

# **Blessed is the Peacemaker**

## **A Political Reflection on the Unitarian Sermons of Ramsay MacDonald**

The name of Ramsay MacDonald has appeared more often in the columns of the nation's more serious newspapers in the first six months of the year 2019 than it has in the thirty years before. It has been suggested more than once that the divisions afflicting the nation since the Brexit referendum have become so entrenched and intractable that it would need a National Government to untangle them, invoking memories of Ramsay MacDonald in 1931. Most recently Ed Davey of the Lib Dems has said that a no confidence vote could lead to a 'Government of National Unity'. (26/6/19)

Both Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn have been warned, as they try to steer their way safely through the Scylla and Charybdis of Brexit, that their 'Ramsay MacDonald' moment is upon them. A cartoon by Martin Rowson even shows Theresa May, facing the Labour leader across the negotiating table, poised to deliver a gift labelled 'My First Ramsay MacDonald Playsuit'.

Heather Stewart, the political editor of the Guardian, writing on January 11 2019 said: "The similarities with MacDonald, accused by a large swath of his party of propping up a Conservative-dominated government committed to austerity, are striking. The Labour leadership is supporting the Conservatives on the biggest issue of the day, despite the economic harm that leaving the world's largest single market is likely to cause by reducing tax receipts and increasing austerity." This is a position that has been repeatedly justified by the obligation to honour the results of a referendum held in June 2016 that was won by a very small margin of 4%. In contrast, Ramsay MacDonald's leadership of the National Government was endorsed in the election of October 1931 by a margin of 34%, winning 554 seats out of 615.

Eighty-eight years after he agreed to lead the National Government; ninety-five years after he became the first Labour Prime Minister and eighty-- two years after his death he is still the ultimate hate figure for many on the left, and the standard of treachery against which every lesser betrayal must be measured. In the intervening years we have had the Cold War, the rise and fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of Soviet Communism, New Labour and Iraq, the 2008 economic crisis, and now Brexit, and the name of Ramsay MacDonald, the great betrayer, is still brought out whenever a Bogeyman is needed to scare the children of the Left.

On May 30<sup>th</sup> 1929 Ramsay MacDonald became Labour Prime Minister for the second time; still leader of a minority government, but in a stronger position than he was in 1924. But the economic weather was worsening and in 1931 the storm clouds broke. The great depression that began in the United States crossed the Atlantic and the nation was threatened with bankruptcy by an economic crisis more severe than any it had ever faced before or has ever faced since. The May\* report recommended strict economies with drastic cuts in civil service salaries and unemployment benefit. The Labour cabinet could not agree an approach and although twelve of his colleagues supported him in cabinet, only three of them followed him into the National Government when Ramsay Mac, after securing concession in the reduction of 10% from a threatened 20% agreed to be its leader. (\* no relation to Theresa)

This is still one of the most controversial episodes in our political history and opinion is still bitterly divided. Many people felt that Ramsay Mac simply betrayed the Labour Party and the working classes and was motivated solely by vanity and by attachment to the pomp of his high position. He was fiercely criticized, portrayed as a traitor and his decision labelled the greatest betrayal in political history. He has also been accused of having planned it all in advance and hatched his plot before there was any sign of a crushing economic crisis on the horizon, and although this has been disproved many times, particularly when the private papers of King George V were released, the suspicion persists.

And others have suggested that he put duty to the country before personal interest or party interest, and that by his unselfish service he saved the country from fascism. "In a decade when other countries were turning to Fascism or Communism, Britain remained wedded to the democratic route. Its achievements may have been less dramatic than those of some authoritarian regimes, but MacDonald, Baldwin and their colleagues returned the country to better times after the prolonged slump, and did so without sacrificing essential freedoms." **Watts, Duncan: Stanley Baldwin and the Search for Consensus. Hodder & Stoughton 1996 p. 103**

Manny Shinwell, who defeated MacDonald in his seat in Seaham in 1935, has defended MacDonald, saying in a memoir of 1955: "To dismiss MacDonald as a traitor to Labour is nonsense." Harold Wilson has repeatedly declared that Ramsay MacDonald's mistakes were the mistakes of an honest and honourable politician, saying in 1966, on the centenary of his birth: "I believe that he made the decision, in my view, because he sincerely felt that he was putting the survival of his country above the survival of his party."

If Manny Shinwell in 1955, and Harold Wilson in 1966, and again in 1977, were willing to defend MacDonald's political honesty even if they were prepared to be critical of his judgment, then why has the myth persisted through the 1980's, with placards bearing the legend 'Ramsay MacKinnock' berating the then Labour leader during the miner's strike? And why does it persist even to the present day with the current Labour leader being warned that he too could be caricatured as 'Ramsay MacCorbyn' if he was to cooperate too closely with Theresa May's Conservatives in addressing the conundrums and contradictions of Brexit? Is this Harold Wilson's warning of 1977: "The legend of the traitor MacDonald persists today, still an effective charge against any Labour MP who is thought to be treating with the enemy" coming to bear?

