

## CALLAGHAN, LEONARD JAMES, Lord Callaghan of Cardiff (1912 - 2005), politician

**Name:** Leonard James Callaghan  
**Date of birth:** 1912  
**Date of death:** 2005  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** politician  
**Area of activity:** Politics, Government and Political Movements  
**Author:** D. Ben Rees

James Callaghan was born on 27 March 1912 at 38 Funtington Road, Copnor, Portsmouth, the second of two children of James Callaghan (1877-1921), a sailor, and his wife Charlotte (née Cundy, 1879-1961). His father was of Irish descent, and ran away from home as a boy to join the navy, changing his surname from Garogher to Callaghan so that he could not be traced. His mother came from a devout Baptist family in Portsmouth. Leonard (as he was known until the start of his political career in 1945) had an elder sister, Dorothy Gertrude (1904-1982).

The father's untimely death in 1921 left the family dependent on charity for a period, until Charlotte Callaghan received a pension of ten shillings a week in 1924 based on the fact that her husband's death was partly caused by his wartime service. Callaghan thus has personal experience of poverty, but the family received vital support from the Baptist chapel community. As a result of his chapel upbringing, he came to love hymn singing throughout his life. He attended Brixham Primary School and Portsmouth Northern Secondary School, but when he left school in 1928 he could not afford to go on to university. Having passed the Civil Service examination he began work as a clerk at the Inland Revenue Tax Office in Maidstone, Kent.

At Maidstone, Callaghan joined the Baptist chapel, the local Labour Party, and the trade union of the Association of the Officers of Taxes (AOT). He became a Sunday School teacher and got to know a fellow teacher, Audrey Elizabeth Moulton (1915-2005). They married in 1938, and had three children: Margaret (b. 1939), who became the leader of the Labour Party in the House of Lords, Julia (b. 1943) and Michael (b. 1946).

Within a year Callaghan was secretary of his union, and in 1932 he succeeded in the examination to become an Inspector of Taxes. He was elected secretary of the union for the County of Kent, and in 1934 he was promoted to the head office of the Income Tax in London. As a result of the amalgamation of two trade unions, he was appointed deputy secretary of the new union, the Inland Revenue Staff Federation (IRSF). He came to know Professor Harold Laski, a prominent figure in the Labour Party, who persuaded him to consider a political career.

Although there was no need, as he was a trade union official, he was determined to be involved in the Second World War, and after a great deal of effort he succeeded in joining the Royal Navy in 1942. Whilst training for active service, he was found to be suffering from TB and had to spend a period in hospital. After he had completely recovered, he joined the Admiralty Office in Whitehall to do research on Japan and produced a handbook for the navy, *The Enemy: Japan*. He then served on the ship HMS Activity and was appointed Lieutenant in April 1944. Callaghan is the only British Prime Minister to have served in the Royal Navy.

During leave from the navy, he was invited to meet the Executive Committee of the Cardiff South constituency (renamed Cardiff South East in 1950 and Cardiff South and Penarth in 1983) as a possible parliamentary candidate. His friend Dai Kneath of Swansea (a member of the IRSF Executive Committee) introduced him to the secretary of the constituency Labour Party, Bill Headon. Callaghan won the nomination against **George Thomas** by a single vote - because he wore his navy uniform for the interview according to Thomas. Cardiff South had been a Conservative seat since 1918, except a brief period when Arthur Henderson won it for Labour in 1929-31, but in the 1945 election James Callaghan (as he was now known) took the seat with a 5,944 majority over H. Arthur Evans.

Callaghan represented constituencies in the Cardiff area until his retirement in 1987. His success can be attributed to his care for his constituents and his communication skills. He could talk easily with people of every community, from the working class district of Splott to the more varied population of Llanrumney, and after 1983, the affluent middle class of Penarth. Only once was he under threat at an election, in 1959 when the Conservative **Michael H. A. Roberts** came within 868 votes of winning the seat. The local Conservatives believed that they had an excellent opportunity of winning at the next election in 1964 when **Wilfred Wooller** persuaded the cricketer Ted Dexter to stand in order to attract the West Indian community to vote (although the majority of the Black community had their roots in West Africa). Dexter was no match for Callaghan as a communicator, and Callaghan won a decisive victory with a majority of 7,841.

