

National Labour: “Quite dead” or “The Coming Force”? The Labour faction of Britain’s National Government under Baldwin & Chamberlain, 1935-39

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I confirm that the work submitted is my own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

The National Labour Committee, from 1937 the National Labour Organisation, was the last political party to provide Britain with a prime minister outside of Labour and the Conservatives and has to date been the longest-lived (and arguably most successful) party to break away from Labour.

However, it currently represents a significant blind spot in the historiography of interwar British politics. Although the crisis and general election of 1931, and the Labour Party split they entailed, are well-understood, as are the ‘high politics’ of the National Government, practically nothing has been written on National Labour as a party.

This thesis aims to remedy this deficiency by examining National Labour as an institution in the period 1935-39. The general election of 1935 proved a bruising experience for the party, amidst the context of near-total lack of organisational activity and Ramsay MacDonald’s recent retirement from the premiership. Although the consensus to date has been that the poor performance in that election marked “the end of the road” for National Labour, in fact the next four years saw a remarkable and unexpected rebirth.

As MacDonald left the political stage, National Labour evolved from a London-based committee that supported candidates and published essays into a modern political party with constituency organisations, area councils and conferences and women’s and youth wings. The party’s personnel also changed, from being a rump of MacDonaldite defectors, to, by the end of the decade, a youthful core of progressive centrists, forward-looking and largely free from the baggage of 1931. Competitive internal elections, a steady trickle of prominent recruits and intense ideological clashes over appeasement indicate the emergence of a genuine institutional life by 1939, before the outbreak of the Second World War removed the party’s *raison d'être*.

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Abbreviations

CP – Archibald Church Papers, Cambridge University Library Special Collections

DLW – Lord De La Warr Papers, East Sussex Record Office

DP – Denman Papers, Bodleian Library Special Collections

JRM – Ramsay MacDonald Papers, National Archives

JRM Diary – the Ramsay MacDonald Diary, National Archives

LNU – League of Nations Union

MMP – Malcolm MacDonald Papers, Durham University Library Special Collections

PND – Published, edited version of the Harold Nicolson Diary

ND – Original Harold Nicolson Diary, Balliol College Library Historic Collections

NL – The News-Letter: The National Labour Fortnightly

SM – Unpublished Ernest Stanford Memoir, National Library of Scotland

TP – Titler Papers, Author's collection

UDC – Union of Democratic Control

Introduction

The National Labour Committee, from 1937 the National Labour Organisation, is a blind spot in the historiography of 20th century British politics. National Labour was the last party other than Labour or Conservative to provide Britain with a prime minister, and has been by far the most successful splinter party in Labour's 125-year history. By numerous metrics – seats won, power wielded and simple longevity – National Labour outperformed Coalition Labour (1918-22), the SDP and the pro-EU Change UK. While David Dutton's *Liberals in Schism* has provided a comprehensive account of the contemporaneous Liberal Nationals, National Labour has yet to receive similar treatment. Ramsden's *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin* and Geraint Thomas's *Popular Conservatism* are two prominent accounts of the Conservative Party in this period that, although working from differing top-down and bottom-up perspectives, are united in acknowledging the importance of coalition cooperation to the Tory party of the 1930s. Even the short-lived New Party, which also split from Labour in 1931 but proved vastly less successful, enjoys a monograph study.¹

As such, a study of National Labour is needed. The events of the 1931 crisis, Labour split and subsequent general election are well understood. The work of Bassett, Howell, Thorpe, and Williamson among others has provided comprehensive coverage of the divisions that emerged in Ramsay MacDonald's cabinet in August 1931, the formation of the National Government and why some Labour politicians followed MacDonald and others did not.² Given that 1931 has been explored

¹ David Dutton, *Liberals in Schism: A History of the National Liberal Party* (IB Tauris, 2014), John Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin, 1902-1940* (Longman, 1978), Geraint Thomas, *Popular Conservatism and the Culture of National Government in Inter-War Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), Matthew Worley, *Oswald Mosley and the New Party* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

² Studies abound on the 1931 crisis and Labour split: Reginald Bassett, *Nineteen Thirty-one: Political Crisis* (MacMillan, 1958), David Howell, 'The Making of National Labour', in *Dictionary of Labour Biography, Vol. XIII*, ed. by Keith Gildart & David Howell (Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), pp. 116-136, Andrew Thorpe, *The British General Election of 1931* (Clarendon Press, 1991), Andrew Thorpe, 'I am in the Cabinet: J. H. Thomas's Decision to Join the National Government in 1931', *Historical Research*, 64.155 (1991), pp. 389-402, Philip Williamson, *National Crisis and National Government: British politics, the economy and Empire, 1926-1932* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

satisfactorily by scholars, this thesis takes up the story of National Labour in the second half of the decade, about which essentially nothing has been written.

One minor point of detail about 1931 does need to be corrected, however. Ever since the 1931 election, National Labour has been listed as running 20 candidates and having 13 MPs elected. This was not the case; two candidates currently regarded as 'National' were in fact National Labour, namely Archibald Church for the London University and Ian Horrobin for Southwark Central.³ The historical record of the 1931 general election should show 22 National Labour candidates, of whom 14 were successful; Church was defeated by another National while Horrobin was elected but stood down in 1935.

In the twelve months after the 1931 election, there was a flurry of National Labour activity. Three pamphlets were produced by Clifford Allen and Godfrey Elton and the party journal, *The News-Letter*, was founded, edited briefly by Allen, then Elton from 1932-37.⁴ The supportive press baron Robert Donald purchased *Everyman* and turned it into a National Labour-supporting weekly, until his death in February 1933. Ramsay MacDonald and others wrestled with the question "Do you want a new political party?" during 1932 and MacDonald appears to have eventually answered in the negative.⁵ In July, MacDonald wrote to Philip Snowden about plans for a speaking tour the two might undertake as part of a propaganda drive. Snowden was not interested, making clear to MacDonald his intention to resign from the cabinet over tariffs, having previously written to Allen "I do not understand this National Labour Party".⁶ The prime minister, in his desperate attempts to forestall

³ Details of all National Labour candidates and constituencies in 1931 can be found at *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1321, a 1932 party social list includes both (PRO 30/69/1328). In 1933 party leaders discussed whether Horrobin might stand down, *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1329, p. 28.

⁴ Godfrey Elton, *The Labour Party – The Crisis – and the Nation* (National Labour Committee, 1932), Godfrey Elton, *Towards the New Labour Party* (Jonathon Cape, 1932), Clifford Allen, *Labour's Future at Stake* (George Allen & Unwin, 1932).

⁵ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1177. There is much correspondence in this folder about the future of National Labour, e.g. the Usher memorandum, Worthington to MacDonald, 23 July 1932, Worthington Memorandum 17.8.32.

⁶ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1177, MacDonald to Snowden, 29 July 1932, Martin Gilbert (ed.), *Plough My Own Furrow: The Story of Lord Allen of Hurtwood as told through his Writings and Correspondence* (Longmans, 1965), p. 251.

the resignation of Snowden and the free traders, begged them to stay on until the 1933 World Economic Conference after which he might resign himself. When Snowden et al did leave in September 1932, MacDonald seriously considered following them and, as late as 1934 concluded “I should make preparations for a gradual withdrawal... from Parliament altogether.”⁷

In early 1932 there had been persistent rumours that MacDonald was plotting a return to mainstream Labour and there was further speculation in 1933-34 that a united National Party might be formed. This uncertainty seems to have put paid to the abortive attempts to build up National Labour. Lord Sankey’s diary does not even mention attending a National Labour meeting until a well-evidenced October 1933 Downing Street conference of the party’s leadership.⁸ Instead, on the organisational side, the only sense in which the National Labour Committee existed was its small office in 35 Parliament Street, and an annual luncheon at the Trocadero Hotel.

In 1935, the organisational structure was formalised with the creation of a central council of parliamentarians and local representatives, in addition to the pre-existing executive committee but, as we will see, this limited activity at the centre did not compensate for complete inertia at the constituency level, where organisations that had existed in 1931 (often made up of Labour defectors) were allowed to wither and die.⁹ This lack of grassroots presence left the committee’s chairman, Lord De La Warr, hamstrung in his tense negotiations with the Conservatives over seat allocations, which are well-documented in Stannage’s study of the 1935 election.¹⁰

What then, was National Labour actually doing in the first half of the decade? It was unhelpful that MacDonald failed to give a clear lead and, repeatedly unwell and serially overworked as premier, remained largely aloof from these ‘party’ matters. The other National Labour cabinet

⁷ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1329 misc, Memorandum on the Present Political Situation. This wide-ranging and detailed 22-page memo is an excellent source on MacDonald’s political thinking in either late 1933/early 1934.

⁸ Sankey Papers, MS. Eng. Hist. e. 287, 13 October 1933.

⁹ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1333, Third Annual Report of the Executive Committee, March 1935.

¹⁰ Tom Stannage, *Baldwin Thwarts the Opposition, The British General Election of 1935* (Croom Helm, 1980), pp. 16-61.

ministers, J. H. Thomas and Lord Sankey showed even less interest in the party as an institution and were equally weighed down with governmental duties. However, on occasion, MacDonald at least did think about what National Labour should be for. In the 1933 summit, he set out what he thought the party should focus on, outlining a scheme for a “new movement... similar to Fabian Society lines”. If National Labour could attract “10 or 12 first-class brains”, they could emulate the success of the Fabians:

[MacDonald asked] How about producing new Fabian Essays ... he would even go to the extent of having lectures, such as were arranged by the Fabian Society... these lectures would be embodied in a book – and launch the whole thing exactly as was done by the Fabian Society.¹¹

MacDonald got his wish. *The News-Letter* began in 1934 a series of lengthy, high-minded policy essays in a series entitled ‘National Labour and the Next Ten Years’, covering themes such as education, welfare, industrial planning and defence. This was followed by *Towards a National Policy: Being a National Labour Contribution*, a collection of essays by party figures published in April 1935 covering various aspects of foreign and domestic policy.¹²

Thus, the sole achievement of National Labour in the first half of the decade was the propagation of progressive policies in the hope of drawing the larger parties into line with ‘middle opinion’ – the centrist political zeitgeist identified by Arthur Marwick.¹³ *The News-Letter* did not sell very well, being an exceedingly dry and detached periodical that was self-consciously *not* party political, and there is little evidence the ‘Fabian’ approach gained National Labour much traction in a field already crowded with cross-party collaborative bodies like David Lloyd George’s Council of

¹¹ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1329, pp. 19-20.

¹² Godfrey Elton (ed.), *Towards a National Policy: Being a National Labour Contribution* (Longman, 1935).

¹³ Arthur Marwick, ‘Middle Opinion in the Thirties: Planning, Progress and Political ‘Agreement’’, *The English Historical Review*, 79.311 (1964), pp. 285-298.

Action and Allen's Next Five Years Group.¹⁴ To understand why MacDonald chose this course, it should be borne in mind that there was no way in the early thirties to predict that coalition rule would continue for the rest of the decade (and indeed up to 1945 in another form). The National Labourites might have been turned out by the Tories at any time should the latter have decided to break up the National Government, and indeed there was noisy agitation in this direction from within the Conservative ranks in 1934-35. Malcolm MacDonald later realised his father largely persisted in office – and therefore with National Labour – to ensure his son, just 30 in 1931, might have a political future.¹⁵ MacDonald felt a deep obligation to those loyal few who had followed him during the split and was painfully aware that if he chose to resign, it would leave his most dedicated supporters in the political wilderness. As such, he hoped that at some point a reunion with Labour might be possible, at least for those same supporters and his son, if not for himself. MacDonald was genuinely surprised that the extent and longevity of Labour hostility rendered such a path inaccessible. Ernest Stanford, a Labour councillor and candidate who defected in 1931, recorded a revealing conversation with MacDonald in his unpublished memoir. Summing up why National Labour failed to become a political force, he recalled the prime minister telling him after the split, “time would prove to be the great healer... he on his part would do nothing to make matters more difficult for the party which had deserted him.”¹⁶ If the door was to be left open to a Labour reunion, then there was little point in building up National Labour; in Stanford's words, MacDonald “firmly declined to set up an organisation”. Instead, the National Labour Committee served the two purposes its leader permitted: expounding its ideology in high-minded essays and protecting “the interests of the little band” of National Labour MPs.¹⁷

¹⁴ For lack of sales see a scathing reference to the journal by Lord Rothermere to Malcolm MacDonald, *MMP*, 6/4/36, Rothermere to MacDonald, 8 February 1934.

¹⁵ Malcolm MacDonald, *Titans and Others* (Collins, 1972), p. 48. See also *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1329, in which a key item on the agenda as late as October 1933 was “Is it possible and desirable to achieve the continuation of National Government beyond the next general election?”, p. 12.

¹⁶ *SM*, p. 114.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 113-4.

This work will analyse the consequences of that decision first for the 1935 general election and then the remainder of the decade. The focus will be the institutional history of the party and its organisation rather than 'high politics'.¹⁸ The historical consensus to date has been that 1935 marked the death knell of National Labour. Stevenson and Cook wrote of the election that it "virtually marked the end of the road for the National Labour Party", while Arthur Marwick's influential article on 'middle opinion' focuses entirely on the party's first years.¹⁹ In his 1938 study of the Labour Party, the American academic Dean McHenry's believed National Labour was merely "marking time until something happens".²⁰ Howell's analysis of the party, while admittedly focused on the "making of" National Labour, is brief on the period after 1935. Noting the damage done by the departures of Thomas and Ramsay MacDonald, and the continued National Labour cabinet presence in the form of Malcolm and De La Warr, Howell states:

National Labour enthusiasts not least Dunnico attempted to strengthen the party but with little success... the lack of a distinctive presence, even in the parties few seats remained a severe handicap.²¹

David Marquand, in his otherwise magisterial biography of MacDonald, has nothing to say about National Labour as an organisation after c. 1933, not even mentioning the party in his passage on the 1935 election.²² Similarly, biographies of Malcolm MacDonald and Harold Nicolson seem to have little interest in the party to which their subjects belonged.²³ Even though no less than seventeen National Labourites enjoy biographies in the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, none of these studies

¹⁸ National Labour's role there has been recognised, for example Maurice Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy, 1933-40* (Cambridge University Press, 1975), Nick Smart, *The National Government, 1931-40* (MacMillan, 1999).

