

**What if Michael Foot had been Prime Minister? by Andrew Roberts**

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*The tributes this week after the death of Michael Foot all praised his principled decency and brilliance as an orator. But they also stated that his espousal of loony-Left ideas made him a disastrous leader of the Labour Party. So what would have happened to Britain if he had ever become Prime Minister? Historian Andrew Roberts, in irreverent mood, sets the scene.*

With the benefit of hindsight, it was probably the decision of the Argentine junta led by General Galtieri not to invade the Falklands in April 1982 that led to Margaret Thatcher's defeat in the 1983 General Election and Michael Foot's election as Prime Minister.

A war with a just cause at that time might have galvanised the country behind her. As it was, with unemployment in Britain reaching 13.1 per cent and memories of the 1978-81 recession still fresh, Foot, the 69-year-old veteran Labour politician, was sent to Downing Street with a 56-seat majority. Mrs Thatcher immediately resigned as Tory leader, with her place taken by former foreign secretary Francis Pym.

Foot may have been a learned, good-natured man. But he was naive and had little experience in dealing with the Hard Left elements of the Labour Party and the trade union movement that were to make his time as Prime Minister so painful and controversial. When it came to the great issues of the Eighties, he was constantly wrong-footed by politicians and union barons far more wily and hard-headed than he.

His first mistake was to send Denis Healey, the widely-discredited Chancellor of the Exchequer during James Callaghan's premiership, back to No 11 in defiance of the widely-held view that he was a busted flush ever since the mid-Seventies, when he had been forced to go to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for financial assistance. Then there was Foot's decision - taken in accordance with his lifelong and deeply-held unilateralist views - to appoint Tony Benn as minister of defence, with the central mission of abolishing Britain's Polaris nuclear deterrent.

It was just weeks after Benn had successfully overseen the decommissioning of Polaris in April 1984 that the Argentinians resuscitated their 1982 plans and invaded the Falkland Islands.

The settlement Foot's Eurosceptic foreign secretary, Peter Shore, reluctantly negotiated with Buenos Aires, via the Peruvian foreign minister Javier Perez de Cuellar and the U.S. secretary of State Alexander Haig, meant that Argentine troops were allowed to stay on the Islands, which remained nominally under the Crown for only another ten years. From the backbenches of the House of Commons, an infuriated Margaret Thatcher and Enoch Powell denounced this arrangement as 'a humiliation equal to that which we suffered at Suez', and advocated sending a Task Force for the Islands' recapture. But the Foot government ridiculed this as militarily impossible. Labour failed to foresee the immediate and devastating international consequences of such weakness.

The Chinese unilaterally brought forward the date of the handover of Hong Kong by five years to 1992; the Spanish imposed a total blockade on Gibraltar; and France demanded the return of the Channel Islands, on the grounds that they were far closer to the French coast than to the British.

None of this would have much mattered had not the Americans, under President Ronald Reagan, enraged by Foot's support of CND, supported moves to bring an end to Britain's occupancy of her seat on the United Nations Security Council. The result was that a weakened Britain was unable to muster any international support against these aggressive acts on her sovereign territory. To widespread scorn, Foot capitulated on the new date for the Hong Kong handover, then ceded control both of Gibraltar and the Channel Islands.

It was while these foreign policy disasters descended on Foot's Britain in the spring of 1984 that Arthur Scargill's National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) declared a national strike demanding a 5.5 per cent increase in pay, at a time when the national finances simply could not afford this. Since this took Foot and Healey entirely by surprise, no supplies of coal had been built up at the pitheads and distribution depots to keep Britain supplied with energy. The only alternative was a humiliating climb-down by the Government, which in itself led to wage-inflationary demands being pursued by the unions of other nationalised industries, such as the shipbuilders and steelworkers.

