with both the national LRC and the Darlington LRC continued to be strained but he remained as LRC candidate for the constituency, enjoying great support among local Liberals because of his moderation and held in high esteem by the Northern Echo as a personification of the virtues of the policy of "progressive" alliance.

Not surprisingly when it came to the general election campaign Isaac Mitchell can be seen, of all LRC candidates in the North East, the most closely identified with the Liberal Party. He was essentially a "progressive" candidate, backed by both the LRC and the Liberal Association in Darlington, and it would have been difficult to tell, from the content and tone of his campaign, that he was the candidate of the LRC rather than of the Liberal Party.

As we have seen, Mitchell had shown after his adoption that he no longer held to his earlier Socialist beliefs and that he was out of sympathy with a policy of complete independence from Liberalism. His tardiness over signing the LRC constitution, his attacks on the Socialist organisations within the LRC and his enthusiasm for co-operating with Darlington Liberals all point to a policy which was difficult to distinguish from Liberal-Labourism.

The Northern Echo, printed in Darlington and the foremost advocate of radical "progressivism" among the regional press, published a leading article referring to Mitchell's adoption meeting in December 1905:

(1)

P Curran to J R MacDonald, 16 January 1905, LPLF.

[It referred to] ... the unanimity and enthusiasm of last night's meeting for the adoption of Mr Isaac Mitchell as the Progressive candidate for Darlington ... Mr Mitchell is the nominee of the LRC, but his views are so broad and sane, his pledges so satisfactory to Liberals of every shade that there is general agreement to place things before names and measures before men and to unite in securing his return in place of the present supporter of the party of reaction. Wherever in the North East the local pioneers of the Labour Representation movement have taken a similarly sane and reasonable course they are being met in the same sane and reasonable spirit by their fellow progressives of the Liberal Party.⁽¹⁾

Best wishes were sent to Mitchell at his adoption meeting by Sir Edward Gray, John Burns, McKinnon Wood, J W Bean, Will Crooks and Dr R F Horton (president of the National Council of the Evangelical Free Churches).⁽²⁾ This list of supporters is almost sufficient in itself to indicate the sort of moderate "progressive" candidate that Mitchell was.

Neither the manifesto, drawn up by Ramsay MacDonald and signed by the members of the National Executive, nor the election addresses of the great majority of LRC candidates were other than reformist in tone. The demand was made for more Labour MPs to represent working class interests in Parliament but this demand was also made by the manifesto of the TUC Parliamentary Committee and was to be found in the election addresses of most Liberal-Labour and many Liberal candidates. Few LRC election addresses even acknowledged the Socialist objective endorsed by the 1905 Annual Conference. The combination of support for social reform and opposition to tariff reform was found in the addresses of "progressive" Liberals and LRC candidates alike. Isaac Mitchell's address, however, was probably the extreme example of conspicuous moderation among LRC candidates.

The most notable feature of Mitchell's election address is that he contrived not to mention the LRC or the fact that he was a Labour candidate. It is also significant that he devoted more space to temperance than to social reform. There is nothing in the address which could not have been safely included in that of a Liberal candidate and many Liberals placed a greater emphasis on social reform.

Mitchell began his address by attacking the Unionist record over education, drink and the Boer War:

(1) Northern Echo, 29 December 1905

(2) Northern Echo, 28 December 1905.

Instead of carrying out the policy upon which they were returned to power they have betrayed the trust reposed in them by passing class legislation for the benefit of their own immediate friends. They have entrenched sectarianism in our public schools. They have endowed the wealthy brewers. They have degraded the good name of our country by engaging in a war which cost 23,000 British lives and £250,000,000 and resulted not in the opening up of South Africa to the white man but in the mine owner obtaining cheap, servile Chinese labour.

He went on to allege that the Unionists had betrayed Labour by not safeguarding trade union rights after Taff Vale and were now proposing to disrupt free trade.

On the positive side, Mitchell declared that he was in favour of a limited degree of home rule for Ireland, licensing reform, peace, and free trade while, in the area of social reform, he thought Parliament should consider the problem of the aged poor and the amendment of the Workmen's Compensation Act. His opposition to royalty rents and to the accumulation of wealth due to rising land values was shared by many Liberal candidates. His address was calculated to appeal to both trade unionists and middle class Liberals:

During the three years since you honoured me at a large public meeting with an invitation to become your candidate I have missed no opportunity to place my views frankly and fully before all sections of the people. I am the more confident that those views are generally endorsed by you from the fact that emanating in the first instance from my own colleagues, the wage earners, the invitation to be your candidate has been ratified by those who are associated together to uphold the principles of civil and religious freedom, the continuance of our present policy of free trade and the popular control of that most dangerous element in our national life, the drink traffic.⁽¹⁾

In H Pike Pease, the sitting Liberal Unionist MP, Mitchell had a formidable opponent. The Pease family had for long dominated the commercial and political life of Darlington and had great influence in the surrounding area. Liberal until 1885, the family was split over home rule and Pike Pease's father, Arthur Pease, had won the seat for Liberal Unionism in 1895 and been succeeded by his son in 1900.

Pike Pease's local connections were an asset he determined to make the most of. While the Northern Echo supported Mitchell, the weekly newspaper, the Darlington and Stockton Times, was staunchly in favour of Pease: "His [Pike Pease's] opponent

(1) Northern Echo, 5 January 1906

is a stranger, a paid political adventurer, a Socialist in his earlier stages and latterly a sort of Liberal, chiefly known by reputation for his activity on the London County Council, the most extravagant and, as some would have us believe, the most incompetent business body in the world." (1) The Northern Echo attacked Pease's claim that Darlington needed a local man: "'A Darlington Man for Darlington! ' That is the Tory cry here, but what a comedown for Mr Pease after twitting his opponents for being 'little Englanders' ". (2)

Pike Pease had shown himself, at the General Election of 1900 to be an enthusiastic Imperialist. By 1906 he was an equally enthusiastic advocate of tariff reform. As with Chamberlain, support for the one led naturally to the other. Many of Pease's business interests lay in the smaller metal trades and tariff reform seems to have made a special appeal to such manufacturers (c.f. S Baldwin and A Baldwin). Pease campaigned on the necessity to "continue the magnificent Unionist foreign policy" (3) to prevent home rule, to build up strong economic ties with the colonies and to introduce protection. He alleged that, in two major works in Darlington more than half the production was for the colonies. (4)

The education issue loomed large in the exchanges between the candidates in this strongly non-conformist town. Mitchell, with his advocacy of temperance and hostility to the 1902 Education Act, was well placed to receive the nonconformist vote. Pease argued that Mitchell's plans would lead to there being no religious education at all for many children:

Remarking on the position of Mr Mitchell in relation to education he stated that the gentleman was not in favour of giving religious instruction in any school in the United Kingdom. Did it not seem monstrous that religious training should be taken out of the schools. He would be very much surprised if Darlington sent to Parliament anyone who was not prepared to give religious education in the schools of the country. (5)

(1) Darlington and Stockton Times, 13 January 1906

(2) Northern Echo, 8 January 1906

(3) Newcastle Daily Chronicle, 3 January 1906

(4) Newcastle Journal, 5 January 1906

(5) Newcastle Journal, 4 January 1906

Probably the issue on which both candidates expended the most energy was the Chinese labour question. Pease denied that the indentured labour was, in any way, slave labour but Mitchell managed to find a miner from the Transvaal who declared that it was, indeed, tantamount to slavery and (what may have had more effect on the electorate) that it was taking work from whitemen.

The Northern Echo summarised the contestants' views as follows:

"Alderman Mitchell stands for the reversal of the Education and Licensing Acts, he is against Chinese Slavery and the taxation of food and he seeks to restore economy in national expenditure. Mr Pike Pease is on the wrong side on all these questions ..."(1)

It was, no doubt, because of the impeccably Liberal platform on which the Labour candidate stood that he was granted, as was Havelock Wilson, the personal support of Lloyd George. Speaking at Darlington on 8 January, Lloyd George declared that he was delighted to support Mitchell and praised his moderation, referring to him as the "Progressive candidate":

Whether it is in the Labour Movement or on the greatest municipality in the world, the London County Council, all without distinction speak of him in the highest possible terms. So far from Liberals discountenancing Labour representatives it is our business to encourage men of the right type like Mr Mitchell. Labour ought to be represented in the House of Commons. It is a good thing for Labour and for capital ... Mr Isaac Mitchell with the help of the Liberals is going to be the Progressive member for Darlington.

He was looking forward to the time when, as on the London County Council, Liberals and Labour could work together for common ends and declared that this was bound to happen if Labour chose candidates "of the same sensible, restrained, shrewd type" as Isaac Mitchell.(2)

The Darlington result was announced as the full extent of their national electoral defeat was beginning to be appreciated by the Unionist press. Pike Pease held Darlington with a majority of 488 votes:

H P Pease (Unionist)	4,575
I H Mitchell (Lab.)	4,087

(1) Northern Echo, 8 January 1906

(2) Northern Echo, 9 January 1906

The Times was able to find some comfort in this result: "There are gleams of sunshine, however, in the maintenance of Mr Pike Pease, an avowed tariff reformer, of his position at Darlington."⁽¹⁾ Some tariff reformers cited Pease's victory, along with other examples of tariff reform candidates who had been returned, to suggest that outright tariff reform was more electorally popular than cautious retaliation but they were highly selective in their examples.⁽²⁾ An alternative explanation of the result was put forward by Sir Charles Mark Palmer, who suggested that many Liberals had not voted for Mitchell.⁽³⁾

On the announcement of the result, Mitchell gave the following advice to his Labour and Liberal supporters.

His counsel to the Labour Party was to continue on the lines they had previously followed by organising themselves apart from all other associations and that they should co-operate with all those who were aiming at the same objects that they themselves had in view. To those of the Liberal Party who had supported them he desired to return his hearty thanks and trusted that in the future the two sections of Progressives would work harmoniously together.⁽⁴⁾

It appears, at first sight, unlikely that such a moderate Labour candidate as Mitchell and one who had the support of the constituency Liberal association would not have received the votes of most of those who normally voted Liberal. On the other hand, such an unlikely candidate as the adventurer Trebitsch-Lincoln, standing as a Liberal, was able to defeat Pike Pease by twenty-nine votes in January 1910. It may well have been the case that even the Labour label was enough to deter many middle class Darlington Liberals, despite the moderate views of its wearer.

BILL PURDUE

Open University

⁽¹⁾ The Times, 15 January 1906

⁽²⁾ Russell, Liberal Landslide, p.178

⁽³⁾ Jarrow Guardian, 19 January 1906

⁽⁴⁾ Newcastle Daily Chronicle, 15 January 1906

SIDNEY WEBB, RAMSAY MACDONALD, EMMANUEL SHINWELL AND THE
DURHAM CONSTITUENCY OF SEAHAM

The parliamentary constituency of Seaham, situated on the east coast of County Durham, was established in 1918 and remained in existence until the further reorganisation of 1948 when much of it was transferred into the new Easington constituency. The Seaham constituency consisted of places which before 1918 had been in the south-east Durham, Houghton-le-Spring and Hartlepool Divisions. It absorbed the Rural District of Easington and the Urban District of Seaham Harbour whose populations were predominantly engaged in the mining industry. There were both old and new pits - a fact of political significance, for Liberalism lingered longest in the older colliery districts and it was there too that a substantial minority of the Seaham Labour Party remained loyal to Ramsay MacDonald in 1931 in his new role as leader of the National Government. The most important collieries were those at Blackhall, Dawdon, Easington, Horden, Murton, New Seaham, Shotton, Wheatley Hill and Wingate. The pits at Dawdon and Seaham belonged to Londonderry Collieries Limited, a family concern of the 7th Marquess of Londonderry, who was very influential in Conservative and Unionist politics in County Durham. In 1923 the Company decided to sink a new pit, the Vane Tempest, just north of Seaham Harbour, from which the first coal was drawn in 1929.

The constituency has a special interest both locally and nationally. County Durham contained seventeen constituencies, six boroughs and eleven county divisions. Seaham was one of the eight county divisions designated by the Durham Miners' Association (DMA) in 1918 as a mining constituency where support for miners' candidates through the Labour Party should proceed.¹ It provides, however, an unusual example in Durham of a mining constituency where the miners who dominated the local Labour Party organisation acted independently of, and indeed in conflict with, the DMA in selecting parliamentary candidates. This was in contrast with Chester-le-Street and Spennymoor which faithfully returned DMA candidates and which, with Seaham, were to become Labour's safest seats in Durham. Seaham's interest is extended by the characters and importance of the parliamentary candidates selected to represent it. From 1922 until 1949 its three MPs were such prominent Labour Party figures as Sidney Webb, Ramsay MacDonald and Emmanuel Shinwell. It had particular interest in the General Election of 1929 as the Labour Party leader's constituency, and in 1931 as the Prime Minister's seat and focus of the Labour/National Labour split. It provides an excellent example of the confusion amongst Labour Party supporters occasioned by this split. There is also evidence in Seaham of the reaction and impact of the Londonderry coal-owning interest on local politics.²

The political history of the constituency inevitably emphasises the development of the Labour Party in Seaham, though it could not have been obvious in 1918 that this was to be the situation. This was a new constituency so comparisons with previous elections in the area demand caution, but Labour did not appear to have made

substantial advances between 1900 and 1914 in what was to become a solid Labour region, and in the 1918 election, held immediately after the armistice, Labour won only four out of eighteen Durham seats.