¹⁹ John Stevenson & Chris Cook, *The Slump: Society and Politics during the Depression* (Jonathon Cape, 1977), p. 252, Marwick, 'Middle Opinion', pp. 289-90.

²⁰ Dean E. McHenry, *The Labour Party in Transition, 1931-1938* (Routledge, 1938), p. 239.

²¹ Howell, 'Making of National Labour', p. 133.

²² David Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, (Richard Cohen, 1997), pp. 779-81.

²³ Clyde Sanger, *Malcolm MacDonald: Bringing an End to Empire* (Liverpool University Press, 1995), James Lees-Milne, *Harold Nicolson, Volume II: 1930-1968* (Hamish Hamilton, 1988), Norman Rose, *Harold Nicolson* (Pimlico, 2006).

seem to adequately recognise the transformation the party underwent in the latter thirties, with the focus in most cases being on what might be termed their respective paths to 1931.²⁴

Despite this historiographical silence, National Labour in 1936 still had the majority of its life ahead of it. In the second half of the decade, the party was re-launched, remodelled and achieved a remarkable recovery from the near-death experience of 1935. By 1938 the party was healthier than it had ever been. The Munich crisis brought about internal divisions between anti-appeasers like Nicolson and Chamberlain loyalists such as Elton, but the March 1939 party conference proved to be a triumph for the former faction, spearheaded by an energetic, Nicolson-led youth wing, the New Democrats. Existing literature on the subject has failed to perceive this renaissance, nor recognise that in the prospective election of 1939-40, National Labour would almost certainly have improved on its 1935 nadir. While a “lack of a distinctive presence” in its own constituencies would certainly be an accurate diagnosis of National Labour in 1935, by the latter years of the decade there is strong evidence that this had been reversed.

The sources for this period, while paltry in comparison with the Conservative, Liberal and Labour parties, are surprisingly strong and provide a reasonably complete narrative of the internal life of National Labour. The Ramsay and Malcolm MacDonald papers, the archives of ‘Buck’ De La Warr and Richard Denman, the original Harold Nicolson diary and the papers of Archibald Church contain a wealth of information on the party in the mid-late 1930s and, alongside hundreds of issues of *The News-Letter: The National Labour Fortnightly*, provide a rich seam of largely unmined archival material.

Without question, National Labour, or at least its leading figures, declined in importance in the corridors of power in the second half of the decade. Ramsay MacDonald was patently a much-

²⁴ The 17 are Craigie Aitchison, Clifford Allen, Ernest Bennett, Archibald Church, Richard Denman, Herbert Dunnico, Godfrey Elton, Derwent Hall Caine, William Jowitt, Holford Knight, James Lovat-Fraser, Ramsay MacDonald, Sydney Frank Markham, Walton Newbold, Arthur Reade, Thomas Rosbotham and Lord Sankey.

diminished figure in the final two years of his life and J. H. Thomas was in a terminal decline well before his resignation in May 1936. Malcolm MacDonald and Lord De La Warr did not enjoy the level of cabinet influence that Ramsay and Thomas had done in the 'big six'. The power shift happened swiftly. The Cabinet General Purposes Committee (the formalisation of the 'big six' instituted by MacDonald in January 1935) ceased meeting shortly after Baldwin's accession. Instead, Thomas was complaining as early as February 1936 that he and MacDonald were being frozen out by an "inner cabinet" that made decisions without consulting the National Labour ministers.²⁵ While this was certainly a significant development - Malcolm MacDonald later believed that the National Government had ceased to be a truly 'National' coalition after 1935²⁶ – it should not be used to signal the death of National Labour as a *party*. The organisation's best years were, in fact, still ahead of it.

²⁵ *PND*, p. 239.

²⁶ *MMP*, 6/6/39, Asquith to MacDonald, 28 February 1945 and MacDonald to Asquith, 5 April 1945.

I - An “exposed position”? National Labour & the 1935 general election

The Context

Following the exchange of the premiership and the post of Lord President of the Council between Ramsay MacDonald and Stanley Baldwin in June 1935, National Labour found itself in a new and difficult situation. Within months it faced a general election from what David Howell calls “an exposed position”; no longer the loyal followers of a valiant prime minister, National Labour found themselves a tiny faction in a coalition that was not just Conservative-dominated, but now Conservative-led. In these circumstances, their “declining status” was clear to see.²⁷ Certainly, MacDonald held far less influence as Lord President than Baldwin had done, although he was acting prime minister during Baldwin’s final French summer vacations in 1935 and 1936.²⁸

The National Labour party was remarkably vulnerable when Baldwin called a snap election on 19 October 1935, announcing the date, 14 November, to the Commons four days later. However, the party’s exposed position was not a political one, as David Howell asserts, but rather an organisational one. The popularity of the National Government held up remarkably well in the 1935 election, despite the economic headwinds, foreign policy difficulties and political wobbles the administration had experienced in the previous four years. The National coalition achieved a landslide, winning 53.7% of the vote, 429 seats and a majority of 247, a victory that exceeded Lloyd George’s ‘Coupon Election’ triumph of 1918 in terms of vote share.²⁹ Labour, meanwhile, has never since won as few seats as it did in 1935. As Ross McKibbin has argued, the National ticket had the

²⁷ Howell, ‘Making of National Labour’, p. 131.

²⁸ See *PND*, p. 261, in which MacDonald is “quite a different man” as acting PM.

²⁹ Roger Mortimore & Andrew Blick (eds.), *Butler’s British Political Facts* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), p. 378.

majority of working-class voters behind it, with the Conservatives benefiting from “an abnormal degree of working-class support”.³⁰ More recently, research by Geraint Thomas has shown that during canvassing in Tory-held Leeds West, the most common response in “the poorest area” of this urban, working-class constituency was for voters to label themselves as National Labour.³¹ It is certainly possible the rare presence of a National Labour MP in neighbouring Leeds Central increased the profile of the party in the city but, nevertheless, the results are striking and unexpected. In 1931 and again in 1935 millions of working-class voters put their faith in Conservative candidates running on a National ticket. Many of those same voters identified themselves as National Labour in 1935 rather than Conservative, at least in Leeds West.

If the National appeal still retained historic levels of popularity in 1935, then National Labour’s political position appears less exposed than might be supposed. Instead, National Labour’s greater weakness in this election – and likely the primary factor behind its lacklustre electoral performance - was organisational. The election of 1935 was the moment MacDonald paid the penalty for imagining National Labour as some kind of new Fabian Society. It is evident that both MPs and activists in the party were concerned by MacDonald’s lack of organisational drive. When he retired as prime minister, there was some optimism that the organisational side of National Labour might finally receive the attention of its leader.³² Richard Denman wrote to the outgoing prime minister on 5 June 1935 openly stating that if the function of National Labour was finished, “the best thing we can do is gently to fade away”. If not, it would have to be far more active. Denman’s own view was that:

³⁰Ross McKibbin, ‘Class and Conventional Wisdom: The Conservative Party and the ‘Public’ in Inter-War Britain’, in *The Ideologies of Class, Social Relations in Britain: 1880-1950* (Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 259-93, (pp. 287-93).

³¹ Geraint Thomas, p. 127. Of 1,338 households canvassed, 428 identified themselves as National Labour to 330 Conservative and 60 Labour.

³² *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1181, Markham to MacDonald, undated.

No excuse must be given for the view that National Labour is about to relapse into coma. Perhaps a lighter burden of office will give you more opportunity of leading us; and that indeed is my hope.³³

Denman's was not a lone voice. Most notable, perhaps, is the exchange of letters between MacDonald and the usually sycophantic E. J. Titler in October 1935. Titler accused MacDonald of what amounted to wilful neglect of National Labour and its activists. He wrote with "profound regret" that "my colleagues and I on the National Labour Committee should have been treated so unkindly, indeed almost callously, as we feel we have been treated by our leader." Those who had sacrificed all to support MacDonald had, in Titler's eyes, been "thrown aside and picked up again when required."³⁴ Reminding his leader that many had declined to return to the Labour Party since 1931 for his sake, Titler lamented MacDonald's passivity:

When the [1931] election was over we were ready to serve in any way we could. Weeks, months, then years went by but nothing happened. Quite naturally we began to get restless as most of us had been active people in our local [Labour] parties... From all such activities we were cut off, idleness began to pall.³⁵

By October 1935, even as loyal a MacDonaldite as Titler was at the end of his tether, as the prospect of an election loomed and nothing, apparently, was being done. For his part, MacDonald railed against the "narrow-minded & somewhat bitter + spiteful" attitude and actions of the trade unions and Labour Party and its "policy of revenge upon all those who had disagreed with them during the crisis".³⁶ This passage only makes sense within the exchange when seen as a defence of organisational inactivity; MacDonald neglected to build up National Labour because he always hoped

³³ *DP*, MS. 12124/13, Denman to MacDonald, 5 June 1935.

³⁴ The exchange of letters is split between the National Archives, the Titler papers and MacDonald letters in the National Library of Scotland, with no collection holding the entire exchange. This initial letter of 2 October 1935 is *JRM* PRO 30/69/1181, then *TP*, MacDonald to Titler, 5 October 1935.

³⁵ *JRM* & *TP*, Titler to MacDonald, 8 October 1935.

³⁶ National Library of Scotland, MS. 25274, MacDonald to Titler, 10 October 1935.

that his supporters would be allowed to return to the Labour fold upon the eventual breakup of the National Government. Titler's final reply was pessimistic; he feared the election "will result in the extinction of our Group, a fate deserved by their own folly in neglecting propaganda work until it is too late".³⁷

How justified was Titler's denunciation of neglect and passivity on the organisational level? It is certainly true that what organisation had existed in the constituencies in 1931 had been allowed to disintegrate. As can be seen from Table One, the level of organisational groundwork was extremely low in most constituencies, especially in target seats. For the most part, National Labour on the ground was starting from scratch in 1935 and this accounts for its 'exposed position' far more than MacDonald's retirement as PM. In Derby, where Thomas's personal following had resulted in the most severe of the local Labour party splits in 1931, there was now no National Labour organisation. From Thomas's biography, it is clear his campaign was conducted by the local Conservative association under a Tory agent.³⁸ The situation was considerably worse in MacDonald's own seat, Seaham. In June 1935, Walter Bisson, a party organiser, was "surprised to find that there was no real organisation in the various places I visited in the Division" and recommended the opening of a constituency office, the distribution of leaflets and the holding of a series of meetings to "get some idea of the supporters of Mr. MacDonald."³⁹ Bisson cited one of the greatest challenges the local agent faced as being MacDonald's anti-Tory obstinacy:

He [the agent] works very hard, but his hands are tied by the fact Mr. MacDonald did not wish for any Co-ordinating Committee, consisting of Conservatives, Liberals and National Labour, to be formed.⁴⁰

³⁷ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1181, Titler to MacDonald, 15 October 1935.

³⁸ Gregory Blaxland, *J. H. Thomas: A Life for Unity* (Frederick Muller, 1964), pp. 270-71.

³⁹ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1181, Bisson report.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Thus, although, agents were in place by March 1935 in nine of the twenty seats National Labour would contest at the general election, there was no guarantee that their presence translated into an effective organisation on the ground.⁴¹

Bassetlaw, Malcolm MacDonald's seat and a Nottinghamshire mining constituency, presented a more mixed picture. It had returned a Tory in six consecutive elections up to 1929, before Malcolm had captured it for Labour but would become a safe Labour seat after 1945. Malcolm had been the candidate for Bassetlaw since 1923 and was contesting the seat for the fifth time in 1935. The Malcolm MacDonald papers indicate cooperation with the local Conservative Association and that both a National Labour Committee and joint National Government Committee had been created by March 1934.⁴² The autobiography of G. A. W. Tomlinson, an unemployed coalminer in Worksop, reveals that some preparation was going on in Bassetlaw when he relates that "about five months" before the election he was recruited as a canvasser by the local National Labour Committee.⁴³ However letters from MacDonald's agent after his defeat blame the "absence of any efficient organisation among the National Labour and Liberal supporters in the period between the elections."⁴⁴ The mere existence of constituency bodies clearly did not guarantee meaningful political activity.

In a July 1935 assessment of National Labour prospects in the 17 seats the party at that stage was planning on contesting, MacDonald's political secretary H. B. Usher predicted they would win only seven.⁴⁵ Thus, the party leadership were under no illusions about the weakness of the National Labour position on the ground. Furthermore, a constituency report by party chairman 'Buck' De La Warr to MacDonald on the progress of the campaign by early November showed that in Cardiff Central and Nottingham South, both seats National Labour was defending, the ground organisation

⁴¹ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1333, Third Annual Report of the Executive Committee, March 1935.

⁴² *MMP*, 2/8/89 & 2/9/69.

⁴³ G. A. W. Tomlinson, *Coal-Miner*, (Hutchinson, 1937), p. 209.

⁴⁴ *MMP*, 3/3/1-2, Goodwin to MacDonald, 17 November 1935.

⁴⁵ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1181, Usher report, 26 July 1935.

was made up of Conservatives, “loyal” in the case of Cardiff, unenthusiastic in Nottingham. Lack of enthusiasm and a shortage of workers was also noted in Finsbury, Forest of Dean and Leeds Central with complaints of neglect of the constituency in Southwark Central (see table one), while a “good” organisation was only noted in Lichfield.⁴⁶

In 1935 target seats, it appears there was no National Labour organisation at all, with the exception of Middlesbrough West. Usher simply stated, “I am not hopeful of a win for our new candidatures up to date.”⁴⁷ Harold Nicolson’s campaign in Leicester West, a seat with no previous National Labour presence, was an entirely Conservative effort and was arranged at the last minute in October 1935. Nicolson was adopted by the local Conservative association with apparently no local National Labour contribution whatever to his campaign and was forced by the association chairman to stand as a National rather than National Labour candidate, with one supporter telling Nicolson “she cried all night when she saw me described as National Labour.”⁴⁸

The Campaign

If National Labour entered the 1935 election in an exposed position so far as organisation went, how did it perform in the actual campaign? A cabinet committee was established to prepare the government’s election programme, on which Malcolm MacDonald and J. H. Thomas served, drafting the National Government manifesto.⁴⁹ Entitled *A Call to the Nation*, it certainly bore a National Labour, or at least centrist, stamp insofar as the core issues it emphasised were the League of Nations and the pursuit of peace, unemployment assistance, the special areas and social reform – in particular housing – as well as of course insisting on the need for a continued “spirit of national co-

⁴⁶ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1364, De La Warr to MacDonald, 10 November 1935.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *ND* passim through October and November 1935 entries, “cried all night” 22 October 1935.