And if it was unforgivable for Ramsay MacDonald to cooperate with Stanley Baldwin's Conservatives in the 1930's in order to deliver the nation from bankruptcy, why is it acceptable for Lexiters to cooperate with a far darker strain of right wing ideology, in Nigel Farage's Toytown Fascists, in order to deliver the nation from the EU? (Aditya Chakraborty the Guardian 25 Feb 2019: "There are of course the Lexiters, . . . who have never quite grasped that the origins of reactionary British politics lie not in Brussels, but in Britain.")

The 10% cut in unemployment was regrettable and the excesses of the means test in the 1930's were reprehensible, but official documents released in 2004 showed the efforts of Ramsay Mac to mitigate and minimize these excesses. Does anyone seriously think today that Brexit is going to improve the lot of the poorest in society? Or improve the lot of anyone who is not in a position to take advantage of the tax havens that the EU anti-tax avoidance directive would challenge?

Regardless of where readers might position themselves on the cultural divisions that Brexit has inflicted on this country, it is hoped that none would deny the negative effect it has had upon the levels of political discourse of the nation. When the slightest deviation from a vision of the one true Brexit that has never been defined can lead to the cry of 'Traitor!' from the zealous custodians of the unspoken utopian version of Brexitannia; and where Polly Toynbee can write in the Guardian on 20 sept 2016: "Two quite separate parties cohabit under one title, each accusing the other of betraying all Labour exists for." it is legitimate to question whether the words 'Traitor' and 'Betrayal' have any meaning left.

It is legitimate also to add that MacDonald was never a revolutionary, was never a class warrior, was never a Marxist, but was scornfully critical of this model of Socialism throughout his life. To accuse MacDonald of having squashed the

prospect of a successful socialist revolution by agreeing to lead the National Government in 1931 simply ignores the facts of history and is to be wilfully blind to the weakness and fragmentation of the left. Any revolution in 1930's Britain would have been just as likely to have been a fascist revolution, with the charismatic charlatan Oswald Mosely as its leader and his royal dimwit Edward VIII as a fascist king in waiting.

Ramsay Mac cannot be accused of having betrayed something that he never professed to believe in, and the only question to be addressed is whether or not he can coherently be accused of betraying the party that he, more than anyone else, created and made credible.

It is my belief that if Ramsay MacDonald betrayed the Labour Party it was because the Labour Party abandoned Ramsay MacDonald: that it is a cliché to say that Ramsay MacDonald betrayed the Labour Party; and that the truth is that Ramsay MacDonald and the Labour Party betrayed each other, and the tragedy is that Ramsay MacDonald and the Labour Party never forgave each other.

.....

That his motives were selfish and vain and unworthy of sympathetic consideration has simply been assumed by his critics and no evidence has ever been brought forward to support the charge. There is, however, a substantial body of evidence to suggest that his real motivation was both more complex and more noble; especially for staying on after the free-traders resigned in September 1932, when the government's credentials as a truly national government became more questionable, and he could have retired with dignity and with the chance to rebuild his relationship with his former colleagues.

Marquand makes the point: "As painful as – perhaps more painful than – the decline in MacDonald's authority as prime minister was the slow erosion of the assumptions underlying his foreign policy. As we have seen, he had stayed in office when the free-traders resigned in September 1932 partly because he foresaw 'dire consequences' from the crisis over Germany's withdrawal from the disarmament conference and believed that only a strong lead from Britain could avert them. For the next three months, most of his energies were thrown into a long-drawn-out struggle to bring the Germans back. p. 747

Why did Ramsay MacDonald remain as Prime Minister at the head of what was, from that point on, essentially a Conservative Government? It was to continue the work he started in 1914 when he opposed the manic militarism of World

War I and that he carried forward as Prime Minister in 1924 with the Geneva Conference and his ongoing efforts to advance to advance the cause of disarmament by that route; and it seemed as if he might succeed:

Marquand comments: “The final act of the conference was signed on July 9<sup>th</sup> 1932. From MacDonald’s point of view, it was a great victory. He had denounced reparations when the peace settlement was signed, and had looked forward to their disappearance ever since. Now the hopes of thirteen years had been realized.” Marquand p.723

This optimism was soon to be severely strained. Marquand reports: “on December 1<sup>st</sup> (1932), MacDonald made another visit to Geneva, in a desperate attempt to save the disarmament conference from breaking down. After ten days of intense though ultimately successful negotiations, he returned to London in a state of exhaustion.” P. 695

This is where the material in the Ramsgate and Margate archives is significant: it strengthens it and deepens the case advanced by Marquand by placing it in a broader historical context. By displaying its roots in his Unitarian preaching as early as 1893 and demonstrating a progressive continuity with his speech in Geneva in 1924 and the sermon delivered in Unity Church Brighton in 1926; a progressive continuity that is framed and informed not only by intellectual ideas but by religious conviction. Religious convictions that were at the forefront of radical theological thinking at the hinge of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; religious convictions based on a concept of Christianity that may have been radical in his day but are at the heart of mainstream, modern, progressive Christian thinking today.