In 1918 the "Coupon" issued by Lloyd George's Coalition Government to its supporters was given to a Liberal, Major E Hayward, and there was a straight fight between Hayward and Jack Lawson, the DMA's candidate, a local miner who had been to Ruskin College, Oxford. As yet the Labour Party had no organisation in the constituency, and support and propaganda for Lawson depended mainly on the few branches of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in the mining villages. Hayward won the seat with a majority of 3,766, gaining 12,745 votes to Lawson's 8,988.

Lawson's failure spurred to action existing Labour Party adherents and in the spring of 1919 a meeting was held in the Murton Miners' Hall to establish a Divisional Labour Party. The six present were all miners except for a local non-conformist minister, J Heron. They were all already actively engaged in local political life and included Peter Lee and Joseph Blackwell³. Lawson soon asked to be released to stand for the already well-established Labour seat of Chester-le-Street and so the new Party's first main task was finding another parliamentary candidate. At once there began a struggle between the miners in the constituency party and the Central Executive of the DMA. Influenced, probably, by ILP members, the local Party had determined on securing a candidate who was already a national figure, 'a real politician'. The DMA Executive attempted to overrule them and confine their search to one of the endorsed mining candidates who had not yet found a seat, and in fact the DMA President, James Robson, was the candidate for a few months.

However, when after a few months he withdrew, letters were sent to Sidney Webb, whose part as a member of the Sankey Commission on the Coal Industry in 1919 had impressed some of the local people, asking him to accept nomination. Webb judiciously approached the DMA to discover their views on his candidature and he was warned off. But the Seaham miners persisted in their demand for Webb as a candidate despite the opposition of the DMA Executive. A particularly interesting feature of this dispute, according to Beatrice Webb's account, was that a number of the miners who visited the Labour Party Headquarters in London expressed their doubts as to the competence of their fellows for Parliamentary careers and a preference for sympathetic intellectuals.⁴

The Webbs made their first appearance in the constituency on June 2, 1920 and spent a fortnight touring the area and Sidney promised to stand if the selection conference was practically unanimous. Beatrice Webb wrote on this tour,

Here and there is a bookish miner It is to these "bookish" miners that is due the pertinacity with which Sidney's candidature has been pursued.⁵

On his selection in July, she commented:

There is a strange irony in the simple-minded miners, living in a remote backwater and seeking out and persistently pressing into their service the most astute and subtle, and be it added, the least popular leader of the Labour and Socialist Movement. The explanation is that these leading men in these isolated pit villages are readers of books and not hearers of revivalist speeches and propagandist lectures.⁶

The constituency Sidney Webb tackled in 1920 was very different from that accepted by the Labour Party leader Ramsay MacDonald in 1928. There was still very little organization and a quarrel in process with the Miners' Executive at Durham over the prospective candidate. The sitting Liberal, Hayward, always voted with the Labour Party and had gained a 3,700 majority over the Labour candidate in 1918. But the decision to have Sidney Webb was important for the development of Labour support in Seaham, for despite his place at the centre of Labour Party politics he and Beatrice worked with their customary dedicated energy and played a large part in building up the Seaham Division into one of the safest Labour seats in Britain. They fulfilled a most exacting programme of lectures, meetings and organisation of propaganda. Beatrice encouraged the formation of Labour Party women's sections which were beginning to crop up in the villages. They both made themselves experts on mining and mining history and Sidney produced The Story of the Durham Miners. They lectured in every village, giving stiff discourses on difficult subjects in miners' halls. Beatrice was told, 'We hear so much at your meetings it is better than a tutorial class'.⁷

In 1922 Webb won Seaham with a majority of 11,888 in a three-cornered contest. The Liberal, Hayward, no longer had the support of the Conservatives who put up their own candidate, and consequently he came bottom of the poll with 5,247 votes, these gained mostly, it was considered by Beatrice Webb, in the remote pit villages where Liberalism lingered. Bradford, the Conservative, came second with 8,315 votes, the bulk of his support coming from Seaham Harbour.

After this, preparing for the 1923 election, Beatrice wrote,

We are in velvet in this ideal constituency There is more enthusiasm than a year ago - far more voluntary work also this time there are always a group of women sometimes sixty or seventy at the meetings. Last year if there were two or three one was agreeably surprised.

She was moved to comment,

There is something very touching in these few 100 miners' wives with here and there a professional woman gathering around me with a sort of hero worship.⁸

In the 1923 election the Liberals did not enter the contest and in a straight fight with the Conservative candidate, Ross, Webb gained 71.3 per cent of the vote, and Beatrice commented,

Up here on the north-east coast Liberalism has disappeared, the turnover of the miners being complete, and the disaffected trade unionist of the Labour Party being Conservative when he is not Liberal.⁹

On the other hand many Liberals may well not have turned out to vote, for there was a fall in turnout of voters from 81.9 per cent in 1922 to 71.3 per cent in 1923 and in 1922 the Liberals had 15.5 per cent of the vote.

In 1924 the polling was up again to 78.8 per cent in another straight fight and it was Ross, the Conservative, who gained an extra 6 per cent of the votes cast, Webb dropping an approximately similar amount. There had been a call from the Liberal leadership for Liberals to vote Conservative in the 200 or so seats where no Liberal was standing and many of them appear to have done so at Seaham. But in this, his last election, Webb still had a majority of 10,624.

Thus, as the Conservative Government formed in 1924 ran towards the end of its term of office in 1929, issues which appeared to dominate the campaign nationally and locally, at Seaham seemed only relevant to the size of Labour's majority. In 1928 Webb gave notice of his intended retirement. The local Labour Party having resisted DMA pressure over Webb's selection were determined again to have a national politician. Arthur Henderson was looking for a good seat for the Labour Party leader, Ramsay MacDonald, who wished to leave Aberavon which made too heavy demands on his time, and Sidney Webb, who wanted to have some say as to his own successor, supported the choice of MacDonald. The way was then made clear for him to have Seaham. There were some local nominees at first but they were dealt with by Arthur Henderson coming to the constituency and at a meeting at the Sunderland Co-operative Hall insisting that a resolution be passed simply inviting MacDonald to be the candidate for the next election - he was not to face competition and a selection conference.¹⁰ The other nominees were then withdrawn and the candidature thus offered to MacDonald. He was promised time for national affairs and freedom from local demands on his time. The members of the local Party felt proud to obtain a personality of MacDonald's standing and he in return had as safe a seat as he could wish for.

As Beatrice Webb wrote to the women of the constituency,

I think you did precious well when you got Sidney Webb to represent you in Parliament. But in persuading Ramsay MacDonald to take on this task you have made a big jump to the very top of the political ladder.¹¹

A young businessman, M S Fearnley-Whittingstall, was the Conservative choice, and the Communist Party leader, Harry Pollitt, was doubtless encouraged to stand at Seaham against the Labour leader where he would obtain the maximum of publicity. He may well have been further encouraged by a strike at Dawdon Colliery which for a time was controlled by left-wing militants. Pollitt made the most of the Dawdon strike in his election address, referring to, 'the magnificent struggle of the Dawdon miners, carried out against Londonderry and the Trade Union leadership'. It was 'a practical example of the economic crisis the most important struggle since the end of the 1926 lock-out'. MacDonald found the situation embarrassing and exhorted Blackwell during and after the campaign to deal with the Communists. For example, in a letter of August 8 from his native Lossiemouth,

My dear Blackwell,

I cannot conceal from you my great concern about the way that your affairs are being handled by Communists of the type of Lumley.¹² Lumley can no more settle a dispute than my boot can, nor has he any intention of doing so. The longer disputes are dragged on the better it is for him and his associates, and in the end Dawdon is going to suffer Is it not time some of you got together and put your feet down? Can you do nothing to clear Lumley out on account of his incompetence?¹³

There was a fourth candidate, the Liberal, H S Haslem, connected with local shipping.

The difficulties facing the mining industry were acknowledged by all candidates and the attempted approach of the Conservative is of interest. He stayed for a while with a miner's family and soon adopted what was an unacceptable position to his sponsors on at least one aspect of mining affairs. It was necessary for him, being dependent on Lord Londonderry's support, to submit a draft of his election address to Londonderry's agent, Malcolm Dillon, and in his first draft he declared his support for the nationalisation of mining royalties. This, however, was firmly removed by Dillon;

This is hardly a matter for an Election Address and raises so much contentious matter, and my own feeling is that it would be better omitted. If we could get fair terms I should be very glad to see Royalties nationalised, although it is the thin edge of the wedge in other directions.¹⁴

It was in the 1929 election that Labour swept the board for the first time in County Durham, winning every county and borough seat except The Hartlepoons (an increase of seven seats on 1924). At Seaham, Ramsay MacDonald increased Labour's majority by 7 per cent with 35,615 votes gaining 72.5 per cent of the poll. Nationally the result of the election was the formation of the second Labour Government - Labour being for the first time the largest parliamentary party with two hundred and eighty seven seats, but vulnerable to a combination of Conservative and Liberal votes. Within eighteen months the Government thus formed was facing a crisis, the outcome of which was the resignation of the Labour Cabinet in August 1931 and the formation of a so-called National Government with MacDonald remaining as Prime Minister.

The situation which resulted in the formation of the National Government produced much confusion at the time and subsequently. The August crisis coming as it did at the height of the holiday season when Parliament was in recess was probably a surprise to most people. Certainly the change of Government provided the Labour movement with a great shock. However, by the end of September it was clear that the hard core of the Labour Party's supporters in the north-east constituencies was staunchly defending the position taken by the new Party leadership under Arthur Henderson. Their MPs were all declaring where they stood and this was, in the case of every Durham constituency except Seaham, on the side of Arthur Henderson and the Parliamentary Labour Party and in opposition to the National Government.

In the Seaham Division there was confusion and disarray which continued until the General Election at the end of October. Within a few days of the formation of the National Government the Seaham Divisional Labour Party Executive demanded the resignation of MacDonald as Labour MP for Seaham. But this decision had been rushed through at the instigation of the Seaham Harbour group, the most militant branch in the Executive, and it did not prove to be a popular decision. The Seaham Harbour group, however, reckoned that it was crucial, judging that if they had not acted quickly, MacDonald might well have retained Labour's backing in the constituency as a whole.¹⁵ William Coxon, secretary of the Divisional Party was reported as saying,

We cannot force Ramsay MacDonald to resign but we are certainly not prepared to allow him to be Member of this Division while he is head of the National Government if he wants to continue in the National Government we think he ought to retire from this Division. Of course, if he retains the seat, the Party can do no more.¹⁶

It was in the press that MacDonald first heard of the decision of the Executive calling for his resignation, but he made no comment until he received a formal request for his resignation. He then replied,

..... Needless to say I very much regret that without knowing any of the facts they have passed the resolution which you have communicated I do desire to make it perfectly clear to you, however, that I shall not under any circumstances, carry out the above instruction whilst it proved a desertion of duty which I consider to be imperative to protect the great mass of wage-earners in this country from a serious disaster. Any action I may therefore take, in response to any resolution passed, will only be after I have finished the duty which I have undertaken and not before.¹⁷

Conservative support for MacDonald in the north-east was rapid and well-publicised in the Conservative-dominated press. The newspapers also, more significantly, produced reports indicating that a number of Seaham Labour Party's constituent groups were not immediately in favour of their Executive's hasty actions (and, indeed, certain miners' lodges and individuals elsewhere were loyal to MacDonald to the end). On September 5 and 7 the Newcastle Journal reported the dissension at Horden, Blackhall, Shotton, Murton and Basington and in various women's groups. Groups and individuals wrote to MacDonald to assure him of their support, while others wrote to their Executive roundly condemning its action. This was pressed in a resolution for the delegate conference to be held at Wheatley Hill on September 12. Some of MacDonald's supporters urged him to visit the constituency before the Wheatley Hill meeting but he was unable to do this. Had he come, its decision might have been a different one, for the Executive's decision was only narrowly confirmed by forty votes to thirty-nine. Joseph Blackwell related how the use of the Seaham Harbour party's black vote of seventeen was used to produce this result. A number of lodges asked that no decision be reached until MacDonald had been heard. Amongst these was Blackhall, whose chairman, Councillor Raine, said at the beginning of October,

It is my personal opinion that there is still a warm side in the Division for MacDonald and the proceedings tonight (MacDonald having arrived) may explain away many of the hard things which have been said in the Division since the crisis began. I am glad the Prime Minister is coming down. I wish he had been able to come before the decision asking him to resign had been arrived at.¹⁸

The press were not admitted to the meeting nor given details of the voting but Coxon insisted that it was only on the question of MacDonald's resignation that there was a difference of opinion. MacDonald was informed of the result of the delegate meeting and wrote to Coxon on September 18 requesting an opportunity to state his case.

