Socialism in Our Time?
The Rise of MacDonald and the First Labour Government

Clifford Allen’s short period as the dominating influence in the ILP coincided with the rise of Ramsay MacDonald to the leadership of the Labour Party and, after a relatively short interval, his taking office as prime minister in the first minority Labour government. As we saw in chapter 3, during his almost four years out of Parliament, between December 1918 and November 1922, MacDonald needed the ILP and made efforts to cultivate its support. How much he would continue to need that support after becoming leader—and how much of it would be forthcoming—were not at all clear. One thing, though, was apparent in 1922: MacDonald would have to rely on ILP votes to gain the Labour Party leadership.

There had long been a deep hostility in the socialist movement to the very notions of “leaders” and “leadership.” For many, these contradicted their egalitarian and democratic beliefs and smacked of sheep-like behaviour on the part of “followers.” In the early days of the ILP, this had been most evident in the pages of Robert Blatchford’s Clarion, which had exercised a definite but never dominant influence in the party. In the mid-1890s, after the idea of having presidents and vice-presidents in ILP branches had been criticized in the paper by Blatchford himself, several efforts had been made to abolish the national presidency of the party. The nomenclature was changed to “chairmanship” in 1896—and there followed attempts to abolish the role of chairman during the next few years. This effort towards an egalitarian structure was partly motivated by the belief among a significant minority of ILP members that Keir Hardie had come to occupy too dominant a position in the party, although the campaign for the “abolition of the chairman,” as the Labour Leader called it in 1901, continued after Hardie left the post.
The Labour Party Leadership: Election of 1922

The question of a Labour Party parliamentary leadership arose after the election of 1906, when twenty-nine Labour MPs were elected to Parliament. Interviewed by the Clarion soon after the election, J. R. Clynes, who would, much later, lose narrowly to MacDonald in the crucial Labour Party leadership election of 1922, said he favoured “the appointment of a seasonal chairman instead of a permanent leader.”

Should Labour fall in with the practice of the longer established political parties and have a parliamentary leader? Jowett, for one, thought not:

The Labour Party has not and cannot have any leader in the same sense that the ordinary Parties have leaders.

It cannot be too clearly understood . . . that in the Labour Group the members all have equal rights when they meet together to decide on all matters affecting their work in Parliament.

Hardie had by this time been elected to chair the Labour parliamentary group, and Jowett conceded that in an emergency situation, when it was not possible to consult the other Labour MPs, the chairman might need to exercise his discretion.

The leadership contest in 1922 involved two crucial meetings: a gathering of ILP MPs and a meeting of the whole Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), at which the election itself took place. In his 1935 memoir, My Life of Revolt, David Kirkwood stresses the support given to MacDonald at this meeting by the left-wing group of MPs from Glasgow’s Clydeside, himself among them. He also remembers Arthur Henderson, a leading figure in the early Labour Party, telling him, “You Clyde men are determined to put MacDonald in. Well, if you do, it will only be a few years before you will be trying to put him out.” Assuming that Kirkwood’s memory is accurate, this was a remarkably accurate prediction.

In his 1953 autobiography, Emanuel Shinwell, another Clydeside MP, gave his own account of the group’s support for MacDonald. According to him, at the meeting of ILP MPs, Maxton (already a leading figure in the party) wanted to propose John Wheatley for PLP chairman, but Shinwell dissuaded him, telling him that this choice “would be quite unacceptable to the others.” Shinwell then proposed MacDonald, whose candidacy was “opposed by Maxton with all the vehemence at his command” and also by Snowden, with “cold fury.” But the proposal was seconded by MacNeill Weir and carried.