⁴⁹ Stannage, pp. 153-4.

operation.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, a considerable amount of electioneering was carried out by the National Publicity Bureau, of which Malcolm MacDonald was one of three key leadership figures.⁵¹ Established in early 1935 in preparation for an election, the purpose of the NPB was to provide a propaganda arm to the National Government. The work it undertook for the 1935 campaign was on a huge scale, costing approximately £300,000. Michael Pinto-Duschinsky claimed in 1981 that the NPB’s spend for the election represented “the highest, in real terms, for any party in any election in British history.”⁵² One contemporary article named Ramsay MacDonald as a driving force behind the creation of the bureau and J. H. Thomas apparently utilised his extensive business connections in spearheading fundraising.⁵³ It is hard to imagine a better figure to grease the palms of non-political businessmen than Thomas, and in raising £300,000 – the equivalent of over £18 million in 2025 – he clearly enjoyed remarkable success.⁵⁴ Both Ralph Casey and Geraint Thomas rate the sophisticated efforts of the NPB very highly, noting alongside posters, pamphlets and cinema vans, the effectiveness of the free newspaper *Popular Illustrated*, and its regional variants *The New London Pictorial* and *Scottish Illustrated*.⁵⁵ With a circulation of up to 5,000,000, these glossily-produced papers were model examples of modern political propaganda; relentlessly positive, full of cheery images of new homes and factories, happy families and good news stories, as well as complimentary pieces on or columns by National politicians. Seaham was one of the 330 target constituencies on which the NPB focused its efforts, with one NPB poster carrying the text:

Vote for MacDonald – 1931 He Stood by the Country When Others Ran Away - 1935 He
Stands by Seaham - He Never Runs Away - SEAHAM STANDS BY HIM⁵⁶

⁵⁰ F. W. S. Craig (ed.), *British General Election Manifestos, 1900-1974* (Macmillan, 1975), pp. 102-7.

⁵¹ Stannage, p. 52, Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, *British Political Finance, 1830-1980* (AEI Press, 1981), pp. 120-1.

⁵² Pinto-Duschinsky, p. 100-1.

⁵³ Ralph D. Casey, ‘The National Publicity Bureau and British Party Propaganda’, *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 3.4 (1939), 623-634, p. 625.

⁵⁴ Calculated using the Bank of England’s inflation calculator, <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator> (accessed 10/3/2025).

⁵⁵ Casey, pp. 623-4, 631-4, Geraint Thomas, pp. 79, 82, 220.

⁵⁶ Casey, p. 633.

The sixth and final edition of *Popular Illustrated* for 1935 was an election special, featuring a column by MacDonald entitled “A Message to Labour” in which he addressed the working-classes directly. “There is still the need for the spirit of national unity” he insisted, in an echo of the manifesto, and he urged workers and members of the Labour movement to show their gratitude for the good that had been achieved and evil averted, after all, they were the “first to suffer in times of crisis and catastrophe.”⁵⁷

While the National Publicity Bureau was a model of cross-party cooperation, there were a number of issues on the ground between the parties. Nicolson’s diary is a testament to the challenges for National Labour candidates who found themselves imposed on local Conservative associations and reliant on the goodwill of Tory activists to run their campaign.⁵⁸ As we have seen, local Tories were not necessarily enthusiastic in volunteering their time for National Labour candidates. Perhaps more alarmingly, in late September, National Labour Secretary and candidate W. A. Spofforth discovered that the Liberal Nationals would not support National Labour candidates fighting Samuelite Liberals, refusing to take any measure that would jeopardise future Liberal reunion.⁵⁹ The seriousness of this situation for National Labour candidates fighting sitting Liberals, as was the case in four of the party’s six target seats in 1935, cannot be overstated. The support of the Simonites must have been a presumed trump card in attempting to displace Liberal MPs who had been elected in 1931 as supporters of the National Government. Speaking for himself, Spofforth claimed he would not have agreed to stand in Liberal-held Middlesbrough West had he known he would not enjoy the backing of the Liberal Nationals.⁶⁰

Coalition difficulties notwithstanding, National Labour ramped up their activities for the campaign in the second half of October. The party’s first conference was held at Caxton Hall, London,

⁵⁷ Ramsay MacDonald, ‘A Message to Labour’, *Popular Illustrated*, 1.6 (1935), p. 6.

⁵⁸ *ND*, see entries from mid-October to mid-November.

⁵⁹ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1181, Spofforth to MacDonald, 28 September 1935.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* Neither Stannage nor Dutton appear to have been aware of the Simonite refusal to back National Labour candidacies.

on 28 October 1935. Letters in the MacDonald papers show this event had been planned before the announcement of the election five days previously and was evidently part of efforts to gear up for a contest. Obviously, the fact National Labour had never held a conference before October 1935 further emphasises the lack of effort put in to building up a party proper. The conference attracted an attendance of 150, including representatives from all the constituencies the party was fighting, of whom more than 75% were reportedly trade unionists. The modest programme consisted of a speech by MacDonald followed by a private session on organisation and policy, in which the platform apparently did more listening than talking.⁶¹ Yet even at their own conference, National Labour started out on the backfoot, setting the tone for the wider campaign. MacDonald expressed serious reservations about a National Publicity Bureau suggestion that the conference be filmed, writing “we would have to be very careful that the people photographed would not be victimized... That proviso is very necessary.”⁶² Similarly, in a *News-Letter* article during the campaign, Sir John Simon wrote that Liberal and Labour supporters of the National Government were finding it difficult to openly declare their views and wait “for the secrecy of the ballot to give effect to it.”⁶³ Operating under this persecution complex, the challenges of fighting an election campaign on the ground can well be imagined.

At long last, however, MacDonald explicitly stated a range of National Labour policy positions, from raising the school leaving age to a national food policy. In his conference speech MacDonald was not entirely defensive, instead selling the way in which cross-party government could lead to a more rapid action on issues both foreign and domestic without “partisan fighting and obstruction” and was a guarantee of democratic institutions and liberties in an uncertain world.⁶⁴ Harold Nicolson, rather uncharacteristically, described MacDonald’s performance in his diary as “a

⁶¹ *NL*, ‘A National Labour Conference’, 8.3 (1935), p. 35 & ‘The National Labour Conference’, 8.4 (1935), pp. 50-1.

⁶² *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1180, Elton to MacDonald, 9 October 1935 & MacDonald to Elton, 10 October 1935.

⁶³ John Simon, ‘Cooperation in National Government’, *NL*, 8.4 (1935), pp. 54-5.

⁶⁴ Ramsay MacDonald, *National Labour and National Government* (National Labour Committee, 1935).

good speech”, and MacDonald himself was clearly satisfied with proceedings, writing in his own diary that the conference “went splendidly, with a fine body of working men”. He also noted that he took an independent line on some issues but that “I cannot hide my convictions”.⁶⁵ Indeed, the case for continued coalition rule and a call for progressive reforms focused on living standards would characterise the National Labour campaign.

Aside from the MPs defending their seats, and former Labour MPs Archibald Church and Frank Markham attempting to return to the Commons, the profile of National Labour candidates in 1935 was interestingly diverse. They consisted of Ernest Stanford, a butcher who had twice been a Labour candidate, Leslie Thomas, stockbroker son of J. H., diplomat and writer Harold Nicolson, ex-Labour Lancashire councillor of nine years William Spofforth, businessman Frederick Burden, working class ex-Labour MP Herbert Dunnico (who had defected to National Labour in 1934) and barrister John Fennell.⁶⁶

The source material allows for a particularly close examination of the campaign in five of the seats National Labour fought. Two of them were target seats, Leicester West and Bristol East, fought by Harold Nicolson and Archibald Church respectively, and three defended seats, Bassetlaw, Seaham and Leeds Central, the constituencies of Malcolm and Ramsay MacDonald and Richard Denman. This cross-section gives a representative blend of the party leader, a cabinet minister, backbencher, former MP and a prospective candidate.

At Seaham, MacDonald entered the campaign in a decidedly pessimistic mood. This was exceedingly safe Labour territory, the party having won the seat with a majority of almost 30,000 on two occasions in the 1920s.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, it is difficult to criticise MacDonald’s personal commitment to the Seaham fight. He toured the constituency relentlessly from 29 October until

⁶⁵ *ND & JRM Diary*, 28 October 1935.

⁶⁶ *NL*, ‘Our Candidates, 8.4 (1935), pp. 56-8.

⁶⁷ *SM*, p. 175, *JRM Diary*, 6 October 1935.

polling day, speaking on no less than 47 occasions in sixteen days, including five speeches in one night on an eve of poll tour. The MacDonald campaign was well-funded, spending a total of £1,289 in Seaham (compared to an average of £777 for Conservative candidates) in an effort that included cinema and loudspeaker vans.⁶⁸ This spending was, however, all in vain as MacDonald suffered a heavy defeat, Emmanuel Shinwell winning with a majority of over 20,000. The day after polling day, MacDonald confided in his diary:

I did not anticipate the bitterness and hysteria... I talked to people whose minds had been poisoned... to regard me as the author of all their hardships... I had, in addition, an absolutely useless organisation which never began to work but was in confusion from beginning to end. Very soon there developed a wild and hysterical rowdiness... Some of the displays were absolutely bestial.⁶⁹

Ernest Stanford described MacDonald being “howled down at most of his meetings”, facing huge levels of bitterness as well as a vigorous opponent in Manny Shinwell.⁷⁰ Two *News-Letter* articles unpicked MacDonald’s defeat at Seaham. A friend and recent party recruit, the Scottish publisher William Blackwood, recounted the frequent organised “wrecking tactics” at National Labour meetings that saw MacDonald, his speakers and even his daughters repeatedly denied a hearing in the constituency, and the vandalism of his car.⁷¹ Another campaign worker wrote in a similar vein of “something very like intimidation”, describing how those who displayed MacDonald placards were threatened with having their windows stoned. However, the activist took a more rounded view of the causes of MacDonald’s defeat, ranking first the “helplessness” of a depressed area which has seen little improvement in conditions since 1931 and the fact that the issues the national campaign was fought on, namely Abyssinia, rearmament and recovery, were irrelevant to the Seaham contest,

⁶⁸ *JRM PRO* 30/69/1748, average taken from Mortimore & Black, p. 410.

⁶⁹ *JRM Diary*, 15 November 1935.

⁷⁰ *SM*, p. 176.

⁷¹ William Blackwood & Mark Baker, ‘Seaham: Two Impressions’, *NL*, 8.5 (1935), pp. 74-8.

which was fought almost entirely on miners' wages and the means test, points on which the government's position was "definitely weak".⁷²

Another MacDonald was defeated at Bassetlaw, albeit by a far narrower margin. Malcolm MacDonald had an association with Bassetlaw dating back more than a decade and although a mining constituency like Seaham, it had a working-class Tory past. Malcolm's election address opened with an explanation that he had been adopted by the Bassetlaw National Committee of all three coalition party organisations in the division.⁷³ MacDonald offered the typical National Labour exhortation that it is "still so paramount" that Britain should "again forego party squabbling, and support for a further period a government composed of leaders drawn from all three political parties." Later, MacDonald referred to an administration "supported by the sanest elements in all parties".⁷⁴ Front and centre of his appeal were the achievements of the National Government in areas such employment, balancing the books, reversing the cuts of 1931 and delivering recovery. MacDonald also promised a number of progressive reforms, including on education and pensions, the extension of maternity and child health care, unemployment insurance for agricultural workers and the nationalisation of coal royalties, the latter two pledges targeted directly at local constituency concerns.

Uniquely, we have the autobiography of a National Labour campaigner in Bassetlaw in the form of G. A. W. Tomlinson's *Coal-Miner*. The agricultural districts of the constituency were safe ground; as one farmer told Tomlinson, "Don't bother laddie, we shan't vote red".⁷⁵ Instead, Tomlinson laid the blame for the lack of National support among the miners of Worksop on the reluctance of local Conservatives to canvass mining communities and their failure to offer practical assistance to those needing help with welfare bureaucracy, unlike their Labour opponents. Tomlinson

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ *MMP*, 1935 Election Address, 2/2/50.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Tomlinson, p. 213.

himself “visited hundreds of miners’ homes” and was “never insulted once”, reinforcing his point about a lack of doorstep campaigning in quoting one miner as telling him “Ar loike ter ‘ere both sides, but your side doesn’t come very often.”⁷⁶ The campaign enjoyed the help of 38 motor cars which ferried 1,800 voters on polling day, but these efforts proved to be in vain as Malcolm lost the seat to his Labour opponent by 1,139 votes.⁷⁷ It appears that the principle ‘traitors’ of 1931 in the form of the MacDonalds faced particular vitriol from Labour supporters at this election. However, Malcolm MacDonald’s agent laid the blame on poor organisation, “bad staff work”, the government’s failure to address miners’ concerns and the “vile weather” on polling day which meant many rural voters stayed at home.⁷⁸

Backbencher Richard Denman was meanwhile defending his seat at Leeds Central. Unlike Malcolm MacDonald, Denman’s election address made no bones in declaring himself the National Labour candidate. His appeal started with a typical championing of the system of National Government, noting that:

A government based on the collaboration of statesmen of all points of view is the best for the circumstances of the time. No one party has a monopoly on wisdom, and when at present you can get leaders from the three chief Parties working together for the common good it is folly to waste the opportunity.⁷⁹

However, Denman’s approach was somewhat different to that of the two MacDonalds, making only fleeting reference to the recovery and social reform. Instead, the former UDC activist chose peace as his flagship issue. Denman also trumpeted his support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine in light of Nazi persecution. The constituency encompassed a large Jewish community and Blanche Dugdale –

⁷⁶ Ibid, pp. 209-11.

⁷⁷ *MMP*, 3/3/65, Gresswell to MacDonald, 15 November 1935, 3/3/8, 21 November 1935.

⁷⁸ *MMP*, 3/3/1-2, Goodwin to Macdonald, 17 November 1935, *DLW*, ACC 5411/127, Goodwin to MacDonald, 15 November 1938.