I know that the Executive were very anxious that I should not be heard, so that they might have a verdict against me without having the situation explained at first hand The vote which you report is no guidance to me or anyone else as to the desires of the Seaham Party. I therefore propose to let the matter rest where it is for the moment and I hope that it may be possible for me to meet my Seaham friends so that when they are again asked to consider this question they may do so after hearing what the trouble was all about and that why the steps which have been taken had to be taken.¹⁹

When MacDonald came to Seaham on October 2 he met the Divisional Executive. Again the press was not allowed at the meeting and no statement was issued. This produced the comment from the Newcastle Journal that,

They were afraid of the effect the Prime Minister's words might have upon the rest of the voters in the constituency It was open last night to a handful of delegates at Seaham Harbour to aid the nation in its hour of need by reversing their former resolution calling for the Prime Minister's resignation. Patriotism was dormant and they failed, despite a speech by MacDonald at the Miners' Welfare Hall, Horden They decided to find an opponent to Mr MacDonald but it was not apparent that in the case of an election they will be able to divert those who supported Mr MacDonald in 1929, if he decides to stand again for the Division.²⁰

And, indeed, on Monday, October 5, it was reported that the Murton Miners' Lodge in conjunction with the Murton Branch of the Labour Party, had the previous day decided to nominate MacDonald as Labour candidate for Seaham. They further decided to ask the Divisional Executive to convene a special delegate meeting to reconsider the whole position in view of the narrow decision at the Wheatley Hill conference.

That, as it transpired, was the very day on which the leaders of the three parties in the National Government finally agreed after much discussion and speculation that a general election would be held at the earliest possible moment. Parliament was dissolved on October 7.

Conservative Associations in County Durham were aware of the splendid opportunity the National label would give to their

candidates. They had been defeated so convincingly in some constituencies in 1929 that they had reorganised. The Durham County Unionist Association reduced the number of their agents and decided, before the August crisis, not to contest certain seats at the next election. At Seaham, J A Hastie had been persuaded to resign by the end of June 1929, as Secretary and Agent, and having got rid of him, Dillon, explaining to the Wingate colliery manager, wrote,

..... our idea is to carry on without an Agent, at any rate until we have paid our debts. It would be quite hopeless to fight the constituency as long as the Prime Minister stands.²¹

Fearnley-Whittingstall was consoled with the message,

If the Archangel Gabriel had been the candidate he would not have polled more votes than you did and probably not so many. It would be perfectly useless to contest the seat again unless circumstances alter very materially but Lord Londonderry asked me to say privately to you that if you contest any other seat he will be very glad to contribute to your election expenses.²²

Thus there was to be no Conservative nursing of Seaham.

However, the outlook for the Conservatives was much rosier in the autumn of 1931 than they could have expected after the defeat of 1929 and they produced candidates for every constituency except where an agreement was made with the Liberals. In Seaham, of course, there was no need to seek a new candidate. The sitting member, the Prime Minister, already a friend and companion of Lord and Lady Londonderry²³ was now the Conservatives' man and Liberals rallied also to provide Ramsay MacDonald with all the support they could muster.

It was necessary, on the other hand, for the Labour Party to replace MacDonald as official Labour candidate though he himself continued to maintain, 'I am Labour candidate and have not changed one ideal that has guided me through the whole of my political life, and I have no intention at the behest of anyone to change it'.²⁴ The local Labour Party, having decided at the beginning of September that Ramsay MacDonald was no longer suitable to represent Labour in the constituency, began preparations to secure the nomination of a new Labour candidate. There were ten nominations at the selection meeting held on October 11. Ramsay MacDonald was at the top of the list, nominated by the Murton Miners' Lodge and Labour Party. Five of the rest were local miners.²⁵ The others included a local public house licensee; Tom Myers, ex-MP for Spen Valley; a National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers nominee;

and the local party secretary, William Coxon, a South Hetton schoolmaster, who was successful in being selected to oppose the Prime Minister. He was a blunt, forthright character, well to the left in the Labour Party and not apparently very popular. He had just over a fortnight to rally the confused and still divided mining communities to the Labour cause.

Beatrice Webb, unable to visit Seaham, wrote by request to the women's groups to explain the situation and support Coxon,

..... most tragic and surprising of all, our own Labour Prime Minister has become the Prime Minister of a Coalition Government, pledged, as the 'Times' newspaper proudly declared the other day, not only to defeat, but actually to smash the Labour Party.

The main point to be clearly comprehended, she emphasised, was that he had left the Labour Party and that,

every vote given for Mr MacDonald is a vote, not only for him, but for his Government with its avowed policy of drastically cutting the social services, cutting down Unemployment Benefit, etc. for the advantage of the wealthy payers of income and supertax.²⁶

A local miner, George Lumley, stood as a Communist candidate but with lack of funds had difficulty with the organisation of his campaign.

The interest of the world was reported to be on the contest at Seaham. Frank King of the Associated Press of America, which disseminated news to 1,500 papers in the US and Canada, was one of the first of many pressmen at Seaham and described the scene thus:

What we see here is a world event. Mr Ramsay MacDonald, apart altogether from his politics, is, and long has been, an international figure of importance. We realise that his future politically means a great deal one way or another to world politics. Fate has chosen a Durham colliery village for the drama and so here we are portraying it as best we can. What strikes one, after looking things over is this: Seaham Division is so largely composed of real-honest-to-goodness working class electors that the rest are in a smaller proportion than elsewhere. Yet this is the place to which the Prime Minister comes individually for his mandate. I would say this: If Mr Ramsay MacDonald is returned in a Division such as this, then there has never been such a democratic working-class vote of confidence anywhere. That is the great point as we in America see it.²⁷

The result of the election nationally and in County Durham was a landslide victory for the National Government and its candidates. The representation of Durham was reversed, Labour losing sixteen out of eighteen seats. MacDonald, now National Labour candidate, held Seaham with a majority of 5,951 over the Labour Party candidate, Coxon.²⁸ Lumley's vote seems of little significance, being only 677. Seaham was the only constituency in Durham where Labour and National Labour candidates were in opposition, and Joseph Blackwell, who acted an agent for Coxon, emphasised the confusion amongst Labour supporters. He reckoned that there was insufficient time for the Labour case to be clearly represented, but that given another week Coxon would have won. This seems highly improbable for quite apart from the 'stunts' and scares prevalent generally in this campaign, personal loyalty to MacDonald, or at least reluctance to believe that the old loyalty had been misplaced, worked against the Labour candidate. MacDonald had told the electorate,

You may be assured that I have abandoned no principle and no ideal which has kept me going through days of fair and foul weather and that the same person whom you elected in 1929 asks for a renewal of your confidence in 1931.²⁹

He had a great personal following too in the constituency and retained votes in 1931 which were returned to Labour in 1935. It is highly unlikely that a National Conservative or National Liberal could have gained MacDonald's result.

Soon after the defeat of 1931 Coxon left Seaham and, again, with the expectation of more time on this occasion, a personality of national status was sought by the local Labour Party. The choice was Emmanuel Shinwell who had spoken at Seaham in 1926 and who had been Secretary for Mines in the two Labour Governments. There were local nominees as usual and the ex-Spen Valley MP, Tom Myres, again, but Shinwell was adopted in September 1932. He challenged MacDonald to resign at once to test the truth of Shinwell's assertion that the previous election was not a true reflection of Labour strength in the Seaham Division.

For three years Shinwell campaigned relentlessly in Seaham. He attended every constituency party meeting in those years in addition to addressing countless others of miners' and women's groups. This was in marked contrast to MacDonald's neglect of the constituency and lent weight to the accusation that he had deserted Labour principles. Their MP, admittedly much involved with affairs of state as Prime Minister, paid only two visits to the constituency between the elections of 1931 and 1935, taking somewhat excessive advantage of the 1929 offer to him of a safe seat with the guarantee of few local demands.

In June 1935, MacDonald and Baldwin changed places in the Government reshuffle. MacDonald received no great welcome in the constituency when the 1935 election campaign commenced, either from the Conservatives or his previous Labour friends.

Local Conservatives were neither happy about his candidature nor hopeful of success. This is clearly revealed in the correspondence between Dillon and both Regional and Central Offices of the Conservative Party. A letter from the Northern Counties Area Office of the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations of May 1935 to Dillon suggested that MacDonald be asked to spend more time in the Division and asked about his chances of retaining the 16,000 or so Socialist votes he had apparently carried in 1931. Dillon, '..... did not consider the chances of the sitting member very rosy'.³⁰ When, rather belatedly, it was agreed that MacDonald would contest the seat again, and the National Labour agent, Halstead, arrived in Seaham, Dillon confessed, 'I have always held the opinion that, under the existing circumstances we should not play any part in the support of the Member'.³¹ And when J H Thomas addressed a meeting at Seaham Harbour the National Labour agent made it clear that he did not wish Dillon to sit on the platform, though two managers from the Londonderry collieries were selected to exert control over the Election Committee. Neither Dillon, as Chairman of the local Conservative Association, nor Bettle, the Conservative agent, were consulted about election arrangements. On the other hand, Labour commentators made great play of the support MacDonald received. Shinwell declared that while MacDonald himself neglected his constituency even during the election, 'The fight was carried on by every speaker that the Tories and the MacDonald group could find.'³² MacNeill observed that, 'his team of speakers and helpers imported from the outside was the largest ever seen at an election. He had more than 200 cars on polling day!³³ There does seem to have been a last-minute effort from Conservative Headquarters to assist MacDonald's election campaign but local Conservatives did not provide similar backing.

Some of MacDonald's meetings were fairly rough and at Shotton he was shouted down altogether after a derogatory reference to his opponent.³⁴ The effect of Shinwell's long campaign and the tightening of party organisation is evidenced by the fact that even at Murton, centre of loyalty to MacDonald in 1931, the ex-Prime Minister was not allowed to use the Miners' Hall for his meetings.³⁵

This time there was a straight fight for Seaham between Labour and National Labour. In County Durham as a whole Labour regained the nine county seats lost in 1931, and in Seaham Labour gained a majority of 20,498, Shinwell polling 38,380 against MacDonald's 17,882. If 1931 is to be regarded as something of a freak election it is more realistic to compare the 1929 results with those of 1935 as an indication of political support. While this is always a hazardous exercise it is rendered particularly difficult in Seaham by the exceptional confusion of MacDonald's position, in addition to an increase of over 6,000 in the electorate between 1929 and 1935. By 1935, Shinwell must have clearly been the Labour candidate and MacDonald, however he chose

to describe himself, the anti-Labour candidate - National Labour meaning non-Labour. Even so the personal influence of MacDonald himself remains of some importance. In a four-cornered contest in 1929 he gained for Labour 72.5 per cent of the votes cast. While Shinwell's 20,498 majority in 1935 was wholly convincing as a Labour victory it was still less than MacDonald's overall majority (with a smaller electorate) in 1929 and Shinwell's 68.2 per cent of the poll was less than MacDonald's had been (with a 2 per cent smaller turnout). Further, in 1935 MacDonald's 31.8 per cent of the poll was higher than the combined anti-Labour vote of 1929 which had been 27.5 per cent.

A decade later, in 1945, when the next election took place, Shinwell, contesting the seat for the second time gained the massive majority of 32,277 and 80.1 per cent of the votes cast in a straight fight with the Conservative, Maurice MacMillan. Shinwell had cultivated support most assiduously. Skilful propaganda, diligent attendance at local functions, organisations and committees, the circulation and publication of every Shinwell speech from the pages of Hansard - such careful nursing of ready Labour support produced a predictable result. In 1949 the Seaham constituency disappeared, being largely merged with the new constituency of Basington which Shinwell continued to represent with comfortable majorities until he took a life peerage in 1970.

The inter-war years had witnessed the rapid and effective development of the Labour Party in County Durham and especially in the county as compared with the borough divisions, though progress in the boroughs too had been real and was to prove lasting. Labour strength was particularly evident in three constituencies - Seaham, Chester-le-Street and Spennymoor, but whereas Chester-le-Street and Spennymoor remained firmly within the political orbit of the DMA Seaham did not. Despite the dominant position of the mining industry and the importance of mining issues within the constituency, the Seaham Labour Party had preferred to choose its MPs independently, and even in defiance of the DMA. This independent line was highly distinctive. From 1922 Seaham was represented in Parliament by a series of outstanding national figures in the Labour movements; Sidney Webb, perhaps the party's leading intellectual, who nonetheless carefully supervised the organisation of the constituency into a safe Labour seat; Ramsay MacDonald, undoubtedly the most prestigious member of the party when first he took the seat, but whose politics split the party locally no less than nationally; and Emmanuel Shinwell, a controversial radical on his adoption, who repaired the local damage and reverted to the Webb policy of careful nursing. In marked contrast to Durham County seats in general, Seaham returned no local man, no DMA nominee and no minor to Parliament. Nonetheless, and despite the confusion and difficulties of 1931, the constituency became one of the safest Labour seats in the country by 1945.

SOURCES

1. W R Garside, The Durham Miners 1918-1960, pp 321-327.
2. Londonderry Papers; Dillon Files. D/L C277.
Durham County Record Office.
Unfortunately, the political files of Lord Londonderry's agent, Malcolm Dillon, are not complete for this period.
3. Joseph Blackwell (D.1971) recalled very clearly the aims and aspirations of the original group. He became well-acquainted with the Webbs, MacDonald and Shinwell, meeting them all in their visits to the constituency, and played a central part in all the elections of the Seaham constituency, acting as agent on a number of occasions. He edited the local Labour Party journal from its establishment. He was a member of the local and County Councils and eventually check-weighman at Dawdon Colliery. An interview was tape-recorded in January 1970 and is an important source of evidence for this account.
4. Beatrice Webb, Diaries 1912-1924, Ed.M Cole; February 18, 1920, p.175.
5. Ibid. p.180.
6. Ibid. p.184
7. Beatrice Webb. A Life. K Muggeridge and R Adams, p.215.
8. B Webb, Diaries, op.cit October 1923.
There were eleven Women's Sections by this time.
9. Ibid. December 3. p.253.
10. From Joseph Blackwell's account.
11. David Marquand, Ramsay MacDonald, 1977 p.481, MacDonald Papers 7/29.
12. Ibid. p.483, MacDonald Papers 7/29.
13. Seaham Harbour Labour News, September 1928.
14. George Lumley, a local miner, Communist Parliamentary candidate for Seaham in 1931.
15. The correspondence between Ramsay MacDonald and Joseph Blackwell, preserved by Blackwell, has been photocopied by Dr N McCord of Newcastle University.
16. Dillon papers, op.cit. Correspondence between Dillon and Fearnley-Whittingstall.