Soon thereafter, the meeting of the Labour MPs, now numbering 142, took place to elect the PLP chairman. According to Kirkwood, when the Clyde group proposed MacDonald, the objections of the trade union members soon became clear, and the meeting became “the first real trial of strength between the two
sections, the political and the trade unions.” His opponent was trade unionist J. R. Clynes, who had become chair of the PLP the previous year. An MP since 1906, Clynes had been an ILP member prior to 1914, but he had not actively opposed Britain’s involvement in the war and had in fact held office in the wartime coalition government. According to Fenner Brockway, who knew him well during this period, he was already known for his “caution and moderation.” But then, most Labour MPs fell into the same category from Brockway’s point of view. Clynes lost to MacDonald only by the very small margin of 56 to 61. As Worley writes, “For the first time Labour had a designated leader.” Although this was, indeed, the case, MacDonald had been elected formally as the PLP chairman, not as the leader of the Labour Party.

There is, in relation to Labour Party leadership, a tendency to read later states of affairs into the earlier history of the Labour Party and to refer to Hardie and MacDonald as the pre-1914 leaders of the party. While they were undoubtedly often seen and described as such at the time, it is important to understand the change that took place following MacDonald’s election. As David Howell points out:

In electing MacDonald to the Chairmanship of the PLP, this bare majority effectively structured the patterns of Labour politics for almost the next nine years. The metamorphosis from PLP Chairman to Party leader was not instantaneous, but by 1924 and the advent of the first Labour Government, circumstances had ensured that, for many, man and party were almost interchangeable.

It does seem that MacDonald emerged as leader because of the particular circumstances of the time. Previous chairmen—Hardie, Clynes, and MacDonald himself from 1911 to 1914—had been elected in totally different circumstances. Only in 1922 was it the case that by electing someone to chair the parliamentary party, MPs were in effect appointing a Leader of the Opposition and potential prime minister. It seems likely that MacDonald—much more conscious of and involved with traditional parliamentary procedure and conventions—was a great deal more aware of this than most of those who elected him or, indeed, than most members of the Labour Party and the ILP.

Nevertheless, it seems odd that there was not more debate at the time, especially from those like Jowett who were so concerned that the Labour Party should not become completely entangled in the parliamentary practices and procedures of the past. Marwick does note that “some confusion surrounds the circumstances in which the newly elected Parliamentary Labour Party chose its new chairman—and ‘leader,’ a new departure in nomenclature as the Manchester Guardian (21 Nov. 1922) immediately pointed out.” Still, such an
important departure from earlier practice might have been expected to generate much more controversy—especially in the ILP.

MacDonald owed his election not simply to the votes of ILP MPs but, given the narrow margin by which he defeated Clynes, to the votes of Clydeside MPs and other left-wingers. An article in Labour Leader by Fenner Brockway, which appeared more than a year before the election, illuminates some important aspects of the leadership issue. Brockway was at the time acting as the paper’s “London Correspondent,” a role that included frequent visits to the press gallery of the Commons. His front-page article “What Is Wrong with the Labour Party?” was a scathing review of the performance of the Labour MPs who had survived the “khaki election” or who had been elected at subsequent by-elections:

If the seventy-odd members of the Labour Party were all as energetic as Colonel Wedgwood, if they were all as well-informed about some aspect of policy as he is about foreign and colonial affairs, if they all attended as well, if they all put questions and supplementaries as often, if they were all animated by his fighting spirit—how different Parliament would be then. 13

Brockway went on to claim that as far as speech-making in the Commons was concerned, Labour depended on ILP MPs and that at least fifty out of the seventy Labour MPs “could never be Parliamentary successes.” It is not hard to imagine the anger and resentment that such comments would arouse, not only among the rejected MPs themselves but also among their many trade union supporters. It was, demanded Brockway, up to the constituency Labour parties to select “abler men (politically) as candidates.”

Before reaching this conclusion, Brockway had damned the chair of the parliamentary group with faint praise, noting that, despite many virtues, Clynes had not “given the Party the invigorating leadership it needs.” He was hampered by his physique, being “little in stature,” and did not “inspire devotion in his supporters.” The Labour Party, Brockway argued, needed to utilize “every Parliamentary opening possible,” and the PLP thus needed someone “seeking out these opportunities and thinking out the best means of attack.” Brockway added, “It is lamentable that the Party did not invite Mr. MacDonald to do this work as was suggested at the beginning of the year.” MacDonald was still out of Parliament at this stage.