⁷⁹ *DP*, MS 12124/13, 1935 Denman Election Address.

Zionist, niece of Lord Balfour and later a National Labour candidate – gave a speech for Denman during the campaign.⁸⁰ An election flyer also played on the MP's war service, featuring a photograph of him in uniform with the slogan "The ONLY candidate who fought with your lads in the Front Line".⁸¹ At a 5 November meeting Denman was "subjected to an insistent vocal attack", but the remaining press coverage of the campaign is notable for the paucity of mentions of disturbances.⁸² Indeed, Denman's agent reported to National Labour HQ "Candidate having reasonable hearing at all meetings; good publicity with assistance of press."⁸³ On the whole, the Denman papers point to an amicable relationship with the constituency Conservative Association. He joked at his adoption meeting that he had been welcomed like "a goat into a flock of sheep" with "great warmth and kindness".⁸⁴ The local Conservative chairman wrote a glowing letter of endorsement, but named apathy as the "greatest danger".⁸⁵ Talk of apathy does seem to have been a coded call to get the Tory vote out for Denman, as the aforementioned agent report decried a "lack of enthusiasm" due to the strenuous local election campaign, resulting in an "unaccustomed shortage of canvassers."⁸⁶ Nevertheless, Denman went on to retain his seat comfortably with a majority of 4,046.

What of the National Labour campaign in target seats? Church's efforts in Bristol were so successful that the often pessimistic De La Warr wrote to MacDonald that he would be "disappointed" if Church did not "pull off" the win.⁸⁷ This was a quite remarkable turn of events given it was a seat that had been held by Stafford Cripps amidst the 1931 Labour wipeout and the fact that Church was adopted as late as 21 October, less than four weeks before polling day.⁸⁸ Church immediately set about launching scathing attacks on Cripps, who had made himself something of a

⁸⁰ DP, MS 12124/20, *Leeds Mercury*, 8 November 1935.

⁸¹ DP, MS 12124/20.

⁸² DP, MS 12124/20, *Leeds Mercury*, 6 November 1935.

⁸³ JRM, PRO 30/69/1364.

⁸⁴ DP, MS 12124/20, *Leeds Mercury* 8 November 1935.

⁸⁵ DP, MS 12124/13, Masser to Denman, 11 November 1935.

⁸⁶ JRM, PRO 30/69/1364.

⁸⁷ JRM, PRO 30/69/1364, De La Warr to MacDonald, 10 November 1935.

⁸⁸ CP, MS. Add. 9560/17/180.

bogeyman for anti-socialists in the preceding years. Church's campaign in Bristol East was decidedly National Labour insofar as it heavily emphasised the candidate's Labour credentials. It was fought largely on the issue of which of the two men truly represented 'Labour' – at his first meeting Church insisted "he stood as a representative of the working class." The fratricidal nature of the campaign perhaps explains why it took on so hostile a tone. The sympathetic *Bristol Evening World* reported on 30 October that Church had been denied the right to free speech at his own adoption meeting by "Socialist storm-troops", whose constant interruptions resulted in the meeting being called short.⁸⁹ This hooliganism, as the local press labelled it, dogged Church's campaign. In a speech the next day, Church faced "persistent interruptions", and another meeting descended into chaos as motor-car horns were blared outside.⁹⁰ Interestingly, the latter report notes that there was not a single interruption at an open-air meeting of the Tory candidate in Bristol South, suggesting Church and National Labour were singled out for heckling in the city.⁹¹

The rowdiness reached its nadir on 5 November when a National Labour speaker was attacked. When asked "Do you think a man who votes for Cripps is a traitor to his country?", Church replied in the affirmative. In the pandemonium that followed, the caretaker lowered the lights to try and empty the hall, but an unknown assailant used the darkness as an opportunity to punch De La Warr, who was sharing the platform with Church.⁹²

Throughout Church emphasised that the National Government had and would continue to deliver for the working class, that Labour generally and Cripps in particular were charlatans, and that National Labour was the true home for sensible working men and women. One Church pamphlet was entitled *Why I have joined the National Labour Group* and authored by a local voter of "the war generation", Froom Tyler. A former ILPer, Tyler claimed his illusions were "smashed" by Labour

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ CP, MS. Add. 9560/17/190, 194.

⁹¹ CP, MS. Add. 9560/17/198.

⁹² CP, MS. Add. 9560/17/199.

“putting sectional interests before national” in 1931. Tyler insisted he was still a socialist, trade unionist and wage-earner who could never be a Tory or Liberal but berated “Crippsian revolutionaries” who dreamt of a workers’ dictatorship.⁹³

Church’s own election address labelled him the National Labour candidate, “For Peace, Security & Progress” but also played the patriotic card; Major Archibald Church, D.S.O., M.C. was how the candidate chose to be presented.⁹⁴ Like the MacDonalds, Church pledged himself to changes in the administration of the means test and further social reform. What was unique was Church’s willingness to trade insults with his Labour opponent. Church’s campaign was more visceral than elsewhere, featuring frequent personal attacks and organised rowdyism, and fought almost exclusively on the debate over Labour identity rather than other issues.⁹⁵ However, this was a fight Cripps was surely always bound to win, easing home with a majority close to 7,000.

In Leicester West, Harold Nicolson fought as the National candidate at the head of a Conservative local machine. Nicolson does appear to have been concerned that his progressive views had “frightened” local conservative voters and was deeply grateful for support from Duff Cooper, whose speeches left the doubters “completely reassured.”⁹⁶ Although “very well liked” by constituents owing to his public profile, at times it appears that Nicolson’s National Labour identity, and ‘fascist’ past, generated added hostility from the local left, as noted in a report from Leicester by the National Labour organiser Walter Bisson.⁹⁷ In a letter to his wife of 1 November, Nicolson described in detail the ordeal of facing a hostile crowd. The chairman of the meeting was howled down, with one audience member shouting “I’ll bash your face to pieces” before Nicolson spoke:

⁹³ *CP*, MS. Add. 9560/7/6.

⁹⁴ *CP*, MS. Add. 9560/7/1.

⁹⁵ See also L. H. Sutton, ‘Impressions of the General Election’, *NL*, 8.9 (1936), pp. 145-7.

⁹⁶ *PND*, p. 216.

⁹⁷ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1364.

I was greeted by a storm of boos as I rose. But I stepped right up to the man who threatened to bash my face. Oh dear, never has Hadj been so frightened or so quite unexpectedly brave... Most of the audience yelled all the time; but some of them in the middle distance heard what I said; and towards the end I managed somehow to impose silence... Then at the end they sang the *Red Flag* again.⁹⁸

In summing up the content of a speech during the campaign, Nicolson wrote sardonically in his diary “I talk about why I stand National Labour. Not a fascist: not a red: security and progress.”⁹⁹ Nicolson’s diary presents a gruelling picture of the level of activity a candidate had to undertake in the short campaign. Bisson estimated a week before the vote that his candidate was neck and neck with Labour, perhaps on course for a small majority, and so it proved, Nicolson stealing the seat by 87 votes.¹⁰⁰

The Result

National Labour won eight seats in the 1935 general election, broadly in line with their own internal predictions. The key planks of the National Labour campaign had been the necessity of continued National Government, a firm defence of the government’s record on the economy and promises of progressive social legislation. Where National Labour lost, it was in often in depressed constituencies, such as Seaham, Bassetlaw, South Shields and Middlesbrough, that had enjoyed little of the recovery and had strong trade union connections.

The party lost half of the fourteen seats it had held at the dissolution: Bassetlaw, Finsbury, Forest of Dean, Seaham, Southwark Central, Tottenham South and Ilkeston, all captured by Labour.

⁹⁸ *PND*, p. 215.

⁹⁹ *ND*, 30 October 1935.

¹⁰⁰ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1364.

The latter was not defended, having been won by a margin of two votes in 1931. Additionally, National Labour failed to defend Tory-held Leek, although Leslie Thomas polled a respectable 43%. The defeats of the two MacDonalds – the only cabinet ministers to lose their seats – were heavy psychological blows, and Worthington and Gillet (defeated at Forest of Dean and Finsbury) were two of the small party's more capable MPs. These heavy losses were compensated with a single gain from six targets. Nicolson would be one of the party's biggest assets going forwards. Aside from Leicester, National Labour came closest to gains in Labour-held seats, despite the fact Labour was recovering from historic lows in the 1935 election. In the four assaults launched on Liberal constituencies, again excepting Nicolson nicking Leicester, the National Labour showing was poor, with no candidate achieving more than 30% of the vote in these three-cornered fights

Tom Stannage calculated that the National Labour-to-Labour swing was noticeably worse than the overall swing to Labour; an eye-watering 16.8%, compared to 9.4% nationally. Stannage incorrectly, however, states that National Labour lost "over half" its parliamentary representation, when in fact it declined from 14 to 8 seats – or 13 to 8 as historians have miscounted to date.¹⁰¹

How can we account for this poorer performance on the part of National Labour? One straightforward explanation is that the party was defending seats that had all returned Labour MPs in 1929. Every single National Labour seat was natural Labour territory and many of them – seats like Seaham, Derby and Forest of Dean – were very safe Labour territory indeed. These constituencies had been won in the special circumstances of 1931, when Labour had been reduced to an historic low of 46 seats. Added to the fact that there was little prospect of capturing seats won by Labour in 1931, there was quite simply no chance of repeating anything close to National Labour's 1931 result. It was inevitable that the swing to Labour in 1935 would be greater in Labour-inclined constituencies than was typical, therefore the comparison between the performance of the different National

¹⁰¹ Stannage, pp. 229-31.

parties is not especially useful except in highlighting the far greater electoral challenge National Labour was confronting. The Conservatives were defending not just 1931 gains, but scores of rock-solid Tory heartland seats, in which the chance of Labour inroads was negligible, therefore it is little surprise that the swing against the Conservatives was not so stark. Equally, the Liberal Nationals were defending many safe Liberal seats and faced a Samuelite challenge in a mere two constituencies nationwide, meaning they did not have to contend with internecine warfare, nor defend their territory against its more 'natural' inheritors as National Labour did.¹⁰² National Labour's poor performance in target seats can also be partially explained by the unhelpful attitude of the Liberal Nationals.

There is strong anecdotal evidence that National Labour candidates faced a greater level of rowdyism, or at least hostility, from Labour activists and some working-class communities than Conservatives. The level of vitriol the party endured appears to have been greater than was typical in an election that otherwise "passed off quietly".¹⁰³ However, by far and away the most important point in explaining the relatively poor performance of National Labour is a catastrophic failure of organisation. Both Ramsay MacDonald and Malcolm MacDonald's agent considered organisational issues at the heart of their respective defeats. At the national level, the party had failed to make itself distinctive in the years after 1931, partly at MacDonald's own behest, in the hopes that its members would be welcomed back into the Labour fold. The publicity that had been undertaken was mainly high-minded intellectual arguments for progressive policies rather than explicit campaigning and the lack of action had driven activists to distraction. The fact that National Labour's first party conference was not held until the election campaign was underway was a damning indictment. It has also been noted both how little organisational work had been undertaken in the constituencies before the campaign and how late seats were allocated to the party and candidates installed. There

¹⁰² Dutton, pp. 88-89.

¹⁰³ Stannage, p. 226.

is evidence that there existed a stigma attached to National Labour that made supporters less likely to publicly state their adherence to the party, let alone campaign for their candidates. This left National Labour totally reliant on the goodwill of their allies, and in particular on local Conservative associations, to conduct their ground campaign, distribute leaflets and knock on doors. Agents in six of the fourteen constituencies that reported to De La Warr noted issues on this front, from a lack of volunteers, to rank-and-file apathy or worse from local conservative voters and activists. This does not include the aforementioned friction in Seaham. Thus, National Labour's exposed position in 1935 was chiefly organisational and, combined with the unfavourable electoral terrain it was fighting and (at times) unhelpful allies, it is frankly surprising that the party managed to win eight of the twenty seats it contested.

II – From “quite dead” to “the spirit of the pioneers”:

The National Labour Renaissance – 1936-37

Mid-winter Melancholy

According to *The News-Letter*, attendees at the party’s first conference in October 1935 had made a “mental vow... that it should be the first of many.”¹⁰⁴ If the conference had provided a positive vision of a more active future for the party, the subsequent election campaign brought home the dire necessity for action. Despite his personal defeat, Ramsay MacDonald hoped for a revival, instructing the new National Labour parliamentary party at their first gathering to “sit together as a group” and to appoint a PPS to serve as de facto whip and communicate with the speaker.¹⁰⁵ This sort of basic party structure was apparently an innovation, four years into National Labour’s life.

MacDonald appeared, at least to Nicolson, to be a definite drag on National Labour by this stage. During a 9 December 1935 party meeting MacDonald was “perfectly useless” (producing phrases such as “we support the government... as Labour – neither red, white nor blue”), with MP Kenneth Lindsay displaying “impatience” and Nicolson himself frustrated that,

We cannot discuss future machinery or propaganda unless we know whether we are going to exist as a party... As a result we completely waste a whole hour and break up with a sense of wastage and dissatisfaction.¹⁰⁶

Further aspiration for reorganisation emerged from a memo of 12 December penned by *News-Letter* editor Lord Elton and Lindsay which called for an intensification and redirection of propaganda.

While dolefully noting that there is “no prospect” of making *News-Letter* a popular journal without

¹⁰⁴ *NL*, ‘The National Labour Conference’, 8.4 (1935), pp. 50-1.

¹⁰⁵ *ND*, 20 November 1935. Markham was appointed, see *NL*, ‘Our Able Whip’, 10.22 (1937), p. 344.

¹⁰⁶ *ND*, 9 December 1935.

