

## Britain's First Labour Government

*Also by John Shepherd*

ON THE MOVE: ESSAYS IN LABOUR AND TRANSPORT HISTORY  
PRESENTED TO PHILIP BAGWELL (*edited with Chris Wrigley*)  
GEORGE LANSBURY: AT THE HEART OF OLD LABOUR

*Also by Keith Laybourn*

LABOUR HEARTLAND (*with Jack Reynolds*)  
THE RISE OF LABOUR  
BRITAIN ON THE BREADLINE  
THE CENTENNIAL HISTORY OF THE ILP (*edited*)  
THE GENERAL STRIKE OF 1926  
PHILIP SNOWDEN: A BIOGRAPHY  
THE EVOLUTION OF BRITISH SOCIAL POLICY AND THE WELFARE STATE  
UNDER THE RED FLAG (*with Dylan Murphy*)  
UNEMPLOYMENT AND EMPLOYMENT POLICIES CONCERNING WOMEN IN  
BRITAIN, 1900–1951  
MARXISM IN BRITAIN: DISSENT, DECLINE AND RE-EMERGENCE, 1945–c.2000

# Britain's First Labour Government

John Shepherd and Keith Laybourn

palgrave  
macmillan



© John Shepherd and Keith Laybourn 2006

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2006 978-1-349-51245-4

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1T 4LP.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The authors have asserted their rights to be identified as the authors of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published 2006 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

Companies and representatives throughout the world

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN is the global academic imprint of the Palgrave Macmillan division of St. Martin's Press, LLC and of Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. Macmillan® is a registered trademark in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries. Palgrave is a registered trademark in the European Union and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-349-51245-4 ISBN 978-0-230-28736-5 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230287365

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Shepherd, John, 1942–

Britain's first Labour government / John Shepherd and Keith Laybourn.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Labour Party (Great Britain)—History—20th century. 2. Great Britain—Politics and government—1901–1936. I. Laybourn, Keith. II. Title.

DA566.7.S54 2006

941.083—dc22

2006045814

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06

*For Jan and Julia*

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	viii
<i>List of Tables</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xii
1 From Foundation Conference to Government	1
2 'Over the Threshold'	24
3 Labour Takes Office	41
4 Domestic Policies	68
5 Minority Government	106
6 Foreign and Imperial Policy	130
7 Downfall	161
8 Political Aftermath	185
9 Conclusion	199
<i>Notes</i>	208
<i>Bibliography</i>	234
<i>Index</i>	244

# Illustrations

(between pages 129 and 130)

- 1 Ramsay MacDonald at his home in Lossiemouth, Christmas 1923
- 2 After an audience with the King: (from left to right) Ramsay MacDonald, J. H. Thomas, Arthur Henderson and J. R. Clynes outside Buckingham Palace
- 3 Ramsay MacDonald arrives by taxi at 10 Downing Street
- 4 Immediately down to work: Ramsay MacDonald during his first visit to Chequers, 1924
- 5 'What would Grandmama have thought of a Labour Government!', Britain's First Labour Cabinet, January 1924
- 6 Jimmy Thomas and John Wheatley step it out in Downing Street
- 7 John Wheatley, Minister of Health
- 8 The uncomfortable trappings of power: Ramsay MacDonald in court dress
- 9 Philip and Ethel Snowden travel in style by train
- 10 'Labour Marching On!', *Daily Herald* campaigns for Labour victory at the Party Conference, October 1924
- 11 The Labour government winds up: Ramsay MacDonald chairs the party conference, October 1924



# Tables

1	1924 Labour government by-elections	112
2	1924 Labour government defeats in Parliament	120

# Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the permission of HM Queen Elizabeth II to quote from material in The Royal Archives, Windsor. We are also indebted to the following for permission to use copyright material: British School of Political and Economic Science; the Bodleian Library; Churchill Archives, Cambridge; Labour History and Archive Centre at the John Rylands Library, Manchester; Manchester Reference Library; The National Archives; The Robinson Library, University of Newcastle. We would like to acknowledge that the James Ramsay MacDonald diaries were 'meant as notes to guide and revive the memory as regards happenings and must on no account be published as they are'. We have only used small extracts from his diaries. Every effort has been taken to trace copyright holders and to avoid infringement of copyright. We apologise unreservedly to any copyright holders who have inadvertently been overlooked.

We particularly would like to acknowledge the formative influence in our historical research of Jack Reynolds (1915–1988), David Wright (1937–1995), Professor Eric Hobsbawm, Professor Kenneth O. Morgan and Professor Chris Wrigley. We would also wish to thank Steven Bird, former Archivist at the Labour History and Archive Study Centre at the John Rylands Library, Manchester, and his colleagues for access to the records of the British Labour Party and for expert advice during our visits. Philip Dunn at the Labour Party photographic archive was very helpful in supplying the photographs which illustrate this volume. We would like to acknowledge the expert help we have received from the staff at many British libraries and for granting access to manuscript collections in their possession: The Bodleian Library, The British Library, The British Library of Political and Economic Science, Cambridge University Library, Keele University Library, The Modern Records Centre, The Robinson Library, University of Newcastle, The National Archives.

We are most grateful to Professor Kenneth O. Morgan, Dr Janet Shepherd and Professor Chris Wrigley who read the typescript in preparation and provided extremely valuable comments and wise counsel. Any errors or omissions that remain are our responsibility alone. We also thank Dr David Musgrove and Greg Neale for publishing our article on 'Labour's Red Letter Day' in *The BBC History Magazine* and for the opportunity to present papers on our research at the Cambridge branch

of The Historical Association and Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, and for the constructive views of the participants. We also wish to thank Dr Huw Richards, Casper Sylvest, Dr Jon Davis, Dr Paul Corthorn, Carol Probert, Dr Paul Ward, John Fisher and Beverley Harding for their assistance and advice. We are most grateful to Laura Ponsonby and Catherine and Ian Russell for their hospitality and access to the Shulbrede archive.

At Palgrave we have been most fortunate in our two commissioning editors, Luciana O'Flaherty and Michael Strang and their colleagues, Ruth Ireland and Daniel Bunyard. We thank them for their constant encouragement and unfailing patience. We would also like to thank Penny Simmons for seeing this book through to publication.

We dedicate this book to our wives, Jan and Julia. Without their unstinting support and help completion would be a distant prospect.

John Shepherd  
Dry Drayton, Cambridgeshire

Keith Laybourn  
Pudsey, West Yorkshire

# Abbreviations

ASLEF	Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen
BBC	British Broadcasting Company (later Corporation)
BSP	British Socialist Party
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence
CCWTE	Central Committee on Women's Training and Employment
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
DPP	Director of Public Prosecutions
ECCI	Executive committee of the Communist International
FO	Foreign Office
ILP	Independent Labour Party
LRC	Labour Representation Committee
MFGB	Miners' Federation of Great Britain
MP	Member of Parliament
NAC	National Administrative Council
NEC	National Executive Committee
NLC	National Liberal Club
NUR	National Union of Railwaymen
PCF	<i>Bolshevik Parti Communiste Français</i>
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
PPS	Parliamentary Private Secretary
SDF	Social Democratic Federation
SFIO	<i>Section Francaise de l'Internationale Ouvriere</i>
STC	Supply and Transport Committee
SJCIWO	Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations
TGWU	Transport and General Workers' Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UDC	Union of Democratic Control
WBCG	Workers' Birth Control Group
WLL	Women's Labour League