17. According to Joseph Blackwell's account.
18. Newcastle Journal, 3 September 1931.
19. Newcastle Journal, 2 October 1931.
20. Newcastle Journal, 2 October 1931.
21. Ibid.
22. Newcastle Journal, 3 October 1931. J Blackwell and T Atkins, a local tradesman, recalled these controversies within the local Labour Party.
23. Dillon Papers, op. cit. 22-29 June 1931 correspondence.
24. Ibid. 4 June.
25. This has been the case for some time and according to the admittedly hostile account of McNeill Weir in The Tragedy of Ramsay MacDonald, p.519. Sidney Webb had warned MacDonald in 1928 that if his friendship with Lord Londonderry became known it would be resented by the miners and might affect his electoral chances.
26. Newcastle Journal, October 13, 1931. Report of MacDonald's first campaign speech at Easington.
27. Including my informant, Joseph Blackwell.
28. Letter from Beatrice Webb preserved by Joseph Blackwell. A photocopy is in the possession of the author.
29. Newcastle Journal, Tuesday 15 October 1931.
30. This was a fall for MacDonald from a majority of 28,794 in 1929.
31. J R MacDonald, Election Address, 1931.
32. Dillon Papers, op. cit. 7 May and 17 May 1935.
33. Ibid.
34. E Shinwell. Conflict without Malice, pp.128, 129.
35. L MacNeill Weir, p.528.
36. This was J Blackwell's explanation of the closing of this meeting.
37. Durham Advertiser, 8 November 1935.

**"BEVIN TO BEAT THE BANKERS": ERNEST BEVIN'S GATESHEAD
CAMPAIGN OF 1931**

Alan Bullock has described Ernest Bevin as "the outstanding trade union leader yet produced by this, or perhaps, by any other country", and few would quarrel with this judgment. Bevin was the dominant trade union personality of the inter-war years, from 1940 to 1945 he served as Minister of Labour in Churchill's coalition government, and from 1945 to 1951 was Foreign Secretary in Attlee's Labour Government. Bevin was born in Somerset and his early trade union activities were confined to the Bristol area and South Wales. He moved to London in 1920 and from then until his death in 1951 was at the centre of national events. However, he had one brief association with the North East when he stood as Labour candidate for Gateshead in the 1931 general election. Bullock devotes only a few lines to Bevin's Gateshead campaign, and Trevor Evans and Francis Williams give it no more than a mention in their biographies of Bevin. (1) Admittedly the campaign was a relatively minor incident in Bevin's life and probably merited no greater attention in a biography. Yet a fuller account of Bevin's Gateshead campaign is likely to interest North Eastern readers, and a closer examination of the campaign may also reveal some new fact or insight overlooked by London or Oxford-based historians.

The background to the 1931 general election was the break-up of the Labour Government and its replacement by a National Government. The Labour Party had won 288 seats in the 1929 general election making it the largest party in the Commons, but with the election of 260 Conservatives and 59 Liberals Labour had failed to win an overall majority and MacDonald formed his second minority government. The second Labour Government struggled to solve the unemployment problem but its efforts were overtaken by the world economic crisis and by 1930 the unemployment rate had risen to 20%. Yet the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Snowden, remained committed to support for free trade and the maintenance of the gold standard, and sought to balance the budget and keep up the sinking fund for the repayment of the national debt. Maintaining the gold standard meant that any fall in world prices inevitably forced down British export prices and hence wage levels, the pursuit of free trade policies allowed other countries to dump cut-price goods on the British home market, and the attempt to balance the budget and the refusal to suspend sinking fund payments meant that public expenditure had to be cut. Snowden's policy of retrenchment received support from the Report of the May Committee on Public Expenditure whose publication in June 1931 precipitated massive gold withdrawals from London. A foreign loan was negotiated by the Bank of England conditional upon cuts in social expenditure. The Labour Cabinet split on the issue of cuts, with nine or ten members opposing any

reductions in unemployment benefits. MacDonald could not continue in office against the resistance of nearly half his Cabinet. He asked for everyone's resignation and went for an audience with the King, who summoned a conference for the next day with MacDonald and the other two party leaders, Baldwin and Samuel. After the conference the Labour ex-ministers met, expecting to learn that the Conservatives were to form a government. Instead MacDonald announced that a National Government was to be formed with himself as Prime Minister and Baldwin and Samuel serving under him. The shocked meeting broke up - except for Snowden, Thomas and Sankey who were offered posts in the new administration.

The formation of the National Government was soon followed by talk of a general election to consolidate its position. Arthur Henderson, who had replaced MacDonald as leader of the Labour Party, sounded Bevin on the possibility of his standing against the Prime Minister in his Seaham constituency. On 2 September Bevin replied:

"Dear Uncle Arthur,

"You will think that I am very difficult in regard to this political business, but I am very anxious to do the right thing. I am being pressed from all quarters to place myself at the disposal of the Labour Party. As indicated to you, however, I must discuss the position with my Executive.

"With regard to Seaham I do not think it wise to interfere or to hold up negotiations. If I ran at all, I should endeavour to get a seat near London, to make things as easy as possible.

"In the circumstances, I think I should tell them at Seaham not to bother. I will look at the whole position when I am at Scarborough next week. There is such a divergence of opinions in my own Society that it is extremely difficult." (2)

The Labour Party Conference opened at Scarborough on 5 October and on the same day the coalition parties reached agreement on fighting an election without breaking up the National Government. Parliament was dissolved on 7 October while the conference was still in session, and on the same day Major Herbert Evans, the Labour MP for Gateshead, died in Westminster Hospital. This meant that Gateshead would need a new Labour candidate. Bullock states that Bevin "was at once offered the nomination for Gateshead which had returned a Labour majority of 16,700 at the 1929 election". (3) This statement is an oversimplification of events, because Bevin had to go through the selection process in order to secure the Gateshead nomination; furthermore, the reference to the 1929 general election ignores the result of the by-election held in Gateshead in June 1931, barely five months before, which saw the Labour majority reduced to 1,395.

In 1931 Gateshead had a population of 124,545 and an electorate of 73,872. Pelling describes Gateshead at the beginning of the century as "the one overwhelmingly working class borough constituency in the North East" (4), and this remained true in 1931. Its working population was chiefly employed in mining and engineering, and housed in crowded tenements in the northern and eastern parts of the town. The unemployment rate for the town was 30% in 1931, and 10% of its population was receiving outdoor relief from the Guardians (5) J B Priestley in his English Journey remarked that "the whole town appeared to have been carefully planned by an enemy of the human race" (6) and to be "nothing more than a huge dingy dormitory". (7). Gateshead, therefore, should have been a safe Labour constituency, and James B Melville had won the seat for Labour in the 1929 general election with a substantial majority. The voting figures for 1929 were:

J B Melville (Labour)	28,893
I L Orr-Ewing (Conservative)	11,644
J Fennell (Liberal)	10,314
J L Watson (Independent)	<u>3,688</u>
Labour Majority	16,749

Melville died in May 1931 making it necessary for a by-election to be held. Major Herbert Evans, a retired civil servant, was Labour candidate, and Colonel Cuthbert Headlam stood for the Conservatives. The result of the by-election was:

H Evans (Labour)	22,893
C Headlam (Conservative)	<u>21,501</u>
Labour Majority	1,392

Thus the Labour vote had dropped by nearly 7,000 and this suggests that Labour's electoral support in Gateshead was already falling before the party split over the economic crisis. However, Maureen Callcott argues that several factors were operating which go some way to explaining the slump in the Labour vote. (8) First, the poll was low - only 60% turned out to vote, and it is likely to have been Labour supporters who failed to turn out in the inclement weather of polling day. The Gateshead Herald described the walk to the poll as "an ordeal by water" and this could have favoured the Conservatives who had more cars at their disposal. Secondly, it is clear that thousands of Liberals - perhaps a large proportion of the 10,314 who had voted Liberal in 1929 - had voted Conservative. The results of the Gateshead council elections in the previous decade suggest that the bulk of the town's Liberal vote was anti-Socialist: though no doubt some Liberals voted for Evans in support of Free Trade and some Radicals found the Labour

programme more to their taste than the Conservative one. Abstentions probably included Liberals who could not support either the Socialist policies advocated by Evans or the Protectionist policies put forward by Headlam. There were also many Labour supporters critical of the Government's performance, especially on the unemployment problem. It is significant that both the New Party and the Communist Party had considered fighting the by-election. It is also likely that some Roman Catholics who had voted for Melville as a co-religionist did not vote for Evans. Roman Catholic influence was strong in Gateshead. Pelling quotes from the Newcastle Daily Chronicle of 14 November 1885 when the Irish vote was reckoned at one-seventh of the electorate(9) and Frank Manders, Librarian at Gateshead Central Library, obtained information from the Bishop's office which estimated that Gateshead's Catholics constituted a quarter of the town's population in 1970. Melville as an eminent barrister was also likely to attract a personal vote regardless of religious affiliation: he was a good public speaker and his speeches were well laced with humour. His attractive wife, Sarah, was an active Fabian and campaigned vigorously on her husband's behalf. The Melvilles made a formidable team. Finally, the by-election took place on an old register and there were numerous complaints about names being omitted. But whatever the reasons for the drop in the Labour vote at the by-election it is clear that Gateshead in 1931 was no longer the Labour stronghold it had been in 1929.

Bevin travelled up to Gateshead on 12 October to attend the selection conference arranged for that evening. Miss Ruth Dodds, editor of the Gateshead Labour Party's newspaper the Gateshead Herald, recorded in her diary "tram men very excited at the prospect of Bevin coming".(10) In the local press Bevin was welcomed as "the Dockers' KC", the nickname he had earned in 1920 when appearing before the Court of Enquiry into wages and working conditions in the ports. The selection conference was held in the Co-operative Hall, Jackson Street, and Miss Dodds, who was present as a delegate, observed that: "It was unfriendly having the meeting in that great, gaunt Co-op Hall filled with clouds and clouds of foul tobacco smoke so that you could only discern the faces on the platform through the haze."

A sub-committee had prepared a short-list of four people: Bevin, Richard Fisher, Steve Wilson and T Foster. Fisher was a native of Hexham and had been educated at Marlborough and Oxford. He worked as a journalist specialising in reporting foreign wars and had been nominated by a local branch of the General and Municipal Workers' Union. Miss Dodds referred to him as "the Roman Catholics' nominee". Steve Wilson was a Gateshead printer and was the nominee of the local ILP. T Foster was also a local man.

Wilson and Foster were soon eliminated when they refused to give an undertaking that, if elected, they would work with the Parliamentary Labour Party. The chairman, Councillor W J Pickering, ruled that unless they gave this undertaking they must withdraw. The ILP delegates protested but Pickering held firm and Wilson and Foster stood down.

Miss Dodds described both Bevin and Fisher as "extraordinarily good candidates". She recorded: "Bevin was a simpler man than I expected. His preliminary speech was not specially striking, except for an honest sincerity about it. He is a great big man with huge shoulders and massive nobbly face with something still frank and boyish about it although he must be 45 past. The younger man was also big built, immensely tall, dark and very full-jowled." Miss Dodds thought that "Fisher's opening statement was more impressive than Bevin's" and her first thought was that he would have more time and energy to give to Gateshead than Bevin with the affairs of a large union to consider. He also promised the local party more money. However, "he seemed to be adopting a bit of a pose; there was a touch of the bully and more than a little of the money touch". Miss Dodds had "more or less decided for Bevin on personality grounds before question time where Bevin scored heavily. His experience told. He knew more about socialist theory and principles. Fisher was weak on the economic side."

The voting was 77 to 40 in favour of Bevin.

Bevin's formal adoption meeting took place at the Gateshead Town Hall on 15 October 1931 and in his opening campaign speech he attacked MacDonald for disloyalty:

"I say now to Ramsay MacDonald: you ran away to Baldwin and Samuel. We knew for months that the crisis was coming. To go and get the support of enemies and never consult your friends is an unforgivable thing."(11)

The Conservatives' preparations in Gateshead for the general election had begun in August 1931 when Major R C White of Stocksfield was selected as Conservative candidate, but on 15 October White withdrew his candidature and said that the Conservatives would support the National Liberal, Thomas Magnay. Magnay was a local accountant and a prominent Methodist; he had fought Blaydon as a Liberal in the 1929 general election. To complicate matters John Fennell, who had been the Liberal candidate for Gateshead in the 1929 general election, stood as the National Labour candidate in support of MacDonald, and J Stuart Barr, who had contested Tynemouth as Labour candidate in the 1924 and 1929 general elections, came forward as the New Party candidate. Fennell was a London barrister who practised on the North East circuit. He was a Roman Catholic and a graduate of Dublin University. During the First World War he had served as an officer with the Royal Dublin Fusiliers and the Machine Gun Corps. Barr was a Scotsman who had started

his working life as a grocer's assistant and in 1931 was Birmingham organiser for the Central Labour College. He had been active in the Labour Movement since his youth, but had followed Mosley into the New Party. The New Party had considered fighting the Gateshead by-election in 1931 with Barr as candidate and therefore had a rudimentary organisation in the town.