Apart from the writer’s enthusiasm for MacDonald’s skills as a parliamentarian, Brockway’s article is notable in at least three respects. First, while Brockway’s prescription for greater success demonstrates a realistic appraisal of how parliamentary politics worked, it would have been anathema to those old-time ILPers who were totally dismissive of the very notion of “leadership”—especially any

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sort that relied on physical magnetism and oratorical skills. Second, it demonstrates the pressures to adapt to existing political culture rather than to mount a root-and-branch challenge to it. Watching from the gallery, even the radical Brockway wanted to see his side scoring well in the existing game. And third, it throws more light on the nature of MacDonald’s support—especially within the ILP. It is significant that MacDonald had been making identical criticisms of the Labour Party in the Commons and had praised Wedgwood’s aggressive approach to opposition in a Forward article in 1920.15 It remained to be seen what would happen to such support if and when MacDonald reached Downing Street.

Labour’s Behaviour in the House: The “Murderers” Incident

Broadly speaking, there were three distinct, though sometimes overlapping, approaches within the ILP to how Labour MPs operated in the House of Commons. The first approach is exemplified by MacDonald. While it is not fair to describe him as being against any change in the parliamentary system, he was certainly a constitutional conservative, as we have seen. To his critics, he would soon seem increasingly to be working his way into the established ways of proceeding. Earlier, before Labour achieved office, one of his strongest points—which, as already noted, attracted the support of many, including Fenner Brockway—was in being more adept than most in playing the parliamentary game. But were these not two sides of the same coin?

Jowett, as we saw in chapter 1, stood for root-and-branch reform, but he shared with MacDonald a fundamental belief in the possibilities of representative government and parliamentary democracy; it was just that for him that was something still to be achieved. But in the meantime, while taking every opportunity to challenge what he saw as the defects and absurdities of existing practice, he believed in treating the role of Parliament with seriousness and respect.

The third approach had been exemplified by Victor Grayson, the independent socialist victor in the famous Colne Valley by-election of July 1907. Jowett was one of those who rejected Grayson’s propagandist and “scene-making” approach. He had told readers of the Clarion:

I do not agree that the House of Commons is the place for propaganda—that it is a debating assembly where rival politicians should discourse at length about their differences, fancied and real. That view has been the curse of Parliament, as I have tried over and over again to explain. If the democracy has any use for Parliament it is to make it work and not talk.”16
But there were others who did take the view—put into words by a Labour Leader correspondent, also in 1907—that the role of Labour in Parliament was to “choose a critical moment to defy tradition, to throw respectability to the winds” in support of socialist aims. Unlike Grayson in the prewar days, James (Jimmy) Maxton (1885–1946) had tremendous staying power. After the brief “Allen regime,” he quickly became the most dominant figure in the ILP, and he kept that position for the rest of the interwar period. He already had a considerable record of radical activity when he became one of the Clydeside MPs in 1922. This included his work not only as a union organizer but also as an opponent of the war and a conscientious objector, with a conviction in 1916 for sedition as a result of his part in organizing strikes in war industries. Maxton, like Grayson, saw the role of Labour MPs much more in terms of propaganda and was soon to become associated with “scenes” in the Commons. An early example occurred on 27 June 1923.

Maxton had campaigned in the 1922 election with the slogan “Vote Maxton and Save the Children.” An election leaflet shows him holding a small child underneath this slogan. The part of his election address under the heading “Education” began with the statement: “The welfare of children is of first importance to me.” Not surprisingly, Maxton had campaigned, vehemently and vociferously, against the 1921 Circular 51, which enforced a ruling of the Scottish Law officers that severely limited the ability of authorities to help needy children with meals and clothing. When the Scottish Board of Health proposed further restrictions concerning children’s milk and medical assistance, justified by the “need for economy,” he was appalled. Nor was he alone. Focusing on a circular of the previous year that had introduced these additional restrictions, Maxton told the Commons: “In the interests of economy they condemned hundreds of children to death. I call it murder. I call the men who walked into the lobby in support of that policy murderers.” Challenged by a Tory MP, Sir Frederick Banbury, to withdraw the word “murderers,” Maxton retorted that he, Banbury, was “one of the worst in the House.”

Maxton resisted calls from Conservative ministers and the deputy speaker to withdraw the word the latter suggesting, rather comically to anyone unfamiliar with the niceties of parliamentary discourse, that he should substitute “no better than murderers.” MacDonald also urged withdrawal, arguing that while the results of the legislation might have been “murder,” its motives were not homicidal. But first John Wheatley and then two more Clydeside MPs repeated Maxton’s charge, resulting in all four being suspended from the Commons in 1923. Some Labour MPs abstained on the suspension vote, though most voted against it.22

Gordon Brown, who devotes a chapter to the episode in his biography of
Maxton, quotes the Times’s description of MacDonald sitting “white with anger at the folly of his own followers.” MacDonald was not the only critic in the Labour Party, but at a special meeting of the parliamentary party, “MacDonald did not directly condemn the Clydeside MPs but said that their suspension was ‘prejudicial rather than helpful.’” The “formal decision” of the meeting was to condemn the “fearful infant mortality” and demand a restitution of at least the provision that had existed in 1920.

In retrospect, at least, the episode was significant in two ways. Most obviously, it showed MacDonald’s determination to conform to established parliamentary procedures, customs, and accepted behaviour was going to be carried. It was also a harbinger of the trouble he was likely to experience in future from Maxton and his colleagues, especially after Labour gained office. But it also raised questions about how effective Maxton’s tactics might be if the incident became a precedent for future demonstrations of a similar kind.

Gordon Brown is probably right to say that “it all amounted to a highly effective publicity stunt.” The nature of the subject that Maxton and his colleagues were so understandably incensed about, the way it related to Maxton’s own background as a former Glasgow teacher, the prominence he had given to the protection of children in his election campaign, the detail with which he argued the case against the cutbacks in child welfare—all of these factors contributed to the incident’s effectiveness. And so did the relative novelty of Maxton’s “disruptive tactic.”

In an article published in the New Leader two days after Maxton’s “scene” in the House of Commons, Clydeside MP John Wheatley argued that “what are called ‘scenes’ in Parliament shock only those who are out of touch with the realities of working class life, and forget the scenes in the homes of the workers.” As Dowse points out, this suggests that the “murderers” episode was to some degree premeditated, since Wheatley’s defence of “scenes,” published only two days after the incident, must have been written and submitted some time before it took place.

Maxton may have seen his controversial tactic as “a method of alerting the working class to the folly of passively accepting the conventions of parliamentary opposition,” as Dowse suggests. But how successful was this likely to be if repeated? Brailsford, in his response to Wheatley’s article, emphasized that the effectiveness of a strategy based on creating “scenes” depended on a constant dramatic escalation. Furthermore, since the loss of temper in normally placid and polite individuals makes an infinitely greater impression than the ranting of permanently angry ones, there was a danger that, if repeated too often, disruptive tactics and extreme hyperbole would result in Maxton being dismissed as a “good turn” in the Commons. Time would tell whether this danger would actually materialize, but, as David Howell notes, “the continuing controversy
Labour in Office: Unexpected and Short Lived

An election was called at the end of 1923 by Baldwin’s Conservative government, which hoped to win a mandate for a protectionist policy that it claimed was necessary to alleviate unemployment. It produced an indecisive result. The Conservatives remained the largest single party in the Commons, with 259 seats to Labour’s 191 and the Liberals’ 159. With a hung Parliament and the rejection of his key policy, Baldwin faced defeat. What should the attitude of Labour be to forming a minority government?

According to Shinwell, there was some opposition within the ILP to taking office and “considerable doubts” throughout the Labour Party about taking on minority government.31 Willie Stewart, secretary of the Scottish ILP, was opposed, as was everyone who spoke at a meeting of the Clapham ILP.32 But there was never any real chance that Labour would turn down the opportunity. Brockway says that the matter was “effectively decided” at a meeting of what he calls the “inner leadership”—Snowden, Henderson, Thomas, MacDonald, and Sidney Webb—at the latter’s house.33 Both the Labour Party National Executive Committee (NEC) and the executive of the Parliamentary Labour Party subsequently agreed that the risks of minority government should be taken, as did the TUC’s General Council at a joint meeting with Labour’s NEC.34 Baldwin, who had decided not to resign immediately after the inconclusive election of 6 December, left office after being defeated in the Commons in a vote of no confidence, and MacDonald became prime minister on 22 January 1924.

According to Brockway, MacDonald, on Webb’s advice, decided to follow the usual practice of the prospective prime minister deciding the composition of the new government and selecting which MPs he preferred for ministerial office. Brockway argues that this revealed “the degree to which the Party was bound by tradition rather than democratic principle.”35 This was part of a divergence that would widen as time went on. MacDonald, unlike most ILP members, saw the choices that had to be made in predominantly parliamentary terms.

A main plank of MacDonald’s argument for taking office, which he had put to the various meetings in December, had been the danger that if Labour refused the opportunity to take office there would be a Liberal minority government, which would see Labour having to relinquish the opposition front bench to the Conservatives. If the Liberals were subsequently defeated, Labour would be likely to lose its right to the opposition front bench to them, and its progress of replacing the Liberals as the official opposition would suffer a serious setback.36 How far MacDonald would go in continuing to adapt to...
conventional parliamentary procedures and how far this would be paralleled
by the pursuit of consensual policies remained to be seen—but the signs were
not hopeful from the point of view of radical ILPers.

Would Labour, as A. J. P. Taylor puts it, be “tamed by responsibility?”37 This
seemed all too probable, especially in light of MacDonald’s diary note that the
members of the “inner leadership” had unanimously supported his view that the
party’s salvation lay in “moderation and honesty.”38 How would the ILP, espe-
cially its MPs and its prominent figures outside Parliament, like Clifford Allen,
react? Would the ILP keep supporting MacDonald, or would cracks continue
to open up along the fault lines already starting to emerge with MacDonald’s
cautious and conventionally parliamentary approach to office? Had the likely
divergence already been foreshadowed by Maxton’s “murderers” incident? With
hindsight, these questions are easily answered, but what is now so obvious only
gradually became evident.

Marquand tells us that it was widely assumed that MacDonald would “enjoy
as much freedom in appointing the rest of the Government as his predecessors
had done.” He goes on to comment on the lack of awareness in Labour circles
that the acceptance of this would inevitably increase the power of the leader
of the Labour Party and “bind the party still more closely to the system.”39 For
MacDonald, a large part of his problem in forming a government was
the limited pool of potential cabinet ministers available to him—or, as he put
it, that he was “short of men.”40 In addition, MacDonald was obliged to navi-
gate among divergent views within the Labour Party itself, including those of
ILP MPs. Controversy arose after news reached the ILP that MacDonald was
considering J. H. Thomas—a Labour MP and trade unionist who had largely
supported Britain’s involvement in the First World War—for the position of
foreign secretary, and, in the end, MacDonald decided to take on the role him-
self.41 In retrospect, MacDonald would generally be regarded as more successful
in this role than in his domestic policies.