The demands of the NUM that it should be coal, rather than the recently-exploited North Sea Oil or nuclear power that provided the lion's share of energy production further extended its powers. Soon the union leaders Jack Jones of the Transport and General Workers' Union, the Scottish miners' Mick McGahey and Scargill were regularly entering No 10 for beer and sandwiches, exhibiting the swagger of men who knew they owned the Government. By 1987, no Cabinet committee regarding industry or the economy could meet without the presence of trade union officials, who very often had the last word on policy. Norman Tebbit's 1981 employment laws were repealed, consolidating the closed shop (which meant employers throughout the land could hire only union members), giving the go-ahead for secondary (and tertiary) picketing, and introducing workers' representatives in every boardroom in Britain.

Foot meanwhile retreated from confrontation, spending more and more of his time writing well-received biographies of William Cobbett, William Hazlitt, Lord Byron and Benjamin Disraeli (after whom he called his dog, 'Dizzy').

The exchange controls that Margaret Thatcher's chancellor Geoffrey Howe had abolished in 1979 had to be reintroduced by 1986, meaning that it became illegal for tourists to take more than £50 out of the country. But this did not prevent the massive run on the pound, and the following year the IMF was once again being called in to help manage Britain's finances.

The only reason why Foot was able to prevail in the 1988 election was through the shocking disunity of the Conservative Party under Michael Heseltine, who had taken the helm after a rheumy-eyed Francis Pym retired. His determination to take sterling into the euro - in which he was supported by Kenneth Clarke, Douglas Hurd and other senior Tories - meant that Foot's far more euro-sceptic stance was attractive to ordinary Britons. The affair between the shadow home secretary John Major and the shadow agriculture secretary Edwina Currie - discovered by accident when a cleaner entered the Shadow Cabinet office one night - meant there was no one to threaten Heseltine's ascendancy within the party. The lovers had been the two front-runners, but both were sidelined as a result of the scandal.

There were some who suggested that Margaret Thatcher should be reinstated as leader, but they were ridiculed in the media and the Commons tea room. With the Tories hobbled and split by their commitment to a European policy to which few of the electorate subscribed, Foot managed to squeak a ten-seat victory in the election.

Yet Foot's second premiership was to be even worse than his first. While producing rhetorically uplifting and beautifully constructed orations to Parliament and party conferences, the actual conduct of policy from No 10 was as woefully shambolic as the donkey jacket that the Prime Minister wore to all major meetings, including audiences with the Queen at Buckingham Palace. It is hard to tell, even at this distance of time, whether Princess Diana's mistaking of Foot for a tramp when they visited the Centre Point soup kitchen was a genuine error, or a malicious joke on the Princess's part.

A particular low point came during General Galtieri's State Visit to Britain in 1988, for further negotiations over the fate of the Falklands. Despite being a lifelong foe of Fascism, Foot appreciated that the diplomatic niceties needed to be observed and the Foreign Office insisted on the General staying at Buckingham Palace.

Even they could not have foreseen that instead of arriving by plane, the leader of the Junta would have chosen to come by sea, aboard the Argentine cruiser the General Belgrano, which triumphantly flew the flags both of the Argentine navy and Malvinas. As she docked in Southampton, she was passed by the Royal Navy submarine HMS Conqueror going off to the scrapping yards, a victim of the swingeing defence cuts imposed by the new Defence Secretary, Monsignor Bruce Kent.

With the United Kingdom splitting through over-hasty devolution at a time when Scottish and Welsh nationalist movements were at their strongest; taxation at 98p in the pound for incomes over £19,550; Francois Mitterand and Chancellor Kohl refusing Foot's polite requests for a rebate on Britain's budget contributions to the EEC; and the prospect of Britain defaulting on IMF loans, Labour plummeted in the polls as fast as sterling collapsed on the currency exchanges.

The decision to sell the Crown Jewels at Sotheby's in Geneva in September 1991 was not taken lightly, but as Foot told the Commons: 'They are mere baubles beside our true national assets, namely a sense of equality and a future fair for all.' Despite Foot's attempted justification, the fire sale of the Crown Jewels was seen as a humiliation for Britain, not least when various Arab sheikhs, Japanese insurance companies and Hollywood starlets displayed what they had bought. Sharon Stone's use of the State orb and royal sceptre in the promotion of her raunchy new movie provoked an outcry in Britain, as did the splitting up of the Imperial State Crown for its parts. The Kohi-Noor diamond, the largest in the world, was bought by Donald Trump and worn around his neck at parties given by Hugh Hefner at the Playboy Mansion. When questioned in parliament over this, Home Secretary Roy Hattersley accurately stated that what people did with their own property was not the responsibility of Her Majesty's Government.