“ten times as much money”, the memo recommended that the paper should aim to “direct and inform opinion” of left-wing supporters of the government in the House and become more “serviceable” for use in the constituencies, having previously been too detached.¹⁰⁷ Essentially, they wanted more of a party political publication that would move away from the previous nonpartisan feel. Elton also proposed something of a shift in the organisation’s balance of power, suggesting Nicolson and Lindsay be added to the party’s publicity committee and that the committee be made responsible for policy, undertaking a “regular general review of political positions” and becoming a “seed bed of ideas”.¹⁰⁸

Without doubt these proposals had some effect, with *The News-Letter* largely departing from the dry policy essays that had characterised output in 1934-35. Instead, it became during 1936-37 a punchier, more political publication. A good example would be an article from as early as April 1936 by Harold Nicolson that took aim squarely at progressive opinion on foreign policy, demanding readers face the fact that “the League [of Nations] has been so blistered by mustard gas that it is past saving” and that the Covenant had been “smashed”.¹⁰⁹ Consensual, middle-of-the-road politics this was not. As well as frequently highlighting National Labour contributions to policy and debates in both Houses¹¹⁰, there was plenty of negative comment on Labour and the left. A typical example in Elton’s regular editorial ran as follows:

When we talk about Collective Security henceforth let us at least have some realistic notion of what frontiers British public opinion is prepared to underwrite – without subsequent recantations. We want no more branch chairmen of the L.N.U. gabbling on the platform

¹⁰⁷ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1333, ‘Notes by Lord Elton’.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ See Harold Nicolson pieces in, *NL*, 9.3 (1936) & 9.5 (1936). Also see *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1182, Allen to Asquith, 12 May 1936.

¹¹⁰ E.g. *NL*, ‘The Forty-Hour Week’, 10.14 (1937), pp 222-3.

about Collective Security, and declaring in the same breath that they would rather see their sons dead than in His Majesty's uniform.¹¹¹

There was also a very strong anti-German, Italian and Japanese editorial bent during these years, with the increasing domination of foreign policy in the public sphere translating into highly critical articles on the actions and intentions of the dictators.¹¹² This drew some ire from pacifist MacDonaldites in the correspondence pages but Elton defended the line *News-Letter* was taking vigorously.¹¹³ Additionally, from 1937, a regular 'National Labour News' segment provided more detail for the constituency organisations on local events and activities and provides a vital insight for the historian as to the organisational life of the party.¹¹⁴

In adding dynamism to *The News-Letter*, Elton and his committee were aided considerably by the writings of the newest National Labour recruit, Harold Nicolson, who penned 26 articles for the journal in the period 1936-38 (see table two). Nicolson's diary is of course an indispensable source for this period of National Labour history, however one of the earliest entries in the published diary relating to the party has had a significant, and rather unhelpful, impact on the historiography. On 28 January 1936, after King George V's funeral, Nicolson called on De La Warr. Finding him "in a dressing-gown", Nicolson records:

We discuss the future of National Labour and agree that there is none. Now that the two MacDonalds have fought [by-elections] with the aid of Tory Central Office, we cannot claim any independence. He says that Baldwin is really keen to maintain the semblance of a National Government and wants us to help.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Godfrey Elton, 'From my Notebook', *NL*, 10.11 (1937), pp. 175-6.

¹¹² E.g. Robert Bernays, 'No Surrender in Africa', *NL*, 10.14 (1937), pp. 215-7.

¹¹³ See *NL*, 'Letters to the Editor', 10.11 (1937), pp. 171-2.

¹¹⁴ This feature commenced in *NL*, 10.20 (1937), p. 320.

¹¹⁵ *PND*, p. 234.

A few weeks later, Nicolson described the National Labour party as a “poor little thing” that is “quite dead” in a letter to his wife.¹¹⁶ These comments, coming so soon after the 1935 election, have been influential in fuelling assumptions about the “end of the road” for the party as a whole, as well as assertions that Nicolson himself “wore his National Labour affiliation lightly”.¹¹⁷ Ross McKibbin, for instance, wrote that Nicolson “rapidly lost whatever faith he had in National Labour”, directly citing this conversation with De La Warr.¹¹⁸ Despite it being a staple of Nicolson biographies, this conclusion cannot be sustained.¹¹⁹ By the end of the decade he was leader of the party’s youth wing, and unlike De La Warr, Elton, Lindsay and Malcolm MacDonald, he would stick by National Labour and its successor organisation to the very end in 1945. These actions hardly appear as those of one who wore his party affiliation “lightly”. Certainly, several National Labour MPs did appear uninterested in the party; Bennett, Flint, Horrobin and Rosbotham contributed little or nothing to *The News-Letter*, seldom attended party meetings and are never mentioned as partaking in rallies or conferences. Nicolson on the other hand would become, in print and on the platform, one of the most prominent National Labour activists.

As for the idea that the chairman De La Warr had given up on the future of the party, events would prove the reverse. The behaviour of National Labour’s younger leaders over the coming months certainly did not suggest that they had thrown in the towel (or dressing-gown), and given the level of activity that De La Warr and Nicolson themselves would undertake, it appears this comment was an example of the January Blues; a throwaway line on a day of national mourning during a midwinter of melancholy for the party that has been overblown by subsequent historians. After all, as Ramsay MacDonald and J. H. Thomas vacated the stage, National Labour was left as an

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p. 237.

¹¹⁷ Howell, ‘Making of National Labour’, p. 132.

¹¹⁸ Ross McKibbin, ‘A Story of His Time: The Political Career of Harold Nicolson’, in *Democracy and Political Culture: Studies in Modern British History* (Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 31-51,(p. 37).

¹¹⁹ See Rose, *Harold Nicolson*, p. 191, in which Rose describes Nicolson as “disguised as a National Labourite”. Also Lees-Milne, p. 73.

exceptionally young political party. Of its leading figures at the outset of 1936 – the two aging Labour giants aside – Malcolm MacDonald was 34, De La Warr 35, Lindsay and Markham 38, Lord Elton 43 and Nicolson was 50. They all surely felt that they had the best of their political careers ahead of them and the fight to make National Labour a force of some kind was one for their own occupational survival.

The Fusion Question

A more revealing incident from Nicolson's diary than the "quite dead" line was edited out of the published edition. On 20 December 1935 Nicolson attended a meeting of "our progressives", attended by De La Warr, Lindsay, Eustace Percy and two young Tory MPs. Nicolson recorded in his diary the outcome was that "the National Labour group should organize itself as well as it can by itself", before contemplating some sort of centrist merger.¹²⁰ Nicolson noted the challenge for National Labour was that the party's "best men" were in government – presumably De La Warr, Lindsay and Malcolm MacDonald – while of those outside office, Denman was "good enough", Markham was absent in India for the moment and Lovat-Fraser was "almost a comic".¹²¹ Thus, the task of defining National Labour as an independent parliamentary force was, in Percy's opinion, very much on Nicolson. It appears this meeting was influential on the course of the party's future. The three National Labour attendees would go on to be the driving force behind the party's reorganisation that attempted to both build up a grassroots presence in the country and more clearly define National Labour's political identity. It also appears that their intention was eventual fusion. Indeed, after the 1935 election little else could have been considered plausible, but fusion from a position of relative strength and in alliance with the Tory progressives, rather than a meek absorption

¹²⁰ *ND*, 20 December 1935.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

into the Conservative Party. Nicolson wanted National Labour to become, over the longer term, the core of a bigger 'Left Centre Party'.¹²²

De La Warr expounded similar objectives more eloquently, and in far greater detail, in a speech script written February or March 1936.¹²³ The party chairman suggested a new political objective:

It is the floating voter which counts to-day... There are many millions of progressive working-class voters who will never confine themselves to the narrow class policies and the doctrinaire theories... of the Labour machine... The task therefore of the left wing supporters of the Government is not so much to trouble themselves with attracting deserters from the opposition ranks, but to strengthen the appeal of the Government to the floating voter.¹²⁴

In a further speech from the summer of 1936 that was never delivered, De La Warr emphasised again the need to win the floating voter, although claimed "organised as we are we cannot do it." This was more of a fighting speech, one not afraid to call out some home truths. National Labour was "too small" and "not likely" to get many more seats.¹²⁵ De La Warr proposed a "centre group" be formed, "something like the Liberal Unionists of the past" but including Conservatives. He envisaged progressive government MPs announcing publicly (after consulting their constituencies) that they would fight their seats in future as Nationals, "without prefix or suffix." There, the draft frustratingly ends.¹²⁶

Thus, National Labour's activities in the second half of the thirties rested firmly in the context of the various mooted mergers of centrist forces that frequently occurred in the interwar period.

¹²² *PND*, p. 237.

¹²³ *DLW*, ACC 5411-127. The speech is undated but refers to the two MacDonalds' by-elections as being "during the last month".

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *DLW*, ACC 5411-127, this speech can be found in a folder marked "Draft of Speech (not delivered) for Nat Lab Conference, June 13 1936". The present author has been unable to find any evidence of a conference on that date.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

Nicolson's diary reveals frequent plotting along these lines during 1936 with the likes of De La Warr, Lindsay and like-minded Conservatives and Liberals. There is for instance talk of a "great central group" led by Winston Churchill in the works in June 1936, with Austen Chamberlain another big beast who was sounded out.¹²⁷ It must be noted that Ramsay MacDonald appears to have been an opponent of such a solution, with Nicolson recording in his diary around this time "Ramsay would sooner die than enter into a real alliance with the Tories based on any system of fusion".¹²⁸ Similarly, in a discussion on the future of the party with colleagues, MacDonald repeatedly insisted "we shall remain OURSELVES", which may have been a veiled attack on the idea of merger.¹²⁹ Certainly given his stance on cooperation with Conservatives in Seaham, MacDonald could be regarded as the most anti-Tory figure in the upper ranks of National Labour.

This may explain why the party rebuild that would occur in the coming months was driven forward by a faction of De La Warr, Lindsay and Nicolson, with the elder MacDonald largely excluded from their counsels.¹³⁰ Lord Elton represented a middle point between these two views. In a piece published in *The News-Letter* in February 1936, Elton made a defence of the National Labour label. Although acknowledging great challenges of organisation, small parliamentary representation and "the persecution which usually befalls trade unionists who support us", he argued hundreds of thousands of one-time Labour voters voted National in the general election, and thereby "proved themselves, in other words, albeit unenrolled and unproclaimed" to be National Labour.¹³¹ It would be "disloyalty" to these voters to abandon the National Labour name and remove the party's *raison d'être* of representing "left-wing traditions" in the coalition. However, Elton conceded:

¹²⁷ *ND*, 25 June 1936, see 10 March 1936 for mention of Austen Chamberlain.

¹²⁸ *PND*, p. 235.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 223.

¹³⁰ See *ND*, 25 June 1936. De La Warr also felt MacDonald and Thomas made the party "ridiculous" and "must be controlled", *ND*, 11 March 1936.

¹³¹ *NL*, "Why "National Labour"", 8.11 (1936), pp. 172-3. This article was written in response to a letter to the editor criticising the National Labour label and thus it seems highly likely Elton penned the piece.

Sooner or later, in the process of evolution a time will come when the National alliance having served its purpose, may assume a more organic form. To make ourselves a serviceable nucleus against the unforeseeable developments of that day, we should be seeing that our beliefs are... clear-cut. But that fence, though it may be faced some day, has not to be taken now. For the present our duty is clear – to make our own distinctive contribution to the National alliance.¹³²

It is clear therefore that there were differences of opinion among the party leadership about the future direction of National Labour. MacDonald was determined the party keep its distinctive identity. De La Warr, Lindsay and Nicolson – the ‘fusion faction’ - were the chief instigators of a drive towards the creation of a centre party. Lord Elton, and his close associate Malcolm MacDonald, were somewhere in between; more invested in retaining a Labour identity than the fusion faction but recognising that some sort of merger was the likely long-term destination. The differences were more in emphasis than overall aim, however. In July 1936 we read in Nicolson’s diary of him, De La Warr, Lindsay, Malcolm, Elton and Denman (another moderate voice) dining together and being reminded “we are really very close in thought and feeling and we sometimes forget it.”¹³³

While the party was going through something of an existential crisis, the two MacDonalds were swiftly returned to parliament in January and February 1936, ensuring that National Labour representation in the Commons recovered to double figures. Baldwin allowed father and son to remain in their cabinet posts during their brief absence from the House, with Malcolm even enjoying something of a promotion in changing places with J. H. Thomas, becoming Dominions Secretary while Thomas went to the Colonial Office. It has been noted that the by-elections – for the Scottish Universities in the case of Ramsay and Ross and Cromarty for Malcolm – highlighted the diminished status of National Labour, now totally reliant on Tory benevolence for the parliamentary presence of

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ *ND*, 29 July 1936.

its cabinet ministers. Certainly, the Scottish Universities and Highlands seats were considerably less 'Labour' than Seaham and Bassetlaw.¹³⁴ On the other hand, it might be argued that it was far more important for the future of the party to secure the swift return of the two MacDonalds than worry about the character of the selected constituencies. Indeed, the Combined Scottish Universities seat was in many ways ideal for the aging MacDonald, requiring as it did no campaigning or nursing of a constituency. The sitting Tory had died just before polling day and been returned posthumously. This meant a by-election could be held almost immediately and all MacDonald had to do was issue an election address by post to graduates.¹³⁵ The former prime minister eased home with a majority of over 7,000 on a considerably higher turnout than usual, with the Labour candidate losing his deposit.¹³⁶

Ross and Cromarty presented a different challenge. The constituency had returned a Liberal (and Whigs before them) at every election since 1847 but the Liberal National incumbent Ian Macpherson was elevated to the Lords in the New Year's Honours List. Therefore, despite the controversial adoption by the local Unionists of Randolph Churchill, once again standing as an anti-National Government Tory¹³⁷, the decisive factor was the stance of the local Liberals. As Malcolm wrote to his father after a tour of the constituency:

The overwhelming majority of people... are staunch Liberals. It was clear that the fact that the Liberal Association had adopted me unanimously, and that I had been recommended by Sir Ian Macpherson (whose name is one to conjure with on the West Coast), had persuaded them to support me.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Howell, 'Making of National Labour', p. 132.

¹³⁵ *NL*, 'The Scottish By-Elections', 8.9 (1936), pp. 144-5.

¹³⁶ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1749, Letter with results to MacDonald, 31 January 1936.

¹³⁷ For Ramsay's furious reaction to this, see *MMP*, 3/8/1, Ramsay to Malcolm, 13 January 1936.

¹³⁸ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1182, Malcolm to Ramsay, 10 January 1936.