On the face of it, the ILP had a dominant share in the new government.
Of the 191 Labour MPs elected, 120 were ILP members, including the prime
minister and the chancellor of the exchequer. So with MacDonald doubling
as foreign secretary, the three key offices of state were, therefore, held by those
who had for decades been the most prominent members of the ILP. Six mem-
bers of the cabinet, including Jowett and Wheatley—both, like MacDonald,
members of the ILP’s NAC—were ILPers, as were nine others who had other
ministerial posts, including Attlee, Ponsonby, and Shinwell. On paper, at least,
this was an ILP government.

From the start, there was a symbolic divergence among members of the new
government and their supporters. For MacDonald, conforming to previous
practice of ministers wearing court dress on ceremonial visits to Buckingham Palace was following a harmless tradition. But to what Marquand calls the “more Cromwellian sections” of the Labour Party, this was capitulating to an overprivileged and oppressive—as well as, in this instance, ridiculous—established order. In their eyes, this did not bode well for the future, and no doubt many cheered Jowett and Wheatley for refusing to comply.

Almost from the start, MacDonald complained about the lack of support, and even hostility, from ILP backbenchers, and he was not the only member of the government to do so. But Patrick Dollan, in the Socialist Review, presented the results of the 1924 ILP conference as refuting any idea of ILP hostility.

Newspapers had arranged to broadcast the wildest I.L.P. attacks on Ramsay MacDonald in particular and the Government in general. How disappointed they were that the I.L.P. did not give them an excuse to abuse the Government! The Premier, instead of being censured, was the popular hero of the Conference; the Government, instead of being condemned, was awarded a vote of confidence. Even the “wild men” from Scotland were congratulatory of the efforts and intentions of the Government.

But such upbeat assessments quickly became very difficult to maintain. Apart from opposition to specific measures—the services estimates and the Trades Facilities Bill were early examples—there was fundamental disagreement among Labour Party members and supporters about the strategy the government should pursue. Everyone agreed that Labour needed to secure a parliamentary majority in order to proceed, as it hoped, to establish the Socialist Commonwealth. But how was this to be achieved? For MacDonald and the inner leadership, the answer was obvious. Labour must first establish itself as a reliable and responsible government.

From MacDonald’s standpoint, this was clearly the way forward. Though Baldwin had been defeated in the January no-confidence vote, the Conservatives remained the party with the most parliamentary seats and the greatest share of the popular vote. Labour had increased both seats and vote share in the 1924 elections—but so had the now reunited Liberals. Labour had replaced the Liberals as the main alternative to the Conservatives, but this might turn out to be temporary. According to the New Leader, many ILPers wanted “to restore the two-party system and seal the fate of the Liberals.” So, no doubt, did MacDonald. The way to do this, he believed, was to calm the fears of those who saw the advent of a Labour government as almost as threatening as a Bolshevik coup and to win over voters who might otherwise continue to support the Liberals. A demonstration of administrative competence, combined with
some progress on the dangerous international scene and cautious moves on the
domestic front, was the surest way to achieve the desired result. Encouraging
by-election results at Burnley in March and later at West Toxteth seemed to
support this view.46

But that was not the view of MacDonald’s critics in the ILP. Nor, perhaps,
was it that of R. H. Tawney, who, at the end of a New Leader article anticipating
Labour’s advent to office, concluded, “If a Government is to drive the engine,
there must be steam in the boiler. It is for the rank and file of the movement
to supply it.”47 For those who saw themselves as “the Left,” any success that
Labour might achieve in office was, as Dowse says, “bound up with audacity,”
particularly in solving the unemployment problem.48 MacDonald was not
going to be able to meet such high expectations—not was he convinced that
being audacious in ways that the Left would have applauded would lead to
anything but disaster for Labour.