On 17 October Lord De La Warr, Chairman of MacDonald's National Labour Committee, visited Gateshead to see Fennell, who afterwards announced: "In the interests of the National Government the chances of victory would be better if I withdraw." Magnay's election agent observed: "Mr Fennell is like the Prime Minister in the way he has put country before self." (12) Thereafter Fennell appeared on platforms speaking in support of Magnay, although it was too late to remove Fennell's name from the ballot papers.

Bevin devoted most of his campaign to the problems of currency and credit. He had recently served for 18 months alongside Keynes on the MacMillan Committee on Finance and Industry, and was very well informed on this subject. Speaking at Low Fell he pledged:

"If I am returned to Parliament I shall fight desperately for the socialisation of credit and currency",

and in a reference to Montagu Norman, Governor of the Bank of England, he declared: "I refuse to be a party to leaving the destinies of this great people in the hands of one man who is exercising greater power than any autocratic king ever exercised in the history of Great Britain" (13)

The Gateshead Herald's election issue hammered home the same theme with the slogan: BEVIN TO BEAT THE BANKERS.

Bevin made only one reference to foreign policy in his campaign and this was when speaking at Shipcote he declared: "The fall of the Labour Government has interrupted Henderson's work at Geneva. It will be a tragedy if a Labour Government is not returned to power to continue its work of securing world peace." However, during the campaign Mr S Phillips of the Jewish Agency for Palestine circulated all Tyneside candidates, pointing out that Jewish voters were particularly interested in the Palestine problem and wanted to know every candidate's view on the Balfour Declaration, which had promised British support for the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine. In view of the criticism of Bevin's anti-Zionist Palestine policy as Foreign Secretary it is interesting to note that he "replied favourably" to the inquiry. (14)

Bevin had no one visiting the constituency to speak on his behalf, although as a national figure he took time off from Gateshead to speak in support of William Coxon, who was

opposing Ramsay MacDonald at Seaham, and he travelled to Lancashire to address meetings in Liverpool, Manchester and Salford.

Magnay launched his election campaign on the same day as Bevin and began by clarifying his position on tariffs.

"I am a convinced Free Trader but if we cannot balance our Budget or put our financial house in order by other means than a tariff we as commonsense businessmen would be fools if we did not take the opportunity."

He defended Ramsay MacDonald's position: "He has recognised a great national emergency", and argued, "The choice is simply this: are we prepared to trust a National Government representative of all the parties, to put the nation on its feet, or are we going to put ourselves in the hands of the Labour Party, who take their orders from their political bosses, the TUC?"(15)

He made great play of his local connections with the slogan: A GATESHEAD MAN FOR GATESHEAD, and in his eve of poll speech he declared:

"I suggest you keep Mr Bevin on the run tomorrow, He came to Gateshead a few weeks ago for a short stay. I came here 37 years ago. I know your needs, I am no carpet-bagger."(16)

Both Colonel Headlam, Conservative candidate in the June by-election, and Sir John Simon, leader of the National Liberals, sent Magnay letters of support.

Walter Runciman spoke for Magnay at Gateshead on Saturday evening, 24 October, when he repeated the savings bank speech he had made in the afternoon at South Shields. In this speech Runciman said:

"A substantial part of the assets of the Post Office Savings Bank had already been lent to the Insurance Fund. That brought home to the Cabinet the difficulties with which they would be faced if serious distrust of British credit set in. If that was not enough to open their eyes to the situation nothing would, because there was nothing in which people trusted more than the inviability of the Post Office Savings Bank."

The speech was reported in the Sunday newspapers and was seized upon by Philip Snowden, who exploited it in a sensational press statement which caught the headlines the following week. Colin Bell has referred to the post office scare as the "most unsavoury tactic of the 1931 election."(17)

Bevin was forced to counter this charge in an eve of poll speech:

"The whole point in this election is whether the people are to be stampeded by misrepresentations and lies that appear in the press", and referring to the innuendo that savings bank deposits would be taken over by a Labour Government, Bevin retorted: "We shall not attack your savings but shall try to give you something to save."(18)

Both Bevin and Magnay held open-air meetings on the Windmill Hills and loud-speaker vans toured the constituency in their support. Bevin's carried the placard:

ABUNDANCE YET UNEMPLOYMENT, WANT, POVERTY, HIGH
TAXATION AND BANKRUPTCY.

WHY? BANKERS DICTATORSHIP AND FINANCIAL SPECULATION.

VOTE FOR BEVIN AND PUBLIC CONTROL OF BANKING IN THE
INTEREST OF TRADE, COMMERCE AND THE PEOPLE.

J Stuart Barr's campaign was preceded by a mass rally of the New Party addressed by Sir Oswald Mosley in the Newcastle City Hall on 8 October 1931. Barr spoke in support of Mosley and was heckled on why he had left the Labour Party.(19). His first meetings in Gateshead were also uproarious. The local press reported that there were "cat-calls, shouts, jeers and whistles when J Stuart Barr opened his campaign", and Fred Tait, an active member of the Gateshead ILP, mounted the platform and appealed to the audience to give Barr a hearing.(20).

Throughout the campaign Barr expounded the New Party's policy of reorganising British industry behind a tariff wall, with the government playing a key role in directing investment and initiating public works schemes. However, the disorder of Barr's early meetings appears to have given way to apathy, for his meeting at Barn Close School attracted only six people and was cancelled.(21)

The election returns show that Bevin spent £470 on his campaign, Magnay £467, Barr £436, and Fennell £131. (22)

Polling took place on 27 October 1931 and the voting was:

T Magnay (National Liberal)	34,764
E Bevin (Labour)	21,826
J S Barr (New Party)	1,077
J Fennell (National Labour)	187
National Liberal Majority	12,938 (23)

The result shows a 25% drop in the Labour vote compared with the previous general election figures. This fall was well above the regional and national average, although Bevin had polled only a thousand votes less than Evans had done to hold the seat for Labour in the by-election five months before. To this extent

Bevin had managed to hold the Labour vote fairly steady. What had done the damage was the 40% increase in the anti-Labour vote which, again, was far above the regional and national average. Why had Bevin done so badly? First, Bevin had not been given any time to nurse the constituency. He was a stranger to the area and had been adopted as the Labour candidate only a fortnight before polling day. Furthermore, he had taken time off from his own campaign to speak on behalf of other Labour candidates in Seaham and Lancashire. Magnay, on the other hand, was a local man, a fact which he exploited to the full during the campaign. Almost all Labour candidates throughout the country faced a "National" candidate of some kind and Bevin was no exception, but few Labour candidates also had to contend with a New Party candidate skirmishing on their left, and a National Labour candidate urging the voters to support the National Liberal. Nor did the campaign issues favour Bevin. One of the main points to be raised was the alleged TUC domination of the previous Labour Government. This issue was effectively exploited by "National" candidates throughout the country, and as the leading personality on the TUC's general council Bevin was particularly vulnerable to the charge.

Bevin himself wrote after the campaign:

"As an old campaigner I recognised during the week-end, and on the Monday before the poll, that fear was doing its work; and I was not surprised at the result; neither was I perturbed. I do not believe the tactics used on this occasion can ever be successful again."(24)

He attributed the spread of fear to Runciman's post office savings speech and to local intimidation:

"When I was a lad in the country I remember how the Liberals used to fight against the intimidation of the squire. Never did I believe that the Liberal Party would sink so low as to get votes by utilising the power of the employers over the workpeople in threatening dismissal if they did not vote in a certain way or if they failed to wear their colours."(25)

Bevin also alleged that promises had been made to bring more work to the town, conditional upon a Labour defeat. He concluded that "Governments which achieve power by such tactics soon fall ignominiously." (26)

Thomas Magnay, however, was re-elected for Gateshead on 1935, although with a greatly reduced majority of 2,968, and remained the town's MP until 1945. His main achievement was to initiate the negotiations which led to the establishment of the Team Valley Trading Estate in 1935.(27) Within a year of the 1931 election John Pennell was on a short-list in an attempt to become the Liberal candidate for York, and afterwards switched

parties, yet again, in time to fight Dewsbury as a National Labour candidate at the 1935 general election.(28) J S Barr appears to have retired from politics after the 1931 general election, and there is no evidence to hand to suggest that he followed Mosley from the New Party into Fascism. For their part the Gateshead Labour Party had been delighted to have Ernest Bevin as their candidate in 1931 and immediately asked him to stand again. However, he informed them in January 1932 that the rules of his union made it impossible for him to accept their invitation.(29)

But if Bevin was finished with Gateshead, Gateshead was not finished with Bevin. In July 1939 Konni Zilliacus, a former League of Nations official, was adopted as the prospective Labour candidate for Gateshead, and went on to beat Thomas Magnay by a massive majority of 19,017 votes in the 1945 general election. Once elected Zilliacus became the arch-critic of Bevin's foreign policy in the 1945-50 Parliament, and in May 1949 was expelled from the Labour Party for his persistent opposition to the Labour Government's foreign policy.

ARCHIE POTTS

Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic

SOURCES

1. Alan Bullock, Bevin (1946), Francis Williams, Ernest Bevin (1952).
2. Quoted Bullock op.cit. p.495
3. Ibid P.496
4. Henry Pelling, Social Geography of British Elections 1885-1910 (1967) p.327.
5. See F W D Manders, A History of Gateshead (1973) for details of social conditions in Gateshead.
6. J B Priestley, English Journey (1934) p.301
7. Ibid p.302
8. Maureen Callcott, Parliamentary Elections in County Durham 1929-1935, M Litt thesis, University of Newcastle upon Tyne (1973).
9. Pelling op. cit. p.327.

10. Ruth Dodds' Diaries: Miss Dodds read selections from her diaries to Maureen Callcott who recorded them on tape. This account of the selection meeting is based on Miss Dodds' record of the event.
11. Newcastle Journal, 16 October 1931.
12. Newcastle Journal, 19 October 1931.
13. Ibid.
14. Newcastle Journal, 24 October 1931.
15. Newcastle Journal, 16 October 1931.
16. Newcastle Journal, 28 October 1931.
17. Colin Bell, The National Government (1975) p.8.
18. Newcastle Journal, 28 October 1931.
19. Newcastle Journal, 9 October 1931.
20. Newcastle Journal, 16 October 1931.
21. Manders op. cit. p.283
22. Newcastle Journal, 3 December 1931.
23. On p.497 of Bullock, when quoting this election result, J S Barr is described as Non-Party instead of New Party.
24. Gateshead Herald, November 1931.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Manders op. cit. p.283.
28. Christopher J James, MP for Dewsbury (1970) pp.214-221.
29. Callcott op. cit. p.178.

Sunderland Divisional Labour PartyBalance Sheet for 1931

The following pages show the 1931 balance sheet for the Sunderland Divisional Labour Party. Sir Jack Cohen, who was the Sunderland Party's Treasurer for 26 years, recalls that the Sunderland Labour Party was always short of money and found it difficult to attract good Parliamentary candidates. The balance sheet shows that Dr Marion Phillips and Alfred Smith (the town's Labour MPs 1929-31) made grants to the Party in 1931 as did D N Pritt, the left-wing barrister who fought the seat in 1931 and remained a candidate until 1934. Among local trade unions the General and Municipal Workers' Union and the Wearmouth Lodge of the Durham Miners' Association were the Party's main financial support.

BALANCE SHEET FROM JANUARY 1ST

INCOME

£ s. d.

78 10 0½

Balance as at December 31, 1930

Affiliation Fees:

Silksworth Miners Lodge	3	0	0	
Railway Clerks	1	19	6	
Typographical Association	1	5	0	
Mental Hospital and Institute Workers		15	0	
Wearmouth Miners	17	0	0	
AEU District	3	0	0	
General and Municipal Workers	25	0	0	
Assurance Workers		9	0	
Boilermakers No. 12		12	6	
NUR No. 2	5	0	0	
Hylton Miners Lodge	4	0	0	
NUR No. 1	1	7	0	
Boilermakers No. 10	1	5	0	
Independent Labour Party	2	10	6	
NUDAW Sunderland	4	8	0	
Locomotive and Firemen	1	0	0	
Joiners		7	6	
Plumbers Society		5	6	
League of Blind		5	0	
ETU Rent for Room				73 9 6
Grant from Late Dr M Phillips				6 10 0
Grant from Late A Smith, MP				72 10 0
Grant from D N Pritt, KC				37 10 0
Individual Membership				112 10 0
				10 6 10

Donations

NUR G Ford Bye Election	3	0	0	
Park Ward Lindsay Road Meeting		3	0	
Mental Hospital and Institute Workers	2	0	0	
Humbledon L P H Heede Election	5	0	0	
NUDAW Sunderland J Scott's Election		10	6	
NUDAW Ryhope " " "	1	0	0	
Plumbers Society, G Morgans "		11	6	
Hendon Ward " " "		14	6	
				12 19 6

Sundry Incomes

Telephone Call		2	3	
Balance from Bazaar	5	5	8	
Rebate Agent's Salary Head Office	9	15	0	
East Ward		14	8	
Sale of Band instruments	2	13	9	
Profit Flower Show	2	3	4½	
Bank Interest		7	11	
				21 2 7½

Collections

Lindsay Road		6	0	
Social at Rooms	1	2	7	
Miners Hall	2	8	1	
Socials Committee				3 16 8
				11 6 6½
				£440 11 8½

Total Income for 1931

440 11 8½

Total Expenditure for 1931

432 9 4

£ 8 2 4½

ONAL LABOUR PARTY1931 to DECEMBER 31ST 1931EXPENDITURE

			£	s.	d.
Salary - G Ford			244	3	4
Postages and Office Expenses, G Ford			28	13	7
Cleaning of Rooms			14	19	7
Individual Membership Cards			6	0	0
Rent			42	0	0
Sundry Expenditure - Duplicator	2	2	9		
Loss on Fete	2	2	4½		
Wreath Late A Smith	1	10	0		
Literature	2	0	0		
Catering for Social		19	6		
Piano and Tuning	6	17	6		
Scarborough Conference	5	11	2		
Meeting Lindsay Road		12	6	21	15 9½
Sundries and Stationery				2	17 1½
<u>Elections</u>					
West Ward Bye	7	0	5		
East Ward Bye	8	1	10		
Shore " November	3	19	6		
Hendon " "	3	8	0		
Central" "	3	2	6		
Bridge " "	7	14	7		
Deptford" "	2	0	0		
Sunderland "	7	9	10		
Monkwearmouth"	2	19	6	50	16 2
Adverts, Echo				4	10 6
<u>Donations</u>					
Womens Federation		10	0		
" " Delegate	4	0	0		
Smith Memorial	2	2	0	6	12 0
Electric Light				5	3 5
Telephone				4	17 10
				432	9 4
Balance				8	2 4½

£440 11 8½

Audited and found correct

(Signed) W Collinson
(Signed) J R Smith
February 17th 1932.

