

# Labour Party

**Labour Party**, British [political party](#) whose historic links with [trade unions](#) have led it to promote an active role for the state in the creation of economic prosperity and in the provision of social services. In opposition to the [Conservative Party](#), it has been the major democratic socialist party in [Britain](#) since the early 20th century.

## History

The Labour Party was born at the turn of the 20th century out of the frustration of working-class people at their inability to field parliamentary candidates through the [Liberal Party](#), which at that time was the dominant social-reform party in Britain. In 1900 the [Trades Union Congress](#) (the national federation of British trade unions) cooperated with the [Independent Labour Party](#) (founded in 1893) to establish a Labour Representation Committee, which took the name Labour Party in 1906. The early Labour Party lacked a nationwide mass membership or organization; up to 1914 it made progress chiefly through an informal agreement with the Liberals not to run candidates against each other wherever possible. After [World War I](#) the party made great strides, owing to a number of factors: first, the Liberal Party tore itself apart in a series of factional disputes; second, the 1918 [Representation of the People Act](#) extended the electoral [franchise](#) to all males aged 21 or older and to women aged 30 or older; and third, in 1918 Labour reconstituted itself as a formally [socialist](#) party with a democratic constitution and a national structure. The party's new program, "[Labour and the New Social Order](#)," drafted by [Fabian Society](#) leaders [Sidney and Beatrice Webb](#), committed Labour to the pursuit of full employment with a [minimum wage](#) and a maximum workweek, democratic control and [public ownership](#) of industry, progressive taxation, and the expansion of educational and social services. By 1922 Labour had supplanted the Liberal Party as the official opposition to the ruling [Conservative Party](#).

In 1924, with Liberal support, [James Ramsay MacDonald](#) formed the first Labour government, though his minority administration was brought down less than one year later over questions of its sympathy for the new Soviet state and over [alleged](#) communist influence within the party. Labour emerged from the 1929 election as the largest party in Parliament, though again it lacked an overall majority and had to form a [coalition government](#) with the Liberals. In 1931 the party suffered one of the severest crises in its history when, faced with demands to cut public

expenditure as a condition for receiving loans from foreign banks, MacDonald defied the objections of most Labour officials and formed a coalition government with Conservatives and Liberals. In the ensuing election Labour's parliamentary representation was reduced from 288 to 52. The party remained out of power until 1940, when Labour ministers joined a wartime coalition government under Winston Churchill.



Ramsay MacDonald. *Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*

Labour achieved a spectacular recovery in the general election of 1945, when it won 393 seats and a comfortable 146-seat overall majority in the House of Commons. Most commentators have attributed this victory to the electorate's overwhelming desire for social reform and its determination to avoid a return to the interwar era of economic depression and unemployment. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Clement Attlee, the Labour governments of the following six years built on the state's recent experience of wartime intervention to construct a postwar political consensus based on a mixed economy, a much more extensive

system of social welfare (including a [National Health Service](#)), and a commitment to the pursuit of full employment. Postwar economic recovery proved slow, however, and in the 1950 election Labour's majority was reduced to five. In 1951 it lost power to the Conservatives.



**Attlee, Clement** Clement Attlee. *Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*

Get unlimited access to all of Britannica's trusted content. [Start Your Free Trial Today](#)

Throughout the 1950s the question of whether, and how, to adapt the party's traditional socialist approach to an affluent society—especially the question of the nationalization of industry—divided Labour's ranks. "Bevanites" (followers of former health minister [Aneurin Bevan](#)) wanted a more socialist economic policy and less dependence on the United States; the "revisionists," led by [Hugh Gaitskell](#), Attlee's successor as party leader, wished to drop the commitment to the nationalization of industry. Labour did not regain power until 1964 under [Harold Wilson](#), who was prime minister until 1970. Wilson attempted to resolve the problem of Britain's relative economic decline by pursuing a strategy of technocratic reform, corporatist relations with business and labour leaders, and a system of "indicative" economic planning, in which the government attempted to facilitate economic development in directions of predicted growth. The party held power again from 1974 to 1979, first under Wilson and then under [James Callaghan](#). Labour's narrow five-seat majority in the election of October 1974 diminished through the term, forcing the party to enter a "Lib-Lab" pact with the Liberal Party. Although hampered by a small

majority, the Labour Party pursued controversial policies, including support for Britain's continued membership in the [European Community](#) and [devolution](#) in Scotland and Wales, which was rejected by referenda in 1979. Ultimately, the moderate social-democratic approach exemplified by the Wilson-Callaghan years foundered on the twin rocks of Britain's chronic economic problems and Labour's worsening relations with its [trade union](#) allies.

Following the "Winter of Discontent" of 1978–79, when Britain suffered a series of major strikes by trade unions, the party was ousted from office by the Conservatives under [Margaret Thatcher](#). Subsequently, Labour underwent a period of considerable internal turmoil. Aided by the leaders of some major trade unions, the party's left wing succeeded in forcing through a number of organizational reforms that enhanced the power of grassroots activists and trade unions in the selection of parliamentary candidates and party leaders. In response, a number of leading parliamentarians and supporters seceded from Labour and founded the [Social Democratic Party](#) (SDP) in 1981. In the 1983 general election Callaghan's successor, [Michael Foot](#), presented a radical manifesto—dubbed the "longest suicide note in history" by Gerald Kaufman, a Labour member of Parliament and critic of the party's reforms—that proposed extensive nationalization of industry, economic planning, unilateral nuclear disarmament, and the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the [European Community](#). The result was Labour's worst national electoral defeat in more than 50 years. Foot was replaced later that year by [Neil Kinnock](#), a politician with leftist credentials who set about reestablishing Labour as a credible national electoral force. Kinnock's "modernization" process, which involved a reevaluation of party policies and the elimination of extremists—including the Trotskyist wing, Militant Tendency—contributed to Labour's electoral revival but was not sufficient to deprive the Conservatives of their governing majorities in the general elections of 1987 and 1992. Nevertheless, the process was continued by Kinnock's successors as party leader, [John Smith](#) (1992–94) and [Tony Blair](#) (1994–2007). In a series of programmatic and organizational changes, the party reembraced the mixed economy, declared its support for [European integration](#), dropped its unpopular unilateral nuclear disarmament policy, rewrote the clause of its constitution that committed it to the public ownership of industry, and gave serious consideration to a new range of constitutional reforms, including devolution, voting reform, and reform of the [House of Lords](#).

This "New Labour" agenda, combined with highly professionalized political marketing, produced a landslide victory in the general election of 1997, returning Labour to power after 18 years of Conservative Party rule and securing Tony Blair's appointment as prime minister. Through its policy of All Women Short Lists (AWSLs), the Labour Party dramatically increased

the number of women in Parliament; in 1997 it elected 101 women members, nearly 25 percent of all Labour parliamentarians, bringing the total number of women members to a record 120.

With a decisive 179-seat majority in Parliament, the Blair government accepted some of Margaret Thatcher's policies but also carried out several of the reforms it promised in its manifesto, including abolishing the right of most hereditary peers to sit in the House of Lords and introducing devolved legislative assemblies in Scotland and Wales after successful referenda. It signed the Social Chapter of the Treaty on European Union, which sought to harmonize European social policies on issues such as working conditions, equality in the workplace, and worker health and safety; helped to forge an agreement between Republicans and Unionists in Northern Ireland; modernized the format of "Prime Minister's Question Time," during which the prime minister is required to answer questions from the opposition in person; and promised eventual referenda on the introduction of the euro, the European Union's single currency, and reforms of the electoral system. In 2001 the party won a second consecutive landslide victory, capturing a 167-seat majority—the largest-ever second-term majority for any party in the House of Commons. Despite the party's electoral success, Blair's leadership style was often criticized by his Labour opponents as dictatorial. Blair also faced internal dissent over his support for the U.S. policy of military confrontation with Iraq in 2003, when 139 Labour members of Parliament backed an amendment opposing the government's policy. Nevertheless, in 2005 Labour won its third consecutive general election (albeit with a significantly reduced majority) for the first time in the party's history. In 2007 Blair resigned the prime ministership in favour of his longtime chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown. In the subsequent general election of 2010, Labour won 258 seats in the House of Commons and lost its majority. Brown stepped down as leader of the party and on May 11 tendered his resignation as prime minister.

## Conservative Party

**Conservative Party**, byname **Tories**, in the United Kingdom, a political party whose guiding principles include the promotion of private property

and enterprise, the maintenance of a strong military, and the preservation of traditional cultural values and institutions. Since [World War I](#) the [Conservative Party](#) and its principal opponent, the [Labour Party](#), have dominated British political life.

## History

The [Conservative Party](#) is the heir, and in some measure the continuation, of the old [Tory Party](#), members of which began forming “conservative associations” after [Britain’s Reform Bill](#) of 1832 extended electoral rights to the middle class. The name Conservative was first used as a description of the party by [John Wilson Croker](#) writing in the *Quarterly Review* in 1830. The first Conservative government was formed by [Sir Robert Peel](#), whose program, set out in the [Tamworth Manifesto](#) (1834), stressed the timely reform of abuses, the necessity of law and order, an orderly system of taxation, and the importance of both landed interests and trade and industry.

Prospects of an extended period of Conservative rule disappeared in 1846 when the party split over the repeal of protectionist regulations known as the [Corn Laws](#), and for most of the next 30 years they were out of government. The party was reorganized by [Benjamin Disraeli](#), [prime minister](#) for a few months in 1868 and from 1874 to 1880.

The Conservative Central Office, a professional organization established by Disraeli in 1870, and the newly formed National Union, which drew together local voluntary associations, gave the party additional unity and strength. At the same time, Disraeli’s emphasis on social reform to reduce the enormous disparity in the living conditions of rich and poor, combined with a strong, activist imperial and [foreign policy](#), helped the party to [transcend](#) class barriers. Disraeli’s contribution was to transform the party from one that spoke primarily for landed interests to one that could draw supporters from the middle class and from newly enfranchised workers.

The Conservative Party was further strengthened in 1886 when it allied with the [Liberal Unionists](#), a faction of the [Liberal Party](#) that opposed the policy of [Home Rule](#) in Ireland put forward by the Liberal leader [William Ewart Gladstone](#). Thus reinforced, the [Conservatives](#) held office for all but 3 of the next 20 years, first under the leadership of [Lord Salisbury](#) and then under [Arthur Balfour](#). A split over tariff policy caused them to lose the election of 1906 in a disastrous landslide, and they did not regain power until they joined a wartime coalition with the Liberals in May 1915. In the

election of 1918, most of the candidates elected to support the coalition were Conservatives.

In 1922 Conservative backbenchers forced the party's withdrawal from the coalition and thereby precipitated the resignation of party leader [Austen Chamberlain](#). The rebellion owed much to the revulsion felt by many backbenchers toward the Liberal leader and prime minister, [David Lloyd George](#), and to their unease over some of the more interventionist reforms introduced by Liberal ministers. A surprise election called in December 1923 by Conservative prime minister [Stanley Baldwin](#) proved to be a miscalculation that briefly reunited the ailing Liberal Party and opened the way to a minority [Labour Party](#) government, though the Conservatives remained the largest single party and were able to regain power the following year. Apart from another brief Labour administration in 1929–31, the Conservatives dominated national office until 1945. Baldwin emerged as a popular figure and the architect of what he called the "new Conservatism," an attempt to appeal to the middle class through a modest movement away from the [laissez-faire](#) economic policies that the party had advocated since 1918.

Baldwin's successor as party leader and prime minister, [Neville Chamberlain](#), was forced from office in May 1940 by his own backbenchers because of his poor leadership in the early months of [World War II](#). Chamberlain was replaced by another Conservative, [Winston Churchill](#), who formed a [coalition government](#) with the Labour Party. Although Churchill led the country to victory in the war, he failed to lead his own party to success in the first postwar election in 1945. The party's stunning defeat can be attributed to the electorate's desire for social reform and economic security, as well as its inclination to blame the Conservatives for not having done enough in the 1930s to [alleviate](#) mass unemployment or to thwart the [aspirations](#) of dictators.

While in opposition, the party reformed its policies and organization. It created a new youth movement (the Young Conservatives) and an education wing (the Conservative Political Centre), revived the party's research department, and undertook a drive to increase party membership.

The party returned to power in 1951 and maintained office until 1964. Under the leadership of Churchill, [Anthony Eden](#), [Harold Macmillan](#), and [Alec Douglas-Home](#), the Conservative Party came to accept the key tenets of the "postwar consensus" with Labour—that is, it recognized the state's responsibility for maintaining full employment and [endorsed](#) the use of techniques of economic-demand management, based on the theories of [John Maynard Keynes](#), to achieve that objective. Moreover, the party did not seek to reverse the welfare measures nor most of the [public](#)

[ownership](#) of industry that had been introduced by Labour in 1945–51. The Conservative government did embark on an extensive house-building program and was able to reduce income taxes while increasing spending on the [National Health Service](#). In the early 1960s, however, an economic downturn and a series of scandals—one of which involved an adulterous affair between the secretary of war and an [alleged](#) Soviet spy—undermined the party's support.

From 1964 to 1979 the Conservatives held power alternately with the Labour Party. Under the prime ministership of [Edward Heath](#) (1970–74), the party pursued policies designed to deregulate finance and industry. Economic problems led to confrontations with the trade unions, especially the National Union of Miners, and to internal party dissension. Heath called an election in 1974 and the party lost, allowing Labour to form a minority government. After losing a second [national election](#) to Labour in 1974, Heath was succeeded as party leader by [Margaret Thatcher](#), who during her four years as leader of the opposition (1975–79) frequently stated her determination to pursue deregulation and supply-side economic reforms.

As prime minister after the Conservatives' victory over Labour in 1979, Thatcher attempted to “roll back the state” in the economic sphere, weaken the power of the trade unions, and reduce welfare programs. She combined this ambitious economic agenda—which included the privatization of several state-owned industries and the sale of more than 1.5 million council houses (publicly owned houses) to their tenants—with [moral](#) traditionalism and [skepticism](#) toward further European [integration](#) through the [European Economic Community](#) (ultimately succeeded by the [European Union](#)). Critics both inside and outside the Conservative Party contended that the “cult of the market” did much to disintegrate the social order, yet Thatcher was able to lead her party to resounding victories in the general elections of 1983 and 1987, owing in part to her decisive leadership in the [Falkland Islands War](#) (1982) and to deep divisions in the opposition. Her eventual resignation as party leader (and therefore as prime minister) in 1990 reflected the combined impact of a number of factors, including public protests over a proposal to finance local government through a flat-rate “poll tax,” a series of bitter conflicts with some of her senior ministers, her strident and [authoritarian](#) style, and a growing sense among backbenchers that she might prove unable to withstand the electoral challenge of a newly united and considerably reformed Labour Party.

Thatcher's successor, [John Major](#), had held senior ministerial office for only a brief period prior to his selection as prime minister. His less [charismatic](#) political style did not prevent him from winning the general

election of 1992, but he had to contend with a prolonged economic recession, internal party conflict over the question of European integration, and dismally low opinion-poll ratings. The party's economic policies were questioned after Britain was forced to leave the European exchange-rate mechanism and devalue the [pound](#) in 1992. Further hampered by a series of personal scandals involving prominent officials of Major's government and facing a rejuvenated Labour Party under [Tony Blair](#), the Conservatives suffered a crushing defeat in the general election of 1997, losing more than half their seats in the [House of Commons](#).

Soon after the 1997 elections, Major resigned as party leader. With some potential leaders suddenly ineligible because they had lost their parliamentary seats, [William Hague](#), former secretary of state for Wales, was elected party leader. Like Disraeli more than a century earlier, the 36-year-old Hague—the youngest Conservative leader in 200 years—set out to reform the party's organization, re-establish its appeal outside traditional Conservative strongholds, rebuild its image, and end the factional strife that had plagued the Conservatives during their last years in power. Despite those efforts, Hague's [tenure](#) was marked by continued [discord](#), and in 2001 the party suffered a second consecutive landslide defeat to the Labour Party. In 2005, under former home secretary Michael Howard, the Conservatives won some 30 additional seats in the House of Commons but remained well shy of a parliamentary majority. Howard promptly resigned as party leader, and [David Cameron](#) presided over the gradual ascent of the Conservatives over the next five years. Having captured 307 seats in the [general election of 2010](#), the Conservatives became the largest party in the House of Commons, but their failure to win an outright majority led to a [hung Parliament](#). Conservative and Labour Party leaders met with the [Liberal Democrats](#) over the ensuing days in an effort to secure enough seats to form a new government. When it appeared that those talks would result in a formal "Lib-Con" coalition, Brown announced his resignation and Cameron was confirmed as prime minister of Britain's first coalition government since World War II.