A Tribute to Harold Wilson

Harold Wilson, 29 years in Parliament, thirteen years as Leader of the articulate, quarrelsome and aspirational Labour Party, eight years as Prime Minister, during which he estimated that he had answered 12000 Parliamentary questions and had spoken to well over a hundred public meetings a year, was by any measure a remarkable phenomenon. He had learned at an early age the ways of government, not least as a Cabinet Minister at the age of 31 in Clement Attlee’s radical post war government. He had demonstrated his remarkable skill as an economist and a statistician at the Bond of Trade. Elected as Prime Minister with a hair breadth majority in 1964, within two years he had transformed that into a solid majority.

But Harold Wilson was not just a gifted politician. Born in Huddersfield of hardworking, nonconformist parents whose background was rooted in the hills and moors of Rievaulx in North Yorkshire, he imbied from his childhood a commitment to social justice. His proudest boast about his own administration was that the British people enjoyed ‘a higher level of social justice and equality than our people have ever known’. Partly that was due to what he memorably characterised, in a speech in the New Town of Stevenage in my then constituency of North Herts, as ‘the white heat of technology’. But not only that. He believed in ideals that, in our current era of gated communities and yawning gulfs between rich and poor, have become unfashionable – the common good, shared sacrifice, solidarity.

Ministers were told to travel economy class and to share cars unless they were working on sensitive or secret material. I remember waiting ten minutes at Moscow airport in 1969 for passengers to disembark. A worried official appeared at my crowded row to ask if I had seen the Minister, because a guard of honour was waiting at the VIP steps for him or her to appear.

Harold Wilson was also a tactician, a negotiator, a player of political chess at its most exacting. He kept Britain out of the bog of Vietnam despite constant pressure from President Johnson, yet managed to maintain a close if occasionally bumpy relationship with Britain’s most powerful ally. He steered Britain into influential membership of the nascent European Community in 1975, while holding his divided party together. But he was too vulnerable to media criticism, sometimes calling newspapers to dispute stories that appeared in their first editions. Harold’s mentor Clement Attlee would not have bothered himself to do that.

Beyond all that, Harold Wilson not only expressed but also practised equality. Of all the Prime Ministers I have known, he was the one who was truly blind to prejudice and immune from discrimination, whether based on race, religion or gender. Barbara Castle once declared to me that she had been responsible for more ladies’ rooms in ministerial offices than any other woman in recent history. True, because Harold appointed her to Ministry after Ministry – Transport, Emploment, Economic Affairs, Overseas Development – that had never seen a female Minister before. He believed that men and women should be promoted for their hard work and their ability, not for reasons of family or privilege. And the life he lived, from meeting ordinary people to holidaying at his bungalow in Scilly, resembled the lives of his fellow citizens. These were among the reasons why he cherished most highly among his achievements in government the Open University, known in the days when my own father strongly supported it, as the University of the Air.
Thousands of students here and in many other parts of the world are thankful for the opportunities it opened up to them.

It is an honour to dedicate this memorial in the presence of his wonderful and loyal wife Mary, his son Robin and Robin’s wife Joy Crispin Wilson, his grandchildren, his friends and other members of his family.