A LETTER TO THE MEMBERS OF THE WOMEN'S SECTIONS OF
THE SEAHAM DIVISIONAL LABOUR PARTY FROM BEATRICE WEBB

Maureen Callcott in her article on Seaham refers to a letter which Beatrice Webb wrote to the Women's Sections of the Seaham Divisional Labour Party on 14 October 1931. This letter is reproduced below.

Passfield Corner,
Liphook,
Hants.
14th October, 1931.

Dear Friends,

I have been asked by several members of the Women's Sections of the Seaham Divisional Labour Party whether I would not come to Seaham for a talk with you, so that we might take counsel together as to what to do in these tragic days. There is no holiday that I should enjoy so much as to be once more among you in one or other of the Miners' Halls, watching your kind eyes and eager faces, and hearing your news about the earnings of your husbands and sons, and the prospects of your own young ones at school or at work. Above all I should like to hear your views of how to make life better and brighter for yourselves and your children, and for all workers by hand or by brain.

But, alas! I am well on in the seventies; and though I keep my hearing and my eyesight, and also, as I tell my husband, a remnant of my wits, I am no longer equal to long railway journeys and public meetings. I must content myself with writing a letter about the world of politics, just as I used to do, during the years that my husband and I were bound up with the work and welfare of the Miners of Seaham.

I think I hear your first question. What about the "Great National Crisis" which has led to all sorts of disasters to the wage earners of Great Britain, from cuts in the Unemployment Benefit and cuts in the pay of the teachers and the policemen, the soldiers and the sailors, the doctors and the chemists, to economies - which mean worsenings - in the education of our children, and in the Public Health Services on which we depend to keep off illness and to lessen the unnecessary mortality now accompanying childbirth? Most tragic and surprising of all, this crisis has led to our own Labour Prime Minister becoming the Prime Minister of a Coalition Government pledged, as the TIMES newspaper proudly declared the other day, not only to defect, but actually to smash the Labour Party at the hurried election at which you will have to cast your vote on the 27th of October. No wonder you are bewildered. Are we living in a madhouse, you will ask?

Now the first thing to notice about the "Great National

Crisis" which ended so dramatically in the resignation of the Labour Government, and in the formation of a Coalition Government of Liberals and Conservatives, with Mr. MacDonald at its head, supported by a handful of former Labour Members, is that this so-called "crisis" had nothing whatever to do with the daily work of the Labour Ministers, or with the government of the country. It happened altogether outside politics in the sphere of profit-making finance, in which no interference by the Government has been tolerated by the Capitalists concerned, whose devious ways have been hidden from the eyes of the public.

The crisis was, in reality, a very simple matter. A few dozen financial firms in the City of London have long done a profitable business by taking care of the money of foreign bankers and traders, and paying them interest on these temporary current balances - just as the Post Office Savings Bank does with your own savings. These financial firms, however, unlike the Post Office Savings Bank, have been tempted by their eagerness for profit to lend the money entrusted to them to various bankers and manufacturers in Germany and Austria at high rates of interest. All these transactions were kept secret, so that neither the Government nor the Bank of England, nor even any one of these financial firms themselves knew HOW MUCH was the total for which the City of London had made itself responsible. When the owners of this money asked for its return, the financial firms who had undertaken to repay it on demand, found that they could not get back from Germany and Austria the sums they had lent; and therefore they were driven to draw gold from the Bank of England in order to meet their obligations. This caused what was called the "drain" of gold. In order to keep a sufficient stock of gold the Bank of England itself borrowed no less than fifty million pounds from American Bankers, but even this did not stop the drain. Then these Capitalists appealed for help to the Labour Government, which had known practically nothing about the matter. (You will notice, by the way, that our great financiers are always willing to "share their losses" with the Government and the people, but not their profits!) It was said that unless help could be given immediately, and the Gold Standard maintained, the whole City of London would be made bankrupt, and that all sorts of calamities would fall on the wage earners. Some of you may have listened to alarming accounts of these calamities broadcasted by Mr. MacDonald and Mr. Snowden. Meanwhile the American Bankers refused to come again to our help unless the Labour Cabinet did two things, namely, "balance the Budget" (that is, impose new taxes sufficient to enable the Government to pay its way without further borrowing); and also effect great economies in the Government expenditure, including a drastic "cut" in Unemployment Insurance. I see that the Prime Minister publicly stated in the House of Commons that this "cut" was "a condition of borrowing". Why did the

American Bankers impose this condition? Because the capitalists of the United States are to-day confronted with something like ten millions of Unemployed workers, to whom they are sternly refusing any State maintenance; and they were desperately anxious to discredit, among their own people, the British system of Unemployment Insurance. The Labour Cabinet refused to accept the distasteful offer of the American Bankers; and (realising that they would be defeated by the united Conservative and Liberal Parties as soon as Parliament met) on Sunday Evening, 23rd August, unanimously authorised the Prime Minister to tender their resignation to the King.

We do not know what happened that night and early the next morning. But at noon on Monday, 24th August, the Prime Minister informed his astonished colleagues that he had been asked by the King, and had agreed, to remain Prime Minister, with a new set of Ministers drawn mainly from the Conservative and the Liberal Parties. He had taken this step without any consultation with the Labour Cabinet, still less with the Parliamentary Labour Party. Unlike Mr. Baldwin and Sir Herbert Samuel, who immediately consulted the Conservative and Liberal Parties, Mr. MacDonald never came near the Parliamentary Labour Party, which passed a resolution repudiating any connection with the so-called "National Government" and its policy. Mr. MacDonald with his new set of Ministers, proceeded promptly to accept the American Bankers' terms (including the cut at Unemployment Insurance) and borrowed no less than eighty millions sterling at a heavy cost to the British taxpayer, merely to "save the pound". The irony of the situation is that it all proved in vain, as the "drain" went on unabated; and within a week Mr. MacDonald and his new Ministry had "taken the Country off the Gold Standard" - which only means that the Bank of England is no longer legally obliged to pay in gold.

At this point I wish to make clear that I have no desire to denounce Mr. MacDonald. He is a man of charming personality; good to look at and delightful to listen to, with a rare gift of emotional oratory. For all these reasons his joining the enemy is a calamity for the Labour Movement. But as to the result of his action there can be no dispute. The so-called "National Government" which he has created is acclaimed by the whole of the Conservative Party and its newspapers as the one and only bulwark against the spread of Socialism, and against the coming into power of the representatives of the Trade Union and Co-operative Movements. All over the country (as in the Seaham Division) the Liberals and Conservatives are eagerly uniting to vote for this new "National Government". Is it not significant that the "Management" of every colliery in the Seaham Division (who used always to oppose my husband) are now publicly supporting Mr. MacDonald on his new platform? Within the new Ministry that Mr. MacDonald has formed are the most prominent enemies of the Labour Movement, such as Mr. Baldwin and Mr. Neville Chamberlain. Why should the late Labour Member for Seaham have superseded George Lansbury, as First Commissioner

of Works, by the Marquis of Londonderry? I can only observe, as the Bible says, "Evil communications corrupt good manners".

And now dear friends, I must ask you a question. What are you going to do about it? You must remember that every vote given for Mr. MacDonald is a vote, not only for him but for his Government, with its avowed policy of drastically reducing the Social Services, cutting down all Unemployment Benefit, sending those who have been longest out of work to the Public Assistance Committee to be put on the pauper standard, and generally "economising" at the expense of the wage earners for the advantage of the wealthy payers of income and supertax. So much for the action of this new Government during the past seven weeks. The future offers us an even darker prospect. Besides the cuts off the money incomes of millions of families we have now an inflation of the currency, with its consequence in a gradual rise in the prices of food and clothing that you have to buy - an inflation that as you will remember Mr. MacDonald and Mr. Snowden had described, only a few weeks ago, in alarming terms. But such a rise in prices and such a reduction of money incomes, already put in operation, is not enough for this essentially capitalist Government. It is not concealed by Mr. MacDonald, and it is eagerly proclaimed on every platform by his supporters, that after the election if they get a majority, one of the earliest tasks of the Government will be to impose new Customs Duties on the commodities (including foodstuffs) that come to us from the foreign countries to which we sell our coal and our manufactures. Every woman knows that the sure and certain effect of putting taxes on commodities is to make them dearer, even at the Co-operative Store. Thus the wage earner, employed or unemployed, will be made to suffer in three separate ways - by the cut in his money income, by the lessening of the value of the pound due to inflation, and by the new dearthness of imported articles caused by Customs Duties - in order to save those who own the land and the mines, the factories and the banks, the railways and the Government bonds, from having to pay, as Income Tax, an additional sixpence in the pound of their dividends.

In conclusion, I repeat my question: What are you doing to do about it? I cannot believe that any working woman in the Seaham Division will be so misguided as not to work and to vote for the election of the candidate chosen by the united delegate meeting, representing all the Miners' Lodges, all the Women's Sections and all the Trade Union Branches in the Division. The Candidate, Mr. William Coxon, the schoolmaster of South Hetton, is living and working in your midst. He has been teaching the children of many of you. He knows, from personal experience, the dismal conditions of life in the mining village of to-day; and he realises even better than most of us how necessary it is to open up new opportunities for employment

for the boys and girls of the Division. In character as well as in brains he would be an admirable representative in Parliament of the working men and women of Seaham. I shall listen eagerly to the wireless on Wednesday the 28th October, and hope to hear that Mr. Coxon heads the poll with an even greater majority than that you gave my husband in 1922, 1923 and 1924.

BEATRICE WEBB

(Mrs. SIDNEY WEBB)

Printed and published by Thos. Summerbell, 10-11 Green Street, Sunderland.

**THE ORGANISATION OF POLITICAL SUPPORT FOR LABOUR IN THE
NORTH OF ENGLAND : THE WORK OF MARGARET GIBB 1929-1957**

This is an account of the career of a woman whose involvement in the formative years of Labour Party development in a large area of the North of England is unequalled. In addition to the intrinsic interest of her own story, for the historian researching twentieth century social and political history she is a unique source of information, possessing as she does an intimate knowledge of the key personalities, problems and issues in the region's constituencies having participated in political activities both as an individual member of the Labour Party for over sixty years and as a National Staff Organiser. She retains a highly impressive recall of dates, events and personalities over a very long period.¹

Margaret Gibb was born at Dunston-on-Tyne in 1892 into a background of political involvement. Her father died when she was quite young, a Liberal voter who, however, "out-radicalled the radicals". She won one of the few scholarships, made available under the Education Act of 1902, to the new Blaydon Secondary School, but points out that only four pupils from Dunston even took the examination.² While a pupil at Blaydon she attended important political meetings in Newcastle upon Tyne, most memorably those of Sir Edward Grey, Liberal Foreign Secretary, held in the West End of the city. Opportunities for higher education for women being very limited, Margaret took the course available to an intelligent girl from a modest but supportive background at in 1910 went to St Hild's College at Durham to train for school-teaching.³

It was during her years as a young teacher at Crookhill, Swalwell and Blaydon from 1912 to 1917 that a positive political interest grew. This partly focused on opposition to the First World War. She then, though not later, felt herself to be a pacifist. She refused to go into the school yard on Empire Day. In a history lesson she informed the children that the king did not write

¹ Most of the information in this article has been gathered in conversations at regular intervals since 1969. A tape-recording relating to many aspects of political, social and educational life made in 1970 is available.

² The school was on the top floor of the council buildings in Blaydon and contained only four classrooms until 1908 when one more room was rented from Blaydon Co-operative Society. When the school was too noisy, Johnny Dalton, then Clerk to the Council, knocked up on his ceiling.