Disappointed by the decision of the local association to back MacDonald, the Scottish Liberal Federation put up a Samuelite candidate, but he attracted just 738 votes. Churchill's intervention certainly caused Malcolm anxiety, however in the end he was returned with a majority of 2,982, an impressive feat considering the Liberal and Unionist opposition.¹³⁹ In his speeches, Malcolm focused on the National Government's cross-party nature, with little mention of any specifically National Labour policies, emphasised that he was the only pro-Baldwin candidate ("if [you] want to vote for this Govt, vote for me") and played on his Scottishness.¹⁴⁰ McHenry claimed that Malcolm's use of the National label was "outward evidence" of National Labour's imminent absorption by the Conservative Party, but numerous National Labour candidates had used this terminology in 1931 and 1935, so it was not quite the watershed it might appear.¹⁴¹ What is clear is that the Ross and Cromarty effort was entirely a National one, largely Liberal National, with no pre-existing National Labour presence, meaning Malcolm was, like most of the party's candidates in 1935, reliant on allied activists and voters to get elected. This by-election also shows the local strength the Liberals still possessed in some areas, and the power that Liberal National endorsement could have on Liberal electors, thereby providing further evidence of the damage that the Simonite stance had done to National Labour's performance in 1935.

The Rebuild

With the MacDonalds back in parliament, an important executive committee meeting on 4 March 1936 sought to diagnose the issues facing National Labour and recommend treatments. There was a

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ *MMP*, 94/6/105-6, 117-22, *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1182, *The Highland Leader*.

¹⁴¹ McHenry, pp. 239-40.

need to economise, with nearly £400 saved by downsizing the head office. It was decided that the party would cut its losses in Dewsbury and South Shields (target seats that it had failed to capture) and Seaham, likely owing to the heavy margin of defeat. Nevertheless, grants of £125 and £100 respectively were agreed for Middlesbrough West and Tottenham South, showing that despite suffering defeats in these constituencies at the general election, National Labour intended to continue to nurse them.¹⁴² Overall spending from 1 April to 31 December 1936 was £6,946 – over £416,000 today.¹⁴³ This was a remarkable sum for eight months of a year following a general election.

Cyril Asquith had recently been appointed party secretary and chief organiser, and would prove to be an able administrator, overseeing the party machine until its dissolution in 1945.¹⁴⁴ Asquith proposed to make a tour of the constituencies “in order to ascertain the exact strength of the local organizations”, which the executive agreed to sanction.¹⁴⁵

Asquith reported to the executive of 30 March 1936 and followed this up with a further progress report on 24 April. His report was meticulous; he either visited or corresponded with 22 constituencies (the twenty contested in 1935 plus the two winter by-election seats). The picture that emerges is one of significant activity. One would be forgiven for expecting operations to be winding down in the wake of a general election, but across numerous constituencies, Asquith prompted moves to keep agents on or reemploy them as secretaries of new constituency organisations. Asquith’s main effort seems to have been directed at getting local groups (variously called National Associations, Committees or Organisations) set up as cross-party bodies that would include National Labour figures in alliance with local Conservatives and Liberals.¹⁴⁶ In less than two months, the party secretary succeeded in persuading local Conservatives to set up National groups in no less than ten

¹⁴² *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1333, Executive Committee meeting minutes, 4 March 1936.

¹⁴³ Calculated using the Bank of England Inflation Calculator, <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator> (accessed 14/1/25).

¹⁴⁴ See positive comments on Asquith *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1182, De La Warr to MacDonald, 1 February 1936 and *ND*, 27 May 1936.

¹⁴⁵ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1333, Executive Committee meeting minutes, 4 March 1936.

¹⁴⁶ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1333, Asquith constituency reports of 30 March 1936 and 24 April 1936.

constituencies¹⁴⁷, with Tories in Bristol East also “open” to the idea and a pre-existing National Organisation in Forest of Dean apparently flourishing, having been “self-supporting” for three years already.¹⁴⁸ Given that the Scottish Universities and the three seats written off by the executive were naturally not considered for these measures, this represents a remarkable ‘hit-rate’ of twelve out of eighteen seats in the space of a few weeks.

The picture was not entirely rosy, however, with hints of continued difficulties with the allied parties. At Ormskirk, Sir Tom Rosbotham was too ill for any action to be taken, indeed he had still not appeared in the House by October 1936.¹⁴⁹ Local Tories were causing difficulties in Southwark Central, with the Conservative Association refusing to support a National Labour candidate. Tory Chief Whip David Margesson meanwhile hung the constituency party at Tottenham South out to dry over their unilateral decision to adopt a Conservative candidate, resulting in mass resignations from the association. Margesson reassured Ramsay MacDonald in November that National Labour “had the right” to nominate the candidate there, but local cooperation would surely have been challenging going forward.¹⁵⁰ Malcolm MacDonald meanwhile faced issues with the Liberals in Ross and Cromarty despite their initial enthusiasm for him.¹⁵¹ Finally, even as committed a National Labour MP as Harold Nicolson appears to have resisted efforts to establish an organisation in his Leicester West seat, telling party HQ he “cannot possibly open a National Labour Office”.¹⁵² Nicolson clearly did not want to bite the hand that fed in him the form of the Leicester Conservatives.

Asquith also made proposals about the relationship between National Labour’s central leadership and the party in the country. He suggested that the party hold:

¹⁴⁷ Tottenham South, Middlesbrough West, Lichfield, Wednesday, Leek, Finsbury, Cardiff Central, Kilmarnock, Leicester West and Nottingham South.

¹⁴⁸ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1333, Asquith constituency reports of 30 March 1936 and 24 April 1936.

¹⁴⁹ *JRM* PRO 30/69/1182, Ramsay to Malcolm, 28 October 1936.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, Margesson to MacDonald, 11 November 1936. For Southwark, see *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1333, constituency report of 30 March 1936.

¹⁵¹ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1333, constituency report, 30 March 1936, *JRM* PRO 30/69/1182, Malcolm to Ramsay, 5 September 1935.

¹⁵² *ND*, 26 November 1935, 15 October 1936.

A series of area conferences and a National Conference in London about the middle of October. He expressed the view that it would be unwise to arrange any gathering on a large scale until steps had been taken to strengthen the organizations in the constituencies.¹⁵³

It is probable that Asquith made this proposal at the prompting of the party chairman De La Warr, but even if it was Asquith's plan, the fusion faction jumped at the opportunity and set about organising these conferences with alacrity.

If a final reminder of the necessity of party reform was required, it was delivered with the Derby by-election of 9 July 1936. Archibald Church was adopted as the party's candidate; De La Warr had of course been hugely impressed by Church's fight against Stafford Cripps at Bristol East and it should be noted that Asquith's constituency report tells us that Church was still active in Bristol in March 1936.¹⁵⁴ The context of the Thomas budget leak scandal that had brought about the contest was surely less than helpful to National Labour's chances of retaining the seat, while Labour had an impressive candidate in Philip Noel-Baker. Against the context of a darkening international picture, the by-election was bound to be fought on foreign policy, far from favourable ground for the National Government in the summer of 1936. The letters of support for Church from Baldwin, MacDonald and Sir John Simon all focus on foreign policy and try rather desperately to defend the government's actions, especially over Abyssinia.¹⁵⁵ The evidence from Church's letters during the campaign reinforce Thomas biographer Gregory Blaxland's claim that the 1935 contest in Derby was fought by Tories on the trade union leader's behalf. There is no hint of a National Labour organisation in Derby at all, and it should be noted, Derby is absent from Asquith's constituency reports of March and April 1936.¹⁵⁶ Instead, it fell on the local Conservatives to "do practically all the work".¹⁵⁷ Church's own

¹⁵³ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1333, Executive Committee meeting minutes, 4 March 1936.

¹⁵⁴ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1333, constituency report, 30 March 1936.

¹⁵⁵ *CP*, MS. Add. 9560/8/1, 3 & 4.

¹⁵⁶ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1333, constituency reports of 30 March 1936, 24 April 1936. The latter report states "am preparing some recommendations regarding future organisation for Mr Thomas's consideration."

¹⁵⁷ *CP*, MS. Add. 9560/8/8, Aiton to Church, 31 July 1936.

approach was to focus on the Rolls-Royce and railway works for open air meetings and to canvass the working class districts, chiming with his labour-focused approach in Bristol.¹⁵⁸ An interesting feature of this by-election was the way the cross-party centrists – the likes of Viscount Cecil, Lloyd George and Clifford Allen – campaigned *against* National Labour, which had once been part of that same ‘middle opinion’ milieu.¹⁵⁹ Thomas’s majority of over 12,000 in November 1935 was overturned by Noel-Baker, who won by a margin of 2,753 votes, arguably the best by-election result Labour achieved during the Parliament. Thus, National Labour began its rebuild in an unenviable position, coming off a serious by-election defeat.

The first public step in efforts to reform and rebuild the National Labour party was a series of regional conferences. In Asquith’s second report of April, he could already enclose the programme for the first of these events, to be held in Birmingham on 16 May 1936. The Birmingham event was something of a pilot, branded a “Midlands Conference”, although this was interpreted broadly.¹⁶⁰ Held on a Saturday afternoon at the Grand Hotel, the speakers were De La Warr, Nottingham South MP Frank Markham and Harold Nicolson. De La Warr’s speech was “a bid for a Central Party.”¹⁶¹ As was becoming characteristic, the party chairman was frank about the challenges facing National Labour:

Our position is not easy. We are small, we have brought no part of the Labour machine with us, and – let us face it – we are suspected and resented by perhaps a small, but none the less vocal, body of our Conservative allies.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ JRM PRO 30/69/1182, Church to MacDonald, 29 June 1936 & 12 July 1936.

¹⁵⁹ Arthur Marwick, *Clifford Allen: The Open Conspirator* (Oliver & Boyd, 1964), p. 133, Richard Temple, ‘Archibald George Church’, in *Dictionary of Labour Biography, Vol. XI*, ed. by Keith Gildart et al (Palgrave, 2003), pp. 24-31, (p. 30), JRM PRO 30/69/1182, Church to MacDonald, 29 June 1936.

¹⁶⁰ JRM, PRO 30/69/1333, Report of 24 April 1936. The nine constituencies represented were Bassetlaw, Bristol East, Derby, Forest of Dean, Leek, Leicester West, Lichfield, Nottingham South, Wednesbury.

¹⁶¹ ND, 16 May 1936.

¹⁶² DLW ACC 5411-127, Speech at the National Labour Conference in Birmingham.

De La Warr then offered a robust defence of the party's more hardnosed foreign policy, and in greater detail, the many progressive social and economic reforms that the National Government had to its credit. He particularly focused on health, housing and nutrition, areas which would become key issues for National Labour in the coming years. In looking to the future, he echoed Lord Elton in asserting there are millions of voters who would not vote Labour, nor for a "purely Conservative Government", who were in fact National Labour, even if "they have never thought of labelling themselves" as such. The great challenge was to mobilise this demographic, the floating voter De La Warr had emphasised earlier in the year.¹⁶³ De La Warr's prescription for the party's next steps was as follows:

For myself, I want neither to return to the unrealities of the Labour Party nor become a Conservative. I would like to see something more than a mere Coalition, a strong fighting centre group – fighting because of its realism, centre because it abhors equally the complacency of the Right and the irresponsibility of the Left.¹⁶⁴

De La Warr nailed his colours to the mast publicly in calling for fusion. But he had also fired the starting gun on a new National Labour party, one that was less backward-looking, no longer so obsessed with 1931 and the Labour split, that would instead look to be a progressive centre party rather than an alternative vision of Labour. The event appears to have been a success. On the train back to London, Nicolson and De La Warr were jubilant, discussing "the future of our Central Party".¹⁶⁵ Two dampeners on this enthusiasm were Nicolson's admission that neither the Samuelite, nor more worryingly the Simonite Liberals would likely be willing to "fuse their identity" and the realisation that Clement Attlee had been at the next table in the dining car.¹⁶⁶ Meanwhile, the next meeting of the executive committee, on 27 May, was described as "somewhat acrimonious",

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ *ND*, 16 May 1936.

¹⁶⁶ See *ND*, 16-20 May 1936 for this flurry of activity.

suggesting De La Warr was moving faster than many were comfortable with. Kenneth Lindsay for one was angered by De La Warr “taking things so much into his own hands”.¹⁶⁷

Despite a great deal of ‘whisky-and-soda’ plotting in the summer of 1936, no such plan for a ‘Central Party’ ever came to fruition.¹⁶⁸ The fusion faction had to be content with building up their own party’s strength for the time being, given their allies, whether Liberal or Conservative, were not willing to take the leap. The regional conferences would thus become an end in themselves, rather than merely the means for platforming merger schemes.

On the weekend of 12-13 September 1936, senior National Labour figures gathered at De La Warr’s country home at Fishers Gate for an informal summit. Joining the host were Nicolson, Lindsay, Malcolm MacDonald, Elton, Denman, Willie Blackwood and Godfrey Lias (a journalist and regular contributor to *News-Letter*). The discussion centred on the “future of our party”.¹⁶⁹ Malcolm MacDonald made a realistic assessment of the party’s potential fortunes in noting that “we cannot rightfully expect an increase in either our Legislative or Executive representation.” However, he believed the party could “forge ahead” with speaking and writing.¹⁷⁰ Nicolson’s hopes of attaching National Labour to a broader progressive bloc in the Commons were fading, as shown by the broadly negative response to his suggestions on these lines.¹⁷¹ The discussion ended inconclusively, with Malcolm writing to his father they had essentially agreed to wait for six months and “see what the results of [the party’s] activity were.”¹⁷²

Next there was discussion of a “plan of action” for the party in the Commons, which it was believed should concentrate on two or three major issues. One of the challenges of course was how

¹⁶⁷ ND, 27 May 1936.

¹⁶⁸ ND, 11 June 1936, Nick Smart (ed.), *The Diaries and Letters of Robert Bernays, 1932-1939: An Insider’s Account of the House of Commons* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), pp. 399-400, Dutton pp. 103-5.

¹⁶⁹ See ND, 13 September 1936 & JRM, PRO 30/69/1182, Malcolm to Ramsay, 14 September 1936. It is revealing that Ramsay MacDonald himself did not attend.