From a sermon first preached in Canterbury Unitarian Church in 1893:

**“Turn we to our Imperial concerns and we find that spirit of the middle ages, the spirit of barbarism still rules. Arms! Arms! Arms! Everywhere. The continent a great smith’s shop for the making of arms, children taught a patriotism which means a hatred of all mankind outside a certain arbitrary boundary, men drawn from the workshop and plough to learn the trade of killing each other; kings who are but children lauded and worshipped for their imperial lispings. Intellect and ingenuity are enlisted by the imperial juggernaut to devise means of destruction and the toiler’s back is broken to find the expense of it all.”**

Turn we to our Imperial concerns and we find that the spirit of the middle ages, the spirit of barbarism still rules. Arms! Arms! Arms! everywhere. The continent a great smith's shop for the making of arms, children taught a patriotism which means a hatred of all mankind outside a certain arbitrary boundary, men drawn from

the workshop and plough to learn the trade of killing each other, kings who are but children lauded and worshipped for their imperialist lipings. Intellect and ingenuity are enlisted by the imperialist juggernaut to devise means of destruction and the toilers' back is broken to find the expense of it all.

From notes in the Ramsgate and Margate Archive:

2. War in reality mean a sordid affair  
Scandals  
Newspapers howling

6. War horrible, absurd unnecessary.

Cost	army	navy	Total
1894	19.000.000	18.000.000	37.000.000
1904	33.000.000	43.000.000	76.000.000

inc £39.000.000

abt £1 per head per annum  
or £6 per working class family of 4 children

From his speech to the League of Nations in Geneva, September 4th 1924:

“The late war was commended in my country as being a war to end all wars. Alas! The human eye sees but few prospects that that hope and that pledge are to be fulfilled. I do not know what the Divine Mind sees, the Divine Mind that sees the future as clearly as you and I can see the present; but I hope it sees more calm confidence in the future and more happiness in it than the human mind, which has to nourish its faith upon appearances.

The danger of supreme importance which is facing us now is that national security should be regarded merely as a military problem and based solely on the predominance of force. For a moment that may do, for a moment that may lull to sleep, for a moment that may enable large nations and small to believe that their existence will be no longer challenged.

But, my friends, there is evolution in every plan and a consequence of every idea, and if, after all the appalling evidence in history that military force cannot secure, we today go back and repeat the follies of our ancestors, then the security we give of the day is only a betrayal of the nation that we lull to sleep under it.

We do not believe that military alliances are going to bring security.

If we cannot devise a proper system of arbitration, then do not let us fool ourselves that we are going to have peace. Let us go back to the past; let us go back to competitive armaments; let us go back to that false, whited sepulchre of

security of military pacts – there is nothing else for us – and let us prepare for the next war, because that is inevitable.”

From a sermon preached at Union Church Brighton as the guest of T. Rhondda Williams in 1926:

The Christian faith gives us the courage to believe in truth and justice and in the moral categories. What faith or trust can we have in these except by believing that they are absolute in themselves? The people's armed themselves and said that they were safe. They put flights of aeroplanes into the air and said they were safe, and they knew perfectly well in their heart all the time that they were nothing of the kind. The nations from the very beginning of things have been trying to secure security with a big club. In the days of the big club the other fellow went and got one a little bigger, and this has gone on and on, and it will always go on until the end of time, unless we discover a nation so full of Christian courage that it will say: “The only security we can have is the security of cherishing the moral categories, justice, fair play, honesty, and uprightness.”

We have but a short time to deal with these things. A year or two after a war are the most precious years in the life of a nation desirous to follow moral ways. Three or four years go by and you go back to the old ways, the old fears, the old lack of a sense of security. You are driven back again by the evil hounds that have driven you up to now, and the years go with inevitable certainty and the evils accumulate and another war becomes as inevitable as the war that preceded it. The time for changing is the time that elapses between the end of a war, when the peoples are exhausted and wise, and the time when peoples begin to recover and have no sure guide as to how their recovery is going to be further secured. Sands that are flowing through the sand-glass are golden, pure gold, precious gold today and if this opportunity is missed, and if we go back to the old ways, to the old evils, to our old materialism, to our old trust in mere strength and power and force, then there will be another war, there will be more grief, more loss, more pain.

Ramsay MacDonald's dream of a successful disarmament conference preserving the peace of Europe faced a crushing disappointment when Hitler led Germany out of the conference on October 14<sup>th</sup> 1933. Any hope of reviving the conference collapsed completely when Germany introduced conscription on March 16<sup>th</sup> 1935. An increasingly dispirited MacDonald resigned on 7<sup>th</sup> June. (staying until then for King George's Jubilee in May. His diary for March 21<sup>st</sup>

1935 reflects on his resignation and notes: “. . .on no account before the Jubilee ceremonies”)

Marquand writes: “The early months of 1935 saw an equally critical decision in another sphere; and, for MacDonald at least, it must have been a profoundly painful one. In 1934, as we have seen, he had slowly come to accept that some British rearmament was necessary. . . Tension in Europe continued to rise, and evidence of German rearmament continued to accumulate” p. 769

MacDonald wrote in his diary on November 21<sup>st</sup> 1934: “The outlook with Nazi murders, Nazi education, Nazi horrors of mind & ambitions & Nazi character is depressing, and whatever may be the immediate consequences it should not be allowed to drift.”

Ramsay MacDonald died at sea on November 9<sup>th</sup> 1937. He foresaw WWII, but could not have foreseen the extent of its terrors, and it is perhaps a mercy that he was spared the knowledge of Auschwitz, Treblinka and Hiroshima.

\*\*\*\*\*

It is for the historians of the future to assess whether or not the left wing brexiteers, in their unwitting collaboration with the rampant right, hastened the demise of the credibility of Socialism as an alternative to Capitalism. Luke 23:34 might apply here: “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”

It is for me to acknowledge, however, that if my own motive in presenting this material is to advance the argument that James Ramsay MacDonald deserves a much more honoured place in the history of the Labour movement and in the history of the nation than that which he currently occupies; then I cannot ask history to be more generous in its assessment of Ramsay Mac if I am unwilling to be equally generous in my assessment of his critics.

I must acknowledge therefore, that for someone like myself, coming of age and becoming politically aware in the period that saw the rise and then the fall of the Berlin Wall; a reader who is privy to all the secrets that were exposed when the citadel of Soviet Communism collapsed, it is all but impossible to judge the feelings and the mood; the dreams and ideals of that earlier generation of the left who really could not have foreseen the revelations that I have lived through.

For the progressive left of the 1930's the narrative of Marxist analysis was not only plausible: it was convincing; and the prophetic voices proclaiming that Karl Marx had unravelled the secret of human happiness and embedded it in a set of predictions proclaiming the only possible direction of travel of social and

political progress was not only convincing; it was compelling. And had I been living in those times I would probably have been one of them.

But I belong to a different age and my life's has embraced the insights of religion as much as the ideas of politics and I have become convinced that if you have materialism as the philosophical underpinning of a society's vision of itself and of the value it places upon its people and that it attributes to their individual and collective endeavours, then you have capitalism as the only possible system for the economic administration of that society. No one has yet been able to persuade me that if you place the word 'dialectical' in front of the word 'materialism' you have done anything more than apply a veneer of sophistication to something that is irredeemably superficial; for if you define the worth of a human being according to their position in relationship to 'the means of production' then no matter what else you get right, you have got the most fundamental thing wrong.

"Capitalism has affected us far more than we had imagined." Wrote Ramsay Mac in 1928 "It has given us notions of value that are wrong. Being itself so grossly materialistic and having given economic resources such an important place in life, it has misled us when we search for remedies against it."

But people cling to their opinions, religious and political, for a variety of reasons. And some will feel threatened and react defensively to any suggestion that the accuracy or fairness of those opinions could be questioned.

It will be enough if a few who examine this material will agree that Ramsay MacDonald deserves to be remembered not for his final failure but for his finest moment. That moment did not come in Geneva in 1924 or 1929 when he was admired and applauded by the whole world. It came in March 1916, in South Wales, when, despised and demonised for his principled, visionary opposition to the war, he addressed a meeting of Welsh miners, I.L.P. members and non-conformists opposed to conscription. He began with Ecclesiastes 9 (Wisdom is better than weapons of war), and concluded:

"Sincerely, seriously, reverently, I ask you in the name of God to consider the problems in front of you. We are bending under the force of a blinding storm today, and our ultimate confusion is the hope of our enemies. But they will not succeed. We shall go on, and when the fair weather comes again, we shall confront the world with faces unashamed, and shall say to posterity "We await your verdict". And the verdict will be: "Blessed is the peacemaker, for he shall be called the child of God." 4

Matthew 13:57 “But Jesus said unto them ‘A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house’.