³ While Margaret Gibb valued the education she received at school very highly she had very little to say in praise of the standards of college training. After school, the academic standards, not to speak of the loss of liberty, were a great come-down and disappointment.

his own speech for the opening of Parliament but simply read out government policy. The result of these tendencies was a report to the Durham County Director of Education by a parent in Ryton whose husband was a Second Lieutenant, and who apparently felt that those with views such as Margaret's "should not be allowed to live", let alone teach.

As soon as individual membership of the Labour Party became possible under Arthur Henderson's reorganisation in 1918, she joined the newly formed Dunston Branch of the Labour Party and also the Independent Labour Party (ILP). She was soon Vice-President of the ILP and Secretary of the Women's Section of Dunston Labour Party. Henceforward social life and political activity were one and the same. Every Saturday was spent at the Westfield Hall at nearby Gateshead. These were new ILP premises where every kind of social and political activity flourished until 1932, when the ILP disaffiliated from the Labour Party. Political activity was intensive. These were the first years of Labour's detachment from the pre-war alliance with the Liberals, and there was a firm determination to secure local support and parliamentary seats. On summer evenings groups of speakers would go into the mining villages and hold increasingly well-attended public meetings. This provided practice in public speaking. In 1921 Margaret Gibb was a founder member of the Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council.¹ Then in 1923 she married the Labour Party Agent at Morpeth, Tom Gibb. This meant resigning her teaching post, and her husband's work took them to live at Blyth, Hartlepool, Bedford and Sheffield.

When they moved to Bedford in 1924, Margaret obtained the headship of the village school at Stevington, married women not being excluded in that Authority, and a Women's Section was started, which met in the school house. The next move was to Sheffield in 1927 and, when her husband died shortly after the move, she was offered his post as Agent for Central Sheffield,² the seat being won by Labour for the first time in the 1929 election. She was elected to the Sheffield City Council in 1929 but relinquished her seat a year later when an opportunity came to apply for a post on the National Labour Party Staff. She was selected from 127 applicants many, she recalls, having nothing like her now considerable experience of Labour Party organisation, and only being able to say in support of their applications that they read the Daily Herald. She was appointed as one of two organisers for the then North-East Region, the other being Will Lewcock.

At that time the Labour Party was organised in nine regions, and a man and a woman were jointly responsible for the organisation of political support in each of these. The North-East Region consisted of eighty-six constituencies in Yorkshire, Durham and Northumberland. Margaret retained this post, its nature changing only slightly, until she retired

¹Bella Jolley from Stanley is the only other surviving founder member

²The starting salary was £260 per annum rising to £320 similar to her headmistress salary

in 1957. She operated from Sheffield until 1942, when the country was reorganised into eleven regions.

During her twenty-eight years on the National Labour Party Staff she made a great personal impact upon party workers throughout the North of England. Many of those with whom she worked pay tribute to her unflagging energy and crusading zeal and readily acknowledge the encouragement and inspiration which she invariably provided. Margaret was prepared to travel anywhere, always by public transport, and often to uncomfortable venues at inconvenient times, in order to provide advice and counsel; and her own devotion led her fellow-workers to seek to emulate it. In this sense, as in others, she taught by example.

Her standards were high in other ways, too. She was insistent in her emphasis upon correct procedure and valued both punctuality and forward planning. But these were never an end in themselves, but simply a means to the advancement of her Party and to equip women with the skills necessary to help them in public life.

Her success owed much to her own personality and even to her appearance. Margaret Gibb is still, at 85, a formidable personality. Tall, and undoubtedly distinguished-looking, with a deep, resonant yet very pleasantly-modulated voice, she had from the outset many of the qualities needed for success, and others she acquired through training and experience. She is still a remarkable raconteur, with an instinct for the dramatic and a remarkable, often impish, sense of humour. She can use her voice with the skill of a professional, sometimes emphasising its soft Northumbrian quality while at others revealing the precise and business-like traits of the skilled manager. She is obviously a highly gifted teacher, not only through training and experience, but, I suspect, quite naturally, and the women with whom she worked very often responded to her as a teacher. Her lively mind and wide-ranging interests are apparent to all who meet her, but perhaps her greatest quality in this respect has been her genuine, sincere and unaffected curiosity about, and benevolent interest in, people. Those who learned from her felt her friendship, and knew that she was interested in them personally and not only in their political usefulness. She still retains contact with a wide range of people in all the districts where she has worked, and remembers others remarkably well. A question about a particular section or the recollection of a secretary's name will produce a wealth of personal detail often contributing to a fuller understanding of why a section or individual acted as it did. She knew the problems faced by women during the period of her office, their economic difficulties, personal qualities (and limitations) and domestic situations.

When Margaret took office, the Labour Party had recently formed its second government under Ramsay MacDonald, though it was only a decade since it had launched out as an independent party challenging the Conservative and Liberal parties for office. In 1929 it was for the first time the largest single party in the House of Commons. Its position had improved from 63 seats in 1918 to 288 in 1929, with its vote increasing from 2,385,472 to 8,389,512. It had made tremendous advances in organisation at local and national levels, and in some areas, County Durham being a notable example, it had already become the dominant party in local government. This was due, to a great extent, to the establishment of regularly-sustained sectional organisations in the constituencies. Before 1918 there had been no individual membership and very rarely any coherent local organisation, political support for Labour depending largely on a few enthusiastic members of the ILP and the subscriptions of trade unions. Between 1918 and 1929 local Labour Party organisations of varying kinds and strengths had developed in every constituency and, through the possibilities inherent in the individual membership now available, women's groups were established and developed. It was with the organisation of these as an important basis of support for Labour that Margaret Gibb was to spend much of her time. In many cases, often with the backing of a powerful and sympathetic trade union like that of the miners, the women's groups became the backbone of Labour Party organisation and activity. Where they were really strong as, for example, in the Chester-le-Street Division of Durham County, which alone had twenty-three women's sections at one period, they provided opportunities for working-class housewives to become practised in political activity and to play their part in the life of the local community.

An organiser was given carte blanche to identify the needs of his or her area and organise his or her work as seemed most appropriate. There were regular contacts with Transport House. Theoretically, at least, weekly reports had to be submitted. There were annual staff conferences in London, numerous staff briefings and training sessions, and also attendance at the annual Labour Party Conferences. These contacts could be very stimulating, but most of the work had to be carried out alone. Apart from involvement in local and parliamentary elections within the region, and assistance at by-elections elsewhere¹, it was agreed with Will Lewcock that Margaret should concentrate on women's activities in the Labour Party in their region. She was assisted at first by her friendship with Lilian Anderson Fenn, one of the first National Staff appointments in 1918, and Marion Phillips, the first Chief Woman Officer of the Labour Party².

¹A list of the by-elections in which Margaret Gibb was involved full-time is appended.

²Dr Phillips was MP for Sunderland, 1929-1931.

The problems faced by the organisers varied in the vast region and, furthermore, the economic and social background during Margaret Gibb's twenty-eight years as an organiser, underwent a number of dramatic changes. Barely two years after taking office, she saw the Labour Government collapse in the 1931 crisis and its numbers in Parliament fall catastrophically in the October election from 288 to 46. Work during the 1930s in the region was against a background, at least until 1937, of increasing unemployment and depression in the staple industries. The failure of the general strike of 1926, the subsequent punitive legislation and mounting unemployment and the failure of the second Labour Government were not conducive to high morale among the rank and file of the Labour Movement. While industry revived with rearmament, the coming of the Second World War checked political activity, and from 1935 until 1945 no general election was held. There was, nevertheless, a marked shift in political affiliation taking place, and in 1945 Labour enjoyed a dramatic victory with the election of 393 MPs and a six-year period of office. When Margaret Gibb retired in 1957, the social and economic background was vastly different from that in which she had begun her job in 1929 and, with it, the change in life styles, with the numbers participating in local political activity greatly in decline.

In 1929 the most important factor which conditioned the organiser's approach was the background of depression and unemployment, with the majority of women's section members full-time housewives with absolutely no money to spare. It was quite evident that a great many of those who attended political meetings simply wanted some diversion. "I still remember the Jarrow meetings of women. A huge hall, just packed, jammed with women and they were all paying a penny a week to the Labour Party. There was no question of twelve shillings a year or anything like that - a penny a week. I don't know that it was so much a matter of coming to a meeting as that it was getting out, getting with other people for perhaps a couple of hours."¹ Margaret Gibb also recalled a meeting at the village of Lingdale in Cleveland where, in a room full with about eighty people, there was not one woman whose husband was at work.² On another occasion, the Seaham Harbour Women's

¹Tape recording, March 1970.

²An ironstone mine was the only source of livelihood in this village.

Group were planning a social evening with Mr and Mrs Shinwell¹ and a charge of sixpence per head was suggested, but fourpence was the maximum that could be managed and the organisers had to proceed on that basis. Even the women who were able to attend the "schools" described below had nothing to spare. Councillor Margaret Murray's mother attended a week's school where thirty women had less than one pound pocket money between them.²

Usually a Women's Section held fortnightly meetings and as great a variety of activities as the organiser's ingenuity could conceive was attempted. She was already very familiar with the Durham constituencies and also knew something of Northumberland, where she had lived in the early days of her marriage. She did not know Yorkshire and Cumberland and their organisations so well, and her approach was to introduce as much variety as possible, to concentrate, as she put it, on "how you do things" and experiment always first in Northumberland where the groups were familiar but not too numerous. Social activities included play productions, attempted first in Northumberland successfully, and then introduced into Yorkshire. Margaret judged that if Northumberland had not responded she would not have continued that particular line. There were also adaptations for the women's groups of local festivities, such as the traditional Sheffield Cutlers' Feasts, which formed the basis of Labour Women's Cutlers' Feasts. There were "Family Reunion" evenings, "round table conferences", "question and answer" sessions, instead of simply "meetings". There were Sports Days with trophies presented by local MPs and miners' lodges and in Northumberland a silver cup presented by Lady Trevelyan³ for the County Labour Women's Sports. There was also the usual run of socials, whist drives and dances, but these had to be very carefully costed before the war. There were annual Labour Women's Galas in Durham, Northumberland and South Yorkshire, with bands and banners. The first was in Durham; that of the Northumberland women coincided with the famous Miners' Picnic.

The main objective of the organiser, however, was the development of political support for Labour through political education and political activity. This was pursued in various ways. A monthly letter was circulated from Margaret Gibb to all the Women's Sections in her region. This included news of

¹Emmanuel Shinwell, who captured Seaham from MacDonald in 1935 and was the constituency's MP until it was reorganised in 1949, was at that time the Labour candidate.

²Interview with Margaret Murray, April 1977

³Wife of Sir Charles Trevelyan of Wallington Hall, Labour MP for Newcastle Central, 1924-1931.

activities of all the groups, books recommended for reading and twenty questions for discussion which, if required, could form the focus of a meeting's activity. She introduced annual "Schools" and regarded these as very important. The first of these was held in 1930, when 29 women students from the Durham sections attended Barrow House at Keswick for a week. Subsequent schools, held annually, were on a larger scale, with sixty or seventy women from the whole region attending at various centres: Matlock, Middleton, Cloughton, Otterburn. During the most difficult economic times, for three years in the 1930s, the school at Cloughton Hall (near Scarborough) was moved out into huts to cut costs. Although some of the better-off sections protested, Margaret insisted that opportunity to attend should be as widely available as possible. She also insisted on total participation in the programmes and succeeded in obtaining almost awed cooperation from the women until she retired. She probably never knew that Lydia Hill, who succeeded her as organiser, had for some reason been absent for an afternoon lecture. When Lydia was asked by Margaret at teatime to introduce the evening discussion with a summing-up of the afternoon's talk she confessed to the speaker rather than to Margaret, and was taken for half an hour's drive with him and given the gist of his talk.

Expenses for the schools were paid at first by the County Advisory Council and later, additionally, there were scholarships from various supportive groups. The schools were very popular, and there was great competition for places, so that tests were taken, usually consisting of a number of questions on a set book or pamphlet and a general knowledge paper. At the schools, there were daily lectures by local MP and popular speakers from outside the area, discussions and intensive training for roles in local Labour Parties. The women learnt the nature of chairman's, secretary's, and treasurer's duties, the organiser being insistent that "everything be done and seen to be done" at group meetings. Many women described the schools as a great stimulus to return to work in their wards or constituencies.² Margaret would always ask those present before they left, when they expressed their appreciation and enthusiasm for their experiences at the school, "So what are you going to do next?" And they would depart full of plans for improving the effectiveness of their sections.

¹Interview with Ethel Sprintall of The Hartlepoons, April 1977.

²Mrs Sprintall won an essay competition for the school at Keswick in 1945. She later became a borough councillor, a member of many committees and mayor and claimed: "It never would have happened if I had not met Margaret. Margaret was the mainspring of it all. Besides her enthusiasm she was a great teacher."

Grace Colman¹ lectured regularly at the schools from 1932 until the end of the war.² Later popular and regular speakers were Horace King³ and Ernest Armstrong.⁴

Occasional exciting events were the "propaganda tours". The first went from Gateshead soon after the defeat of 1931. Seventy-two bus loads carrying about 1300 women and two former MPs who had lost their seats in the recent election. Literature was distributed at points en route and the tour culminated in a meeting on the Stray at Harrogate. On a lesser scale "tours" went into southern Scotland from Northumberland and along the Yorkshire coast to such places as Staithes and Whitby and from Hull to the Withenssea and Hornsea districts.

Fund raising was achieved by some of the activities described, and by contributions from local trade union lodges, and a proportion of what was raised was used to contribute to the election expenses of non-trade-union-sponsored parliamentary candidates. Additionally, in 1927 when Dr Marion Phillips was selected as a prospective parliamentary candidate for Sunderland, the only woman to be contesting any seat in County Durham, her candidature was supported by the provision of £70 a year towards an agent's salary from the County Women's Advisory Council. This was largely the result of her efforts during the long lock-out of 1926 in organising a miners' relief fund, when she gained respect and popularity in the north east.

In 1929 the Labour Party became the largest single party in Parliament. Its success was particularly spectacular in the north of England, notably in County Durham where Labour gained 18 out of the 19 parliamentary seats. It appeared that the Labour Party was now securely established and consequently the collapse of the Labour Government in August 1931 and the result of the October election came as a tremendous shock to the hard core of Labour supporters. The situation had been

¹Grace Mary Colman (1892-1971) - educationalist and Labour MP for Tynemouth, 1945-1950.

²"Grace had the ability, which not many lecturers have, of making most complex political issues clear to hundreds of women, who, for the most part, had had little formal education beyond the elementary school..... she not only won the confidence of her eager students but gave them confidence to express themselves and demonstrate that they really did understand so many issues, which at first sight appeared so complex. There are today in the northern counties in particular, very many women in public life who would be the first to acknowledge that they owe a great debt of gratitude to their unpaid tutor." Letter from the late Dame Sara Barker, 29 July, 1973, quoted in The Dictionary of Labour Biography, vol. 3, p.35.

³Speaker of the House of Commons 1965-70.

⁴Ernest Armstrong MP N.W. Durham since 1964.

not only very alarming because of the economic crisis, but confusing also because of divisions within the Labour Cabinet. The prime minister, Ramsay MacDonald, stayed on as prime minister of a National Government and, while Labour officially went into opposition, he campaigned for his constituency of Seaham in County Durham against the official candidate, declaring, "I am a Labour candidate and have not changed one idea" In Northumberland labour lost every seat and only two were retained in Durham. It appeared that Labour had lost its support and its credibility as a possible party of government. Despite the loss of seats, however, the fact was that Labour lost only about five per cent of its support in Durham, less than in the country as a whole, where again the loss of seats grossly exaggerated the reduction of the Labour vote.¹ Margaret Gibbs recalls only two resignations by women members of the Labour Party, at least one of whom re-joined later. On the other hand, a letter quoted by David Marquand² helps to explain the pattern of voting.

15 Austin Street,
Easington Colliery

Dear Sir

It is with the greatest regret I read of the Seaham Party's attitude to you. We are just a few of the Easington Miners' wives who wish to extend our sympathy to you. We know you have done your utmost for us, and you still have and will have our loyal support no matter what the Seaham Labour Party may say

We wish you every success in your new task and trust there is better times ahead both for you and us. May we subscribe ourselves,

Your staunch admirers,

Constance Clough
Alice Davidson
Ethel Ward
Elizabeth Daniel
Margaret Logan
Bertha Griffiths
Meggie Taylor
Jane Stubbs
Sally Sloper

¹In 1929 Labour polled 37.1% of the total vote; in 1931 30.6%.

²David Marquand, Ramsay MacDonald, 1977, p.653.

The organiser was determined to recover what had been lost. This was to be achieved through the continued development of grass-roots organisations with more activities than ever and this was done as described above in spite of the background of increasing economic difficulties in the whole region. Because this was achieved successfully the general election of 1935 was felt to be disappointing for Labour in the north, a more substantial recovery being expected. Margaret Gibb felt that the turning-point had come with the Wakefield by-election in 1932, when a tremendous effort succeeded in obtaining the return of Arthur Greenwood for Labour. His agent, W J Thrupe, followed up every house removal by persuading four postal workers to employ their spare time in devising a scheme for contacting all those removed. The result was a narrow majority of 344 for Greenwood. However, in 1935 only one seat, Morpeth, was regained, and in Durham, though the eleven county seats were all regained only South Shields of the seven boroughs was won.

During the war, from 1939 to 1945, from a point of view of political organisation, it was mainly a matter of keeping things ticking over. Apart from the Annual Galas most activities continued as usual, but membership and attendance declined. The minute books from the Northumberland Women's Advisory Council were sent to Haltwhistle for safe-keeping and those from Durham to Stanhope. Travel through the vast region was very difficult for the organisers because of shortage of petrol, late trains, the blackout and the necessity to obtain special permits to visit certain places. In 1942 Margaret Gibb moved to Saville Row in the centre of Newcastle upon Tyne. The reorganisation of the Labour Party had removed the East and West Ridings of Yorkshire from her responsibility and added Cumberland to what became the Northern Area. There was more money in circulation and weekend and weekly schools continued during the war, and the organiser was at a school in Cumberland when peace was declared.

The general election of 1945 took place after an interval of ten years and Labour's overwhelming victory could be attributed at least in some part to the sustained work in the local organisations. Certainly canvassing returns had predicted a Labour victory, but its extent surprised the canvassers. In the Northern Area the most unexpected Labour victory was that of Grace Colman at Tynemouth. The successes of 1945 produced when Margaret Gibb described as a "general euphoria" and offers of help poured in and membership numbers increased again, the peak probably being about 1947. The women's galas and processions started again in 1946. At the Durham Gala in 1947, when Aneurôn Bevan and Jennie Lee were the speakers, Margaret recalls that "you couldn't see a blade of grass in Wharton Park".

New activities in the post-war period included the extension of gala-type meetings and rallies in Cumberland at Wigton and Keswick. For a few years housecraft exhibitions, Women's Institute style, were organised on a county basis with the prizewinners' certificates designed by the winner of a children's competition. An annual Speakers Forum was introduced when representatives from the women's groups from Cleveland, Cumberland, Durham and Northumberland competed for a silver shield. There were also sports days for a period. In 1955 the Northern Region Labour Women's Rest Fund was begun. After an initiative from the Durham County Women's Advisory Council. Margaret Gibb established a Committee formed from three members of each of the areas' Advisory Committees. Sections were asked to pay threepence per member per year, and eight women have been sent every year since for a fortnight's holiday, either at the Mary McArthur home in Stanstead in Essex or Cober Hill Guest House near Scarborough. Need is the only qualification taken into account but if equal need is established only then is party membership and service considered.

When Margaret Gibb retired in 1957, it was evident that the rapidly changing social and economic pattern was having its effect on the membership and attendance of political organisations of all kinds. Far more women were employed outside the home, where in any case the arrival of television and improved comfort generally, made the alternative of a political meeting less attractive, and meetings of any sort were becoming less well-attended. Nevertheless, by the 1950s a whole generation of working-class women, particularly in urban and industrial centres, had been introduced to the possibility of influence and participation in the affairs of their local community. Many had become politically literate and with skills which equipped them to act as local councillors and magistrates; and a number of women still active in the political arena in northern England are very anxious to acknowledge the impact on their own lives of the woman who, during twenty-seven years as North Regional Organiser for the Labour Party, gave them inspiration and confidence to take their first steps in public life. The quality of her methods, her training and organisation of the women's sections, her wide range of contacts at national level in the Labour Party and her persuasive personality have been important in four counties during the formative years of the development of the Labour Party.

Margaret Gibb's services to the development of the Labour Party were recognised at a dinner and presentation given for her retirement at the House of Commons by the northern group of Labour MPs, and in 1965 she was presented with the OBE.¹

¹A list of the 16 general elections and 33 by-elections in which Margaret Gibb was fully engaged is appended.

She has never ceased to be active in her own constituency of Morpeth or in the neighbouring Berwick constituency, in spite of the increasing difficulties of public transport from Cambo village where she has had her home since 1951. In 1958 she was invited to "advise" the Labour Party in Berwick and was Agent in the 1959 and 1964 general elections there. She was the constituency party secretary for eight years and has been its Honorary President since 1968. Characteristically, although it entailed removal to residence in Alnwick for a three-week stay, Margaret was fully involved in the organisation of the Berwick election of 1970, and the two elections of 1974. She always accepts the invitation to attend the Durham Labour Women's Annual Gala. This summer, 57 years after being a founder member of the Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council, she was delighted to be invited as a guest speaker at their Gala with Dr David Owen, MP, and Gwyneth Dunwoody, MP. Margaret Gibb is still involved and making an enthusiastic contribution to the work of the Labour Party in the north of England.

MAUREEN CALLOTT

Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic

APPENDIXElections in which Margaret Gibb was involved from the selection of candidates to the count.General Elections

1922	Morpeth
1923	The Hartlepoons
1924	Penrhyn and Falmouth
1929	Sheffield Central
1931	North Region 86 Constituencies
1935	" " 86 "
1945	Northern Region
1950	" "
1951	" "
1955	" "
1959	Berwick
1964	"
1966	"
1970	"
1974	"

By-elections

1922	Newcastle East
1923	Berwick
1923	Morpeth
1930	North Norfolk
1930	Shipley
1930	Sheffield Brightside
1931	Sunderland
1931	Gateshead
1932	Wakefield
1933	Batley
1933	Rotherham
1933	Skipton
1937	Kingston
1937	York
1937	Normanton
1938	Dartford
1938	Doncaster
1939	Holderness
1939	Sheffield Hallam
1939	Colne Valley
1946	Jarrow
1955	Gateshead West
1956	Chester-le-Street
1957	Blaydon
1974	Berwick

BOOK REVIEWS

Palmers' Yard and the Town of Jarrow, compiled and organised by Vincent Rea (Bede Gallery, Jarrow 1975) pp.89 £1.

Jarrow March : 1936, text by David Dougan. Photographic Interpretations by Irene Reddish (Bede Gallery, Jarrow 1976) pp104 £1.

The Bede Gallery is to be congratulated on producing two such excellent books to support their exhibitions. Palmers' Yard and the Town of Jarrow is the more comprehensive in its approach and, at least in illustration, spans aspects of Jarrow from 1852 to 1975. This collection of reproductions from contemporary sources can bring an added dimension to our appreciation, and understanding, of the past. Charles Mark Palmer, a powerful man by any standard, is presented in his prime through to an aged and worn face in 1904. There are the determined and frequently proud faces of his workmen, but later in the 1930s the despair of the coal pickers, with faces unconsciously turned away from the camera, opposite the sticky faced young child of the unemployed labourer. Poverty was not new and a telling street scene from the 1890s shows the barefooted children at play. But they did play, and men and women laughed and lived; this the pictures in their way bring home.

An engraving of the launching of the "John Bowes", the first screw collier from Palmers Yard, is the first illustration of the output of the shipyard. Many of the later pictures, such as a photograph of HMS "Terror" being built in 1854, may be studied for details of the working methods and conditions of their time. The colour reproduction of "Back Yard" by Alf O'Brien (1975) displays a vivid realism, which must surely characterise a town such as Jarrow whose rise was so dramatic but whose tragedy in the 1930s was also so deep.

David Dougan provides "a biographical note" on Palmer. This serves a useful supporting role for the illustrations. Quotations from the man himself add flavour to his outline, but the entrepreneur should not always be presumed to be a fountain of truth. In places judgments and detail might be more precise and at least a brief reference could have been made to earlier depressions of grave severity, e.g. in the mid-1880s, when for a time half the workers were unemployed at Jarrow.

It is not an academic niggle to suggest that on page 16 the uninformed reader should not be encouraged to think that the Crimean War was in the early 1860s. Dougan writes "Within ten years, (from 1851) brother George has enough to retire on ... The Crimean War is taking place". The account of Palmer's workers and the nine hours strike of 1871 (on p.26)

is also inaccurate. It was Stephenson (George Robert) in 1871 not Palmer who pledged his workers the 54-hour week. In fact Burnett had left Palmers after the dispute of 1865-6 which Dougan also briefly refers to. It may also be noted that the introduction of the 54-hour week at Palmers in 1872 brought a number of short disputes. Palmer was never really happy with trade unions.

The late E. Leslie Chapners, who worked at Jarrow in the depressed years, provided a short account of the shipyard with some hasty generalisations. Perhaps understandably this shipbuilder sees the fate of shipyards caused "by the maintenance and loss on other unprofitable subsidiaries, steel, coal and ore mines, etc., etc." However he had already noted "a capacity of over 4 million tons per annum, with an order book of averaging only 1 million tons per annum ...". Perhaps Palmers "shipbuilding could have weathered the storm" but then someone else would have been closed - that was the tragedy. His anger, rightly remains forty years after the closure, - he wrote:

"The skill was there in management and craftsmen, in forward-designers and inventive brains. Why then should the potential means of their future livelihood be destroyed by a demolition from under their very eyes?"

How regrettable it is that we are still without a history of Palmers. The Jarrow March should not be all that is remembered, there was also "a triumph of skill and enterprise which deserves to be remembered".

James Dudfield Rose (1867-1947) a chemist with an interest in photography whose pictures are well displayed, is rightly commemorated in this book, as are those who as imaginatively presented the exhibition at the Bede Gallery.

Jarrow March 1936, was published to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the event in 1936 which surprised many by its dignity and careful planning. There is a useful text by Dougan which provides a chronological account of the March, with interjections of analysis and comment. He is probably less than fair to other Marches, but it may readily be acknowledged that none gained the fame of the men from Jarrow. Surprisingly little stress is placed on the grave problem inevitably surrounding a town based almost solely on a single commercial enterprise. No community should be subjected to the miseries experienced by Jarrow between the wars, and the pictures here should help a new generation appreciate those men who marched in hope of work, and only finally found it when the war drums sounded!.