The ILP, however, was still pledging its full support to the government. H.
N. Brailsford, in a New Leader editorial following the ILP annual conference,
insisted that the party stood “firmly behind Ramsay MacDonald and his
colleagues.” However, the prime minister might have been wary of the way
Brailsford ended the sentence with the words “not by slavish and unhesitating
support, but by a comprehension of the difficulties of government.”49

Clifford Allen, in spite of—perhaps even in part because of—his close
personal relationship with MacDonald, took a lead as a critic of the new gov-
ernment. His chairman’s address to the ILP conference at Easter 1924, just
three months after Labour took office, stressed that the ILP’s role should be
“maintaining a persistent pressure in favour of 1) an increasingly bold use of
power for Socialist measures and administration, and 2) a vigorous prepara-
tion of Socialist knowledge in readiness for a further appeal to the nation.”50
Allen, along with other ILP critics, wanted Labour to pursue a radical policy
in order to precipitate a polarization between Labour and its opponents.51 He
combined pleas for tolerance of the government’s difficulties with a radical
view of representative democracy that would be taken up by left-wing critics
of Macdonald.52

For MacDonald, Snowden, and the majority of members of the Labour
government, “bold” measures could only be carried out in the context of a
parliamentary majority. A minority government could claim no mandate for
radical policies. The first task was to secure that mandate—the policies would
then follow. To their critics, this was an excuse for overcautious inactivity. They
argued that the government should put forward the policies it really believed
in and present its opponents with the choice of either acquiescing or voting it
out of office. The Labour Party would then be able to go to the country seeking
support for the radical socialist program that its supporters believed would attract sufficient support to give it a majority.53

In Brockway’s later interpretation, Allen favoured the introduction of a full “socialist programme.”54 James Maxton, already the rising star of the ILP, was another prominent MP urging MacDonald to take a more radical approach. And in the early days of the Labour government, only a few months on from the “murderers” incident, Maxton was involved in a late night exchange of abuse with the Conservative MP Leo Amery and “appeared to take a swipe at him.”55 Such incidents had a dual effect: while they no doubt heartened many committed supporters who were outraged, like Maxton himself, by the injustices of the society in which they were living, they also increased the danger of Maxton being stereotyped as an emotional “rebel” who could be relied on to provide excellent copy for the popular press but would probably make little progress in effective politics.

For most members of the ILP, the core issue was unemployment. By the summer of 1924, the NAC was organizing conferences aimed at bringing “to the notice of the government the immediate improvement that would accrue by the establishment of a 48-hour week.”56 The ILP also pressed for a whole range of other measures thought essential to reduce unemployment, including the raising of the school leaving age. The New Leader expressed the disappointment many felt with the government’s response, while MacDonald, for his part, complained to Allen about the lack of ILP support.57 The very ILPers who had secured his election as leader only two years previously now seemed to be ganging up against him. MacDonald took the enmity of the Scottish group in particular as a personal betrayal: “It’s treachery; he told me,” reported Shinwell many years later.58

MacDonald’s government was always going to be at the mercy of its political rivals. If the Liberals and Conservatives decided the time had come to oust it, there was little that could be done to preserve the minority administration. That said, the issue that led directly to the Labour government losing a confidence vote on 8 October 1924 was not without its almost farcical aspects. The Campbell Case, as it came to be known, turned on the decision of the government’s attorney general to drop the prosecution of J. R. Campbell, a Communist journalist. Campbell had been charged with sedition under an antiquated piece of legislation (passed in 1797 during the wars with revolutionary France) after he published an open letter urging members of the armed forces not to shoot fellow British workers. The vote that led to MacDonald’s resignation was on this question, but other issues—notably the Russian treaties, which both opposition parties disliked, and a general belief that its opponents might now benefit from an election—also lay behind it.59
Given the short time that the party was in office and its precarious minority position, one would expect the achievements of the 1924 Labour government to be relatively modest, as indeed they may have seemed at the time. In retrospect, though, they were not unimpressive. Wheatley’s Housing Act, which, over the next decade, resulted in about 450,000 houses built by local authorities, is generally regarded as the high point of its legislative achievements. Brockway notes how MacDonald’s “open letters” to Poincaré marked an advance towards ending secret diplomacy, and Marquand has some justification for giving his chapter on MacDonald’s foreign policy the title “Foreign Triumphs.”

But such advances and the efforts of Jowett as First Commissioner of Works and of Trevelyan in his worthy attempt to raise the school leaving age did not prevent a great deal of disappointment among the keenest Labour Party supporters—and above all, in the ILP. Despite Labour being in office rather than in power, there was little appreciation of its minority position. Shinwell sums the situation up succinctly: “The fact that we were really a Government without power . . . was ignored by the country and by our own party members. Criticism grew steadily.”

With the advantages of twenty-first-century hindsight, it is difficult to dissent from the conclusions of John Shepherd and Keith Laybourn in their 2006 book, Britain’s First Labour Government. The 1924 government was at least “a useful milestone” for Labour, they argue. It did help to “dispatch the Liberal Party to political oblivion,” and it should be judged in terms of its impact over the long term as well as its immediate achievements and failures. But few on the Left, least of all in the ILP, saw matters in such terms at the time. Labour’s unexpectedly early advent to office, not even as the largest party in the Commons, had left little time for its leaders to prepare their supporters for the complexities, difficulties, and inevitable disappointments that lay ahead—even if had it wanted to do this. It is doubtful that any members of the new government, even MacDonald himself, fully appreciated the great pressures they would be under from a variety of directions. Expectations remained high, even as MacDonald’s government fell.

The ILP approached the general election of October 1924 with optimism. In the New Leader, less than two weeks before the election, Allen announced the party’s healthy financial state under the headline “Labour’s War Chest Already Half Filled,” and Dollan reported campaign success in “MacDonald Rallies the North: A Triumphant Tour.” But the ILP’s hopes were dashed. Amid the hysteria surrounding the Daily Mail’s publication of the now famous Zinoviev letter, the Labour Party was resoundingly defeated in the October 1924 election.
Soon after the fall of the first Labour government, the ILP Information Committee reissued MacDonald’s pamphlet _The Story of the I.L.P. and What It Stands For_. Originally called _The History of the I.L.P._, it had been part of the syllabus for socialist study circles published in 1921. The new version began with a preface—unsigned but dated November 1924—which incorporated an apologia for the now defeated administration and an upbeat assessment of the future of Labour and the ILP.

So well was the work of the Opposition done, that the Election of 1923 gave Labour 191 members instead of 141, and in February 1924, J. R. MacDonald took up the heavy task of forming a Government, although he had behind him less than a third of the total strength of the House of Commons. A Socialist resolution had been defeated by nearly three to one in the House; the country had given no mandate for constructive change; the task was a difficult one—that of doing national work so truly and well, at home and abroad, as to win national consent for Socialist efficiency. That experiment came to an end in October this year when the first Labour Government was defeated by a combination of Tories and Liberals.

This defeat, resulting from “the capitalist pact,” should not, the preface continued, obscure the fact that Labour’s votes increased by more than a million and that its future prospects were good: not only had many long-standing ILP members been MacDonald’s colleagues in government, but socialism and Labour were “winning new adherents every day” and the “growth in membership and branches of the I.L.P. itself goes steadily and rapidly on.” The pamphlet ended with a section titled “The I.L.P. Path to Socialism.” To the original two subsections, “Programme” and “Methods,” was now added a third, “Tactics,” which comprised two passages from MacDonald’s previous writings. An appendix in the pamphlet reproduced the ILP constitution as adopted at the 1922 conference.

Had the ILP as a whole fallen in line with the approach of this pamphlet, it might have continued its role of providing MacDonald’s essential political base. But this was not to be. In Parliament, an ILP-based internal opposition—which, admittedly, did not include anything like the majority of MPs sponsored by the party—had begun to take shape even while the first Labour government was in office. The view of MacDonald’s leadership from the emerging ILP “rebels in the parliamentary contingent” was later summed up, dismissively, by David Kirkwood: “The 1924 election was lost—partly because of the Zinovieff letter, which was a swindle, and partly because the Labour Government had accomplished nothing and had challenged nothing.”66