¹⁷⁰ ND, 13 September 1936.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² JRM, PRO 30/69/1182, Malcolm to Ramsay, 14 September 1936.

thin the ranks of the National Labour backbenchers were, as Malcolm acknowledged in his report to his father, the onus for backbench activity essentially rested on Denman, Markham and Nicolson.¹⁷³ Bennett and Rosbotham were passive (the latter essentially absent from the House) and had little to do with their party colleagues, Lovat-Fraser, as we have seen, was regarded as a joke. Bennett was 70, Rosbotham 72 and Lovat-Fraser 68. Meanwhile, Ramsay and Malcolm MacDonald and Kenneth Lindsay held ministerial posts. Thus, of the party's paltry nine MPs, only a third could be counted on to put across the National Labour view from the backbenches. It was decided that the party would focus on "the health and physical well-being of the people" as a key policy area, a theme De La Warr had dwelt on in his Birmingham speech and would be highlighted in *The News-Letter* in the coming year.¹⁷⁴

The absence of Ramsay MacDonald, and the patent sense among those present that his opinion was not required on issues as large as the future of the party or its policy, marks a sharp break with the past. The Lord President had a little over a year to live and was in clear physical and mental decline.¹⁷⁵ National Labour was moving out of its leader's shadow, and the absence of him and Thomas seems to have done the party good, or at the very least leant internal discussions a greater air of reality. Denman felt the meeting was the "first time" National Labour had ceased to be merely MacDonald's "children", but instead "a party on our own". Nicolson concurred, writing "We all feel this. We are a group and I love them all dearly."¹⁷⁶

A final issue discussed at Fishers Gate was party pamphlets, with six drafts presented by members of the publicity committee (Blackwood, De La Warr, Denman, Elton, Lias and Lindsay) on the topic of "Why am I National Labour". These pamphlets represented a follow-up to *Politics on the Train*, an idiosyncratic tract written by another of the committee's members, Harold Nicolson, in the

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ *ND*, 13 September 1936. Also 22 June 1936 in which Nicolson wrote "we all feel that it is in [MacDonald's] own interests that he never again speaks in public."

¹⁷⁶ *ND*, 13 September 1936.

summer.¹⁷⁷ Nigel Nicolson and subsequent biographers have claimed rather boldly that *Politics on a Train* represented the “main policy statement” of the party, which is a bizarre assertion given it contains no policies.¹⁷⁸ Far closer to being statements of party policy were the series of pamphlets published by the National Labour Committee in the spring of 1937 that had been approved at the Fishers Gate summit. De La Warr authored *The Case for the National Government*, Denman *The National Front*, Elton *Why National Labour*, and Lindsay *National Labour and Leadership*. All essentially discussed what the purpose of National Labour was and why National Government remained so vital. These releases were reinforced by the publication of Ramsay MacDonald’s party conference speech of October 1936, entitled *National Labour and the Labour Movement*.

It appears the distribution of these glossy pamphlets was large, with 25,000 copies of MacDonald’s alone being printed.¹⁷⁹ MacDonald specifically requested an update on the progress of his own pamphlet and a February 1937 report gives us some insight into its distribution and impact. 21,000 copies were posted directly to trade union secretaries, working men’s clubs, co-operative guilds, branches of the LNU, nonconformist ministers and Workers’ Educational Association branches.¹⁸⁰ The remaining 4,000 copies were distributed to National Labour branches, with a “small batch” going to W.H. Smith to specifically be displayed beside *The News-Letter*. The targeted focus on organisations associated with the Labour movement is interesting and perhaps explains a short article in *The News-Letter* describing an incident at a branch of “one of the greatest unions of skilled workmen in the country”, in which members were explicitly banned from reading MacDonald’s pamphlet and the secretary ordered to return them.¹⁸¹ On the other hand, the publicity officer admitted in his report that “the response has been rather disappointing”, with only around 50 of the

¹⁷⁷ ND, 27 May & 12 June 1936, JRM, PRO 30/69/1182, Malcolm to Ramsay, 14 September 1936.

¹⁷⁸ For “main policy statement” see PND, p. 251, Rose, p. 189. For Malcolm’s derisory comments on it, see JRM, PRO 30/69/1182, Malcolm to Ramsay, 14 September 1936.

¹⁷⁹ JRM, PRO 30/69/1182, Stannard to Rosenberg, 12 February 1937.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ NL, ‘Another Suppression’, 10.11 (1937), pp. 162-3.

enrolment postcards found in each edition being returned. Those that had arrived had come from “ministers or working men. A few have come from areas in which we previously had no known supporters.”¹⁸² It should be borne in mind that this was just the first of the series of pamphlets published.

Meanwhile, the organisational build-up continued to gather pace. The Midlands conference of May 1936 had served as a pilot, and alongside the distribution of the pamphlet series, work now began in earnest to build up National Labour’s support in the country. In late September 1936, *The News-Letter* had announced “a series of Conferences at provincial centres on the lines of the very successful Conference held in Birmingham”.¹⁸³ The first was held at Manchester on 10 October, shortly before the national conference in London. Like Birmingham, Manchester was a city without a National Labour MP or candidate in the past. The conference was addressed by De La Warr and Denman and presided over by a local councillor.¹⁸⁴ Each of the subsequent events followed this pattern, with the party chairman De La Warr delivering the keynote speech (with a brief break due to an East African trip) alongside one or two of the party’s parliamentarians, with local supporters completing the platform. The relative success of the London conference, and in particular the lively debates on the resolutions, highlights considerable progress from the inaugural edition the previous year.¹⁸⁵ On the weekend of 7-8 November there was a Midlands Area Political School, attended by 140 people, which Nicolson described as a “great success”. From there, he immediately travelled up to Tynemouth to lecture at the Northern Areas Political School.¹⁸⁶ Such a programme of political schools had been under discussion at the time of Asquith’s reports in the spring and they were

¹⁸² *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1182, Stannard to Rosenberg, 12 February 1937.

¹⁸³ *NL*, ‘National Labour Conferences’, 10.2 (1936), p. 19.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ Ramsay MacDonald, *National Labour and the Labour Movement* (National Labour Committee, 1937), see also the detailed report on the conference in *NL*, ‘The National Labour Conference, Discussion at the Afternoon Session’, 10.5 (1936), pp. 74-8.

¹⁸⁶ *ND*, 7-9 November 1936.

clearly now in full swing. At some point in November or December the second regional conference was staged at Bristol, followed by Nottingham in January 1937 for an East Midlands meeting.¹⁸⁷

Here, discussions ranged from the pensions system to party organisation, which was debated “with zest”, the “general opinion being” that National Labour was making “steady and encouraging headway throughout the Midland area.”¹⁸⁸ The attendance of over 200 delegates at a regional gathering also represents no mean feat and the resolutions passed resulted in the creation of a sub-committee to report on welfare policy.¹⁸⁹ Next came another London conference, this time for the Home Counties area in February 1937 and in March Hanley hosted the “North Staffordshire regional conference.”¹⁹⁰ That month De La Warr also addressed the Manchester County Forum on the topic “Why Labour should be National”, with an ex-Labour councillor in support. Copies of De La Warr’s pamphlet *The Case for the National Government* were distributed to all attendees and the reception he received moved the aforementioned defector to write in *The News-Letter* “the spirit of the pioneers is with us once again. By zeal and hard work, a merry England can be brought about in our time.”¹⁹¹ In April 1937, a Scotland conference was held in Glasgow, addressed by De La Warr and the Scot Lindsay. An apparently diverse audience included early followers of Robert Blatchford but “the bulk of the attendance... was made up partly of young trade unionists... and young professional men and women.”¹⁹² These groups were “outraged” by present Labour Party policy, found the left-wing intellectuals “abhorrent” and thus had found their way into National Labour. One attendee commented:

¹⁸⁷ *NL*, ‘Good Results at Nottingham’, 10.9 (1937), p. 131. See Malcolm MacDonald’s speeches – he refers to the Bristol in his Nottingham speech, *MMP*, 95/5/60-66. There is also an undated “Bristol speech” in the De La Warr papers that refers to the “Edinburgh Circus”, a reference to the Labour conference at Edinburgh in October 1936, ACC 5411/127, Speech for Bristol.

¹⁸⁸ *NL*, ‘Good Results at Nottingham’, 10.9 (1937), p. 131.

¹⁸⁹ *NL*, ‘National Labour’s Progress’, 10.15 (1937), p. 227.

¹⁹⁰ *NL*, ‘National Labour’s Work’, 10.12, (1937), p. 179.

¹⁹¹ *NL*, ‘Letters to the Editor’, 10.13, (1937), p. 202.

¹⁹² *NL*, ‘Our Glasgow Conference’, 10.14 (1937), pp. 210-1.

It was refreshing indeed... to listen to speakers drawn from such widely differing occupations as the law, the office desk, the mines, the shipyards, Scottish journalism, and the pulpit, to say nothing of trade union official and co-operative members, frankly admitting that National Labour was now offering them a better political anchorage for their convictions than they had ever known.¹⁹³

This does not sound like a gathering of old MacDonaldites. Rather, it appears an embodiment of what the fusion faction desired; an appeal across class lines to the younger, progressive floating voter who was not firmly aligned with either of the two main parties. The regional conference series was brought to an end on 24 April 1937 with a return to Birmingham and around the same time two “large public meetings” were held, at Bristol East and Derby. In Bristol, Arthur Reade (a barrister, former communist and recent recruit from Labour) was the new candidate, and he was supported by a strong platform of Elton, De La Warr and Lindsay, with the latter two then joining Church in Derby.¹⁹⁴

Reflecting on the conference series, Willie Blackwood claimed that the party was “appealing more and more to an electoral element not catered for” and he had been impressed by the “earnest enthusiasm” of men and women of all classes.¹⁹⁵ *The News-Letter’s* verdict meanwhile, based on the reflections of party staff who had attended all the conferences, was as follows:

The most striking thing about them is that they are fully representative of our society, being attended on the one hand by members of the professions and on the other by contingents of working men and women. Both groups mix easily and take part in the discussions in total absence of class-consciousness.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ *NL*, ‘Letters to the Editor’, 10.15 (1937), pp. 233-5.

¹⁹⁴ *NL*, ‘National Labour’s Progress’, 10.15 (1937), p. 227.

¹⁹⁵ *NL*, ‘Letters to the Editor’, 10.15 (1937), pp. 233-5.

¹⁹⁶ *NL*, ‘After the Conferences’, 10.15 (1937), p. 227.

They also noted that “again and again” the topic of discussion would come back to health and pensions. While *News-Letter* was bound to report in enthusiastic terms, the palpable positivity marks something new in National Labour discourse – even in public – and a stark contrast with the party’s mood in the run up to the general election just over a year before.

III – “The Coming Force”: New Model National Labour, 1937-39

The Rebuild Gathers Pace

After the Fishers Gate meeting in September 1936, Malcolm MacDonald had talked of assessing the situation in six months' time. During this period, the leadership had dispensed with plots of parliamentary blocs and was determined to develop a stronger party machine and more defined political identity as a springboard for future fusion on more equal terms. By the spring of 1937, National Labour could look back with such satisfaction at the success of the regional conference series that a repeat programme was already in the works. The blithe assertion of one historian that National Labour was, by this stage, “a party that existed in name only” thus appears wide of the mark.¹⁹⁷ This moment, with the organisational rebuild coming to fruition and a change of premier imminent, gave rise to fresh discussions about the future of the party. On 9 March, Malcolm MacDonald made an “outspoken” speech to the central council in which he directly addressed the future options for the party:

He says that the alternatives before us are (1) To leave the National Party (2) To fuse with the Nat. Libs or left Tories (3) to remain on as we are for a bit. The general opinion of the Council is in favour of (3) Kenneth Lindsay makes an interesting contribution to the effect [the left Tories] look to us for encouragement and support.¹⁹⁸

As would occur frequently in the coming years, the safest option of the status quo won out.

¹⁹⁷ Rose, *Nicolson*, p. 213. Cowling, p. 392, refers to National Labour as a “salon party”, a comment which should be seen in the context of Cowling's reliance on the Nicolson and Dugdale diaries.

¹⁹⁸ *ND*, 9 March 1937.

The wind appears to have been taken out of the sails of the fusion faction by the majority opinion in favour of ‘wait and see’, the reluctance of potential merger partners, and assurances from Neville Chamberlain that he would maintain the “National Front”, as well as hints at a cabinet seat for De La Warr and an undersecretaryship for Nicolson.¹⁹⁹ Evidence of this volte face can be seen in *The News-Letter* on 27 March when De La Warr made a robust defence of the party in its current form, insisting “National Labour should and will continue as National Labour” and “nothing could be further from our minds” than a name change.²⁰⁰

By April, the executive committee was deep in discussions about party aims and a new constitution, with a new name, the National Labour Organisation (replacing Committee), settled upon.²⁰¹ The constitution was approved by the party’s central council on 15 June. Clause II outlined three aims of the organisation: “To work for social justice, equality of opportunity, and improved conditions of labour”, to promote world peace through the League and “further the development of the British Empire as an association of free peoples”, and to “support national government” by maintaining “political machinery” to conduct research and propaganda for “progressive opinion” and to give “practical effect” to the above aims.²⁰² The constitution set out that the party would function through a conference, central council, executive committee, area councils and local associations and be headed by a president and chairman (Ramsay MacDonald and De La Warr being the respective incumbents). The conference was formalised for the first time, consisting of officers and members of the central and area councils, as well as the party’s area and constituency agents and five elected delegates from each local association. The central council, which was to meet at least three times a year, consisted of the party’s parliamentarians of both houses, adopted candidates, the executive committee, the national officers of the party and the chairman of each area council plus one other

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 15 March 1937, 8 April 1937.

²⁰⁰ Lord De La Warr, ‘The Future of National Labour’, *NL*, 10.13 (1937), p. 196.

²⁰¹ *ND*, 12, 26 April 1937.

²⁰² A full copy of the constitution can be found in *DP*, MS 12124/13.

representative of each area council's choosing. The executive committee was to be an elected body of 20, with all members of the central council having a vote. Six senior party officers were guaranteed a seat, while two peers, four MPs and eight members of the central council (who could not be parliamentarians) would be elected annually to the executive.²⁰³ For the first time individuals could join National Labour as members, as opposed to registering as supporters, a system which had been instituted in 1935. Richard Denman reflected that "curiously enough" National Labour, which had appeared at first to be a "mere survival of a momentary need", was now "proving to supply a want felt by many people", with party membership growing rapidly and, apparently, unexpectedly.²⁰⁴ Thus, 'wait and see' had gained its own rationale and been codified; the party was flourishing and with Chamberlain's benevolence its position seemed surprisingly secure. Merger talk evaporated and instead the newly dubbed National Labour Organisation emerged ready to build on its progress of the previous nine months.