In October 1946 Callaghan was amongst twenty-one Labour MPs who wrote to Ernest Bevin, the Foreign Secretary, urging him to follow a middle path between America and Russia. He agreed with **Hugh Dalton** and **Aneurin Bevan** in their campaign against the rearmament of Germany. In 1947-1948 he felt that he and **Jim Griffiths** deserved credit for their contribution to the success of the ports and docks of south Wales. Callaghan was not initially in favour of creating a Secretary of State for Wales, but like Aneurin Bevan he changed his mind in the belief that priority had been given to the Forth Bridge in Scotland rather than the Severn Bridge because Scotland had a Secretary of State in the Cabinet.

In 1947, Callaghan was appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, and was the UK's representative on the Council of Europe in Strasbourg 1948-50. In the second Labour Government of 1950-51 he served as Parliamentary and Financial Secretary in the Admiralty. During the years of opposition he was the Labour spokesman on Transport (1951-53); Fuel and Power (1953-55); Colonial Affairs (1956-61), and Shadow Chancellor (1961-64). In this period he became a polished performer in the House of Commons and the media.

When Hugh Gaitskell died in January 1963 Callaghan stood for the leadership of the Labour Party, but was defeated by Harold Wilson. When Wilson won the 1964 election

he appointed Callaghan Chancellor of the Exchequer, though he also created a Department of Economic Affairs headed by George Brown. The first budget of the Chancellor in November 1964 was not acceptable to the financial markets, and the situation was rectified by a loan of three thousand million dollars, mostly from the USA. The situation deteriorated further in July 1966, when the bank rate was raised to 7 per cent. Callaghan was in a difficult position and had to acknowledge his failure. If it wasn't for his wife he would have resigned from Parliament. Wilson ensured that would not happen by moving him to the Home Office and bringing in **Roy Jenkins** to replace him.

Callaghan soon re-established his reputation as a minister of the Crown. His roots in the trade union movement and his Baptist upbringing were responsible for his conservative instincts within the Home Office. He could not tolerate low moral standards in society, such as gambling, drugs and excessive alcohol consumption by the younger generation. As one who had been a spokesman on behalf of the police in Parliament from 1955 to 1964, he supported a fair but strong policy on law and order. In an attempt to control immigration he introduced the controversial Commonwealth Immigrants Act in 1968, and also in the same year the Race Relations Act which made it illegal to refuse employment, housing or education on the basis of ethnic background. With regard to the situation in Northern Ireland, he was prepared to defend the civil rights of the Catholic minority, sending in troops to keep law and order. He wrote a book on the problems of the province entitled *A House Divided* (1973).

Callaghan was one of the few politicians who did not expect Labour to win the 1970 general election. He was proved right and the Conservatives held power for the next four years. Callaghan won easily in Cardiff South East and had an excellent agent in John Edward Brooks throughout the 1970s. He made him a member of the House of Lords in 1979 as Baron Brooks of Tremorfa. During the Heath government he served as Shadow Home Secretary 1970-71, Opposition Spokesman on Employment 1971-72 and Shadow Foreign Secretary 1972-74.

Callaghan succeeded in persuading most of the Labour MPs to support a referendum on Europe, though he was not himself a strong believer in the European Community. After Labour returned to power in 1974, Wilson insisted that they should reconsider Britain's membership. In the 1975 referendum, 67.2 per cent of the electorate voted to stay in the Common Market. When Callaghan became Prime Minister, he had an excellent relationship with the European Community, better than with the trade union movement, though he was the most committed trade unionist of all the British Prime Ministers.

Callaghan served as Foreign Secretary in Wilson's government from 1974 to 1976. He was successful in dealing with the crisis in Cyprus, with Iceland and the Cod War, on South Africa, and he had an excellent relationship with the USA. When Harold Wilson resigned in April 1976, there was no doubt that Callaghan would succeed him as Leader of the Labour Party and Prime Minister, and he duly defeated **Michael Foot** in the final vote. Among the Welsh Labour MPs, his confidant was **Cledwyn Hughes** and he came to depend on him as the Chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party in Westminster.

As Prime Minister Callaghan faced a number of difficult issues. Because of the state of the economy it was necessary to arrange an IMF loan. The Cabinet was split with a fierce debate raging, but the Prime Minister managed to maintain unity. A Social Contract was agreed with the trade unions in an attempt to avoid excessive wage rises, and by 1978 both unemployment and inflation were under control. Maintaining his minority government was another problem, since Labour had lost seats in by-elections and were dependent on a pact with the Liberal Party and the goodwill of Welsh and Scottish nationalist MPs. Callaghan admits in his autobiography that he should have called an election in October 1978.

For Wales and Scotland, devolution was a burning issue. When the devolution policy was introduced it was immediately opposed by six Labour MPs from south Wales. Callaghan decided to hold a referendum and agreed to insert a clause that a 40 per cent majority was required to establish an Assembly. This was a tactic of Neil Kinnock, Tam Dalyell and their supporters to ensure that devolution would not be implemented in Scotland or Wales. Unfortunately, Callaghan did not give the leadership that was needed and never considered disciplining the aggressive opponents. According to the Welsh press Callaghan's attitude was lukewarm and apathetic. It was not until late in the campaign that he urged the people of Wales to vote 'Yes' and take power, and in the referendum on Saint David's Day 1979 the majority of the population of Wales refused to support the creation of a Welsh Assembly.

It was also distressing that by the end of his term in Downing Street he had lost the support of the leaders of the trade unions. Nothing seemed to work for him, and there were constant strikes and tension in 1978-79, the so-called Winter of Discontent. On 28 March 1979 he lost a vote of confidence by 311 to 310 and had no choice but to call a general election in May 1979 which brought the Conservative Party into government under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher. If he had called an election in 1978, and had won, the whole history of Britain might have been different. It was also a mistake for Callaghan to carry on as Leader of the Opposition after losing the election of 1979. He believed he could pass on to his successor a united party, but it was not to be. He was replaced as leader by **Michael Foot** in November 1980, and in January 1981 a new political party was formed based on two dozen Labour MPs. Nevertheless, Callaghan held on to his parliamentary seat, Cardiff South and Penarth, in 1983 and became the 'Father of the House of Commons'. He retired as MP in 1987 and was ennobled as Lord Callaghan of Cardiff to serve in the House of Lords.

Callaghan had purchased a farm in Ringmer, Sussex, in 1968, and in his retirement he and his wife had years of happiness farming there on quite a large scale. He maintained his association with **Julian Hodge** as a director of the Bank of Wales, and proved himself to be an unrivalled ambassador for the traditional Labour Party. He received numerous honours, including honorary doctorates from the University of Wales in 1976, Sardar Patel University, India in 1978, the University of Birmingham in 1981 and the University of Sussex in 1989, and fellowships of the University of Wales, Cardiff in 1978 and of Portsmouth Polytechnic in 1981. He was a Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford from 1959 to 1967 and was made a Life Fellow in the same year. He was President of the University of Wales, Swansea from 1986 to 1995, and was awarded an honorary fellowship in 1995. He received the Freedom of the City of Cardiff in 1974, and was also awarded the Freedom of the City of Sheffield in 1979. He published his autobiography, *Time and Chance*, in 1987.

Audrey Callaghan had to go into a nursing home in July 2001 due to dementia, and she died there on 15 March 2005. James Callaghan died of pneumonia eleven days later on 26 March 2005, a day before his 93rd birthday. His body was cremated and his ashes scattered near the statue of Peter Pan in the garden of the Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital where his wife had been a governor.

He is commemorated in Callaghan Square in Cardiff and by the Callaghan Building at Swansea University.

## Author

**D. Ben Rees**

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Personal acquaintance

## Further reading

NLW Archives: [For Peace and Progress - Callaghan](#)

NLW Archives: [Vote Callaghan Labour](#)

NLW Archives: [Cardiff South-East Constituency, General Election Thursday, 10th October 1974: Hear your LABOUR Candidate - Jim Callaghan](#)

NLW Archives: [Welsh Devolution Referendum, 1979](#)

Wikipedia Article: [James Callaghan](#)

Wikipedia Article: [Audrey Callaghan](#)

## Images

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