Foot's resignation in October 1992 took some by surprise, not least because it came only a few months before the General Election that saw new Tory leader Edwina Currie elected Prime Minister. (Heseltine had been knifed in the back by fellow Tory MPs in November 1990 as a result of his policies on Europe, especially after he had publicly said 'No, no, no' to the prospect of sterling remaining outside the single European currency.)

The uniform historical verdict on Michael Foot's ten years in No 10, when country was dissolved as a united kingdom, lost its voice and place in the world, and experienced the humiliation of national bankruptcy for the first time in history, is wholly negative. 'It would have been far better for his reputation,' said a former Cabinet colleague when Foot died aged 96 in March 2010, 'if Michael had lost that 1983 election and returned to his books and walks on Hampstead Heath. But sadly history had to take its disastrous true course.'

**Letter to the Daily Mail by William Shepherd**

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Sent to the Daily Mail on Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> March In response to an article by Andrew Roberts entitled 'What if [Michael Foot] had been PM?' first published in the Daily Mail on Saturday 6th March 2010.

I have long admired Andrew Roberts for his scholarship. I was therefore surprised that his article in today's *Daily Mail* on the Michael Foot premiership implied that Labour had failed to win an historic third term. This is quite wrong. Their landslide victory in May 1995 led to the influx of almost two hundred new radical left-wing MPs...including myself as the *Member of Parliament for Oldham West & Royton*.

Michael Foot eventually stepped down as Prime Minister in the summer of 1998 after almost two decades in office. His legacy was a country, a Europe, and indeed a world, that was at peace with itself. 'I am,' he had always insisted, 'a peacemonger.' His final success was to defeat the attempt by private foreign interests to destroy the British economy and overthrow the *Westminster Parliament* by undermining the new local English currencies.

Most historians agree that the work of the *Tawney Education Association* in the eighties and nineties was critical to *Labour* winning a third term. Their courses resulted in widespread public support for *Clause Four* of the *Labour Party Constitution* that the means of exchange, as well as the means of production and distribution, should be under public management and control. The *Foot Government's* programme of monetary transformation was enacted into law in the *Usury Act* of May 1997, based on an act of Queen Elizabeth I in 1571. It led to the effective banishment of the *London Exchanges* and an eighty percent contraction in financial activity in the *City of London*.

However the reinstatement of the tax raising powers of the English counties in Labour's second term enabled the *London Parliament* and ten of the *County Parliaments* in the South East to apply for *Disaster Area* status from Michael Foot's second *Labour Administration*. Unemployment rose rapidly to thirty percent in the south-east but the policy of *County Mints* and *Public Credit* allowed income tax to be cut by a third to fourteen pence in the pound, while the secret *Robin Hood Treaty* with Norway and Sweden and a number of bilateral treaties between the English counties and other small rich global economies, defeated the attempts to destroy sterling. The craftiness of Michael Foot's diplomacy became apparent during the *2007 London Reconciliation Tribunals* and has been compared to the diplomatic successes of Neville Chamberlain in the 1930s and Michael Stewart in the 1960s.

By the time of the *Birmingham Olympics* in 2012, London and the south-east had finally broken free from the shackles of three centuries of an imperial economy...gun-running, money laundering and propaganda...that benefited a few at the expense of the many. England is now a powerhouse in the world with *Birmingham Engineering* widely regarded as *Number One* and *The Chamberlain Dynasty* once again in the ascendancy as Harriett Harman leads the *Labour Party* into the new century with the sureness of touch and the personal and professional skills of a Joseph or a Neville Chamberlain.

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Yours sincerely, Andy Simpson, Daily Mail Readers' Letters Editor

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