By the time the new constitution had been approved, the regional structure that the party's leaders envisaged was already taking shape, beginning with the founding of the Western Area Council at Bristol.²⁰⁵ Each area council opened a permanent office with salaried staff, including an area agent.²⁰⁶ The councils consisted of elected officers, plus MPs, candidates and agents for constituencies within the area, as well as four representatives of each local party association in the region. Each area council's constitution listed four objects: to further the policy of the National Labour Organisation, to encourage the formation of local associations, to organise an annual area conference and to promote the return of National Labour parliamentary candidates.²⁰⁷ Thus, these

²⁰³ The president, chairman, deputy chairman, treasurer, chairman of News-Letter Ltd and chairman of the *News-Letter* editorial board were ex-officio members, the incumbents being Ramsay MacDonald, De La Warr, Worthington, Church, Derwent Hall-Caine and Elton respectively. A full list of the 1937-38 executive committee members can be found in the 1938 nomination ballots sent to Malcolm MacDonald, *MMP* 6/5/56.

²⁰⁴ *DP*, MS 12124/13, Denman to Sir Montagu Burton, 27 Sept 1937.

²⁰⁵ *NL*, 'Progress Notes', 10.19 (1937), p. 291.

²⁰⁶ The addresses of the area offices can be found on party leaflets of the period, *JRM PRO* 30/69/1183, attached to a letter, Stannard to MacDonald, 12 October 1937.

²⁰⁷ The essentially identical constitutions of the Scotland and Yorkshire Area Councils can be found respectively in *MMP*, 6/4/63-7 & *DP* 12124/13.

councils were essentially taking over (and augmenting) the groundwork that had been conducted centrally by Asquith since 1936 of organising regional conferences and constituency parties.

Several councils began to produce their own journals, beginning with the Western Area which already by the start of July 1937 had launched *The Coming Force*, edited by the area agent and serving to “be a link between members.”²⁰⁸ The title, while obviously aspirational, points to the degree of optimism in the National Labour grassroots and must have reflected real progress, or else surely would have invited ridicule. The start of July also marked a change in *News-Letter’s* approach to party matters, with each issue featuring a ‘National Labour News’ section (reporting on the huge range of activities happening in the constituencies, from rambles to rallies, dances to debates, study clubs to speaker schools), as well as a series of articles entitled ‘National Labour in the Country’.²⁰⁹

The West was not a unique example. The West Midlands Area Council was launched in Birmingham in late June, great “enthusiasm and interest” was noted at the launch of the North-West Area Council in Manchester on 3 July, quickly followed by a meeting in Nottingham to inaugurate an East Midlands council.²¹⁰ A Scottish office was opened in Glasgow in September 1937 (although the council was not inaugurated until May 1938), while the Yorkshire office opened in Leeds in October 1937 with the council launch the following month.²¹¹ An Area Council for London and the Home Counties was formed on 26 October and followed the West in producing a regional journal, *National Labour News*, which was launched in February 1938 with a first edition of 30,000.²¹² The Denman papers reveal something of the work the councils were undertaking through the minutes of a December 1937 meeting of the Yorkshire council. As well as planning the appointment of a salaried women’s organiser and the distribution of National Labour literature in *every* constituency in

²⁰⁸ *NL*, ‘National Labour News’, 10.20 (1937), p. 320.

²⁰⁹ Charles A. Young, ‘National Labour in the Country: 1 – The West’, *NL*, 10.20 (1937), pp. 316-17.

²¹⁰ T. Avery Radford, ‘National Labour in the Country: II – The North-West’, *NL*, 10.21 (1937), pp. 334 & in the same issue ‘National Labour News’, p. 336.

²¹¹ *NL*, ‘National Labour News’, 11.1 (1937), p. 16, see also the constitutions of the Scottish and Yorkshire Area Councils and related correspondence in, respectively, *MMP* 6/4/63-7 & *DP* 12124/13.

²¹² See the ‘National Labour News’ pieces in *NL*, 11.1 (1937), p. 16 & 11.9 (1938), p. 144.

Yorkshire, it was noted that the formation of the council had sparked an upturn in interest in the party, with a new association formed in Sheffield, positive signs in Bradford and supporters in Dewsbury “anxious to have a meeting at an early date.”²¹³ Bradford and Sheffield had no previous National Labour presence, while the party had cut Dewsbury loose after failing to capture it in 1935. Thus, in short order, National Labour built a regional structure with offices, agents, publications and councils in the seven regions in which it held seats. These bodies appear to have developed some genuine momentum and provided an infrastructure for future expansion.

The expanding regional apparatus necessitated a corresponding expansion at the centre. In September 1937, the party moved to new, bigger premises, with Asquith planning an official opening that was held on 18 October.²¹⁴ The 35 Parliament Street office the party had inhabited since 1931 was now considered “too limited to accommodate its manifold activities”, and the executive committee had thus purchased the “large and very suitable” 57 Tufton Street, decking it out with “up-to-date equipment”.²¹⁵ In his last public engagement, Ramsay MacDonald lauded the party for at last finding a “permanent and dignified” home. He proceeded to make a “fighting speech”, which reappraised the rights and wrongs of 1931 once again before, perhaps fittingly, reviewing the decades since Labour’s foundation, concluding that the ideas that “the Labour Party fought for... had been realised, had become accomplished facts to-day.”²¹⁶ The purchase of a new headquarters demonstrated the reality of a burgeoning party bureaucracy but also hints at a genuinely bullish outlook about the future, a marked departure from the despondency of 1935, and in stark contrast to the downsizing of the party HQ we saw in the spring of 1936.

²¹³ *DP*, 12124/13, Minutes of Yorkshire Area Council Meeting, 10 December 1937. See also the report on the opening of the Sheffield Association in *NL*, ‘National Labour News’, 11.6 (1937), p. 96.

²¹⁴ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1183, Asquith to MacDonald, 8 September 1937.

²¹⁵ *NL*, ‘National Labour’s New Headquarters’, 11.2, (1937), pp. 24-5. This address remains at the heart of the Westminster bubble as the headquarters of the right-wing think tank, the Centre for Policy Studies.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

This was not the limit of expansionary activities. Dunnico's constituency association at Wednesbury established a women's organisation in July 1937, Bristol East quickly followed suit and by February 1938 a women's council was even established in Yorkshire with the first meeting held at the party's Leeds office on Great George Street.²¹⁷ As well as in numerous constituencies, National Labour associations were established for the Inns of Court (headed by Lord Amulree), Oxford and Cambridge Universities.²¹⁸ In September 1937 the executive committee agreed to establish a research bureau to develop policy, despite the party's health and welfare report irking the Health Ministry.²¹⁹ The party continued to host political schools, with the most successful the Kilmarnock offering, run by Kenneth Lindsay's impressive constituency organisation. The December 1937 iteration boasted a substantial attendance of 500 and culminated in a "very successful" demonstration in Glasgow.²²⁰

In the autumn and winter of 1937-38, the party conducted what De La Warr termed "a great public push... to make ourselves felt."²²¹ Each of the seven area councils played host to the second round of regional conferences, now established as annual events, and continuing to attract respectable audiences; 140 delegates attended the London & Home Counties conference in February 1938.²²² The third national conference was scheduled for November, however, was postponed owing to Ramsay MacDonald's death. As well as a host of small-scale meetings, there was a spate of twenty large rallies and demonstrations across the country, hosted primarily by the constituency associations and usually addressed by the MP or candidate alongside a national figure such as De La

²¹⁷ On Wednesbury & Bristol, see 'National Labour News' in *NL*, 10.21 (1937), pp. 336, & 10.21 (1937), p. 352. Correspondence regarding the Yorkshire women's area council can be found in *DP*, MS 12124/13.

²¹⁸ See *NL*, 'Progress Notes', 10.19 (1937), p. 291 for Inns of Court, *NL*, 'National Labour News', 11.5 (1937), p. 80 for the Oxbridge branches. See also *JRM PRO 30/69/1183*, Reade to MacDonald, 8 June 1937 for the Inns of Court Association.

²¹⁹ *JRM PRO 30/69/1183*, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 27 September 1937.

²²⁰ *NL*, 'National Labour News', 11.5 (1937), p. 80, *NL*, 'National Labour News', 11.6 (1937), p. 96.

²²¹ *ND*, 10 September 1937.

²²² *NL*, 'National Labour News', 11.9 (1938), p. 144.

Warr, Nicolson or Elton.²²³ The executive committee reflected with satisfaction in September that all of their demonstrations and meetings scheduled for the next six months were “purely National Labour gatherings” (rather than National) with the exception of the Liberal stronghold Middlesbrough West, where cross-party collaboration was presumably viewed as desirable.²²⁴

Lord Nuffield purchased the party a loudspeaker van, complete with a large stock of literature and an indefatigable campaigner in one F. L. Reeves to deliver speeches. From August to November, he toured the Western Area, Midlands and North-West, in the latter region addressing 54 meetings and apparently producing a spate of enrolments with the area council. In the new year, a second van was acquired and dispatched to the Midlands, while Reeves and the original vehicle campaigned in London and its environs from December through January.²²⁵ Leaflets were produced specifically for the loudspeaker campaign that presented the National Labour message in simple terms:

If your half-back quarrels with your centre-forward and refuses to play the team won't WIN. The essence of Britain's strength is the team spirit. National Labour is playing its part in the National Government team. We have already defeated depression... We have MORE to do and need your HELP.²²⁶

Another leaflet focused on the party's core theme of health and welfare, noting achievements such as free milk and maternity services, as well as listing goals such as an expansion of nursery schools.

²²³ Cryptically, in announcing the autumn-winter schedule, *The News-Letter* proclaims there will be nine area conferences. Where were the two regional gathering beyond the remit of the seven area councils? *NL*, 'National Labour News', 11.1 (1937), p. 16.

²²⁴ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1183, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 27 September 1937, see the National Labour News section of editions of *The News-Letter* in this period for the flurry of meetings.

²²⁵ See 'National Labour News' pieces in *NL*, 11.2 (1937), p. 32, 11.4 (1937), p. 64, 11.5 (1937), p. 80, 11.7, (1938), p. 112. Reeves's own account of his journeys, F. L. Reeves, 'National Labour in the Country: V. – Showing the Flag', 11.2 (1937), pp. 27-28. See also discussion of the loudspeaker campaign by a “very favourably impressed” executive committee, *JRM* PRO 30/69/1183, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 27 September 1937 and Asquith to MacDonald, 8 September 1937.

²²⁶ Two examples are included in *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1183, attached to a letter, Stannard to MacDonald, 12 October 1937.

National Labour stood for “Peace not pacifism” and “Social justice – not pauperism” according to the attractive publication, which then listed “what we have helped to do” and “what we intend to do” in concrete terms. Improvements in housing, wages, social services, education and the Factory Act were celebrated, with promises of subsidised milk for the under-fives, part time education up to 18 and a 40-hour week for the young, unemployment insurance for black-coated workers, planning in the location of industry, a nutrition policy, and holidays with pay for all.²²⁷

The delayed third national conference was a two-day event held on 18-19 March 1938, with the party returning to Caxton Hall as the culmination of its publicity drive. The 450 delegates were more than triple the number in 1936, representing four times as many constituency associations.²²⁸ The first day consisted of the formal adoption of the new constitution and the election of party officers. De La Warr finished proceedings with a speech celebrating the progress the party had made:

This is a great day for National Labour. It completes the first twelve months since we took the decision to build an effective organisation in the country. We are no longer a small group of men and women who took a certain line in 1931. We have become a party with its eyes not on the past, but on the future... Last year we had no Area Councils, this year we have seven. Wherever we look there is life and there is growth – meetings being held, literature going out and speaking vans touring the country.²²⁹

In Nicolson’s words, the first day had been like “eating rabbit pie which had been cooked in November”, but on the second day, in which the resolutions were discussed, “something happened. The Conference became alive.”²³⁰ In particular, the debate on the foreign policy resolution

²²⁷ This leaflet can be found in *MMP*, 6/5/58.

²²⁸ *DLW*, ACC 5411/127, Speech at Third Annual Conference of the National Labour Organisation, Caxton Hall, Friday 18th March 1938, *JRM PRO* 30/69/1183, Asquith to MacDonald, 15 October 1937 & *NL*, ‘National Labour in Conference’, 1.2 (1938), p. 28.

²²⁹ *DLW*, ACC 5411/127, Speech at Third Annual Conference of the National Labour Organisation, Caxton Hall, Friday 18th March 1938.

²³⁰ Harold Nicolson, ‘People and Things’, *NL*, 1.2 (1938), pp. 31-3. The change of mood is also reflected in Nicolson’s diary.

engendered “deep feelings and strong controversy”, with the Inns of Court Association proposing an amendment to beef up the executive’s language. A call for unity from Malcolm MacDonald was supported by Nicolson, and the leadership were forced to strengthen their own wording in order to bring about the withdrawal of the lawyers’ amendment.²³¹ New recruit Blanche Dugdale confided in her diary that the party “continued to show much vigour and independent thinking.”²³² The session highlighted both a greater bottom-up emphasis to proceedings than previously and two key areas of interest for the party going forward; the familiar enthusiasm for health and welfare provision alongside a new focus on foreign policy. *The Times* reported that although technically the party’s third conference, this was the first of “a fully-fledged political party.”²³³ De La Warr noted the party was now a “real living force”, which had made a “great beginning”. According to the chairman, at least half the speakers were under 30. Nicolson also commented on the youthfulness of many speakers, the “solidarity” between platform and hall and the genuine heat of the debates.²³⁴

In September 1937, the executive committee agreed to appoint *The News-Letter*’s first paid full-time editor, N. E. W. Sutton, with Elton moving upstairs as chair of the editorial board as part of a substantial rebrand.²³⁵ In the final edition of the old format, *The News-Letter* claimed it needed to come into line with the “remarkable growth” of the party over the previous eighteen months, and sought to “very considerably” increase the circulation, especially to those who were not currently National Labour supporters.²³⁶ The new *News-Letter* marked a departure from the staid, plain-covered periodical that had run since 1932. It was double the length, one penny dearer and printed in a convenient pocket format. With distinctively modernist graphic design, each cover was illustrated and the editorial approach was livelier and more varied, with *The News-Letter* now

²³¹ *ND*, 19 March 1938, Lord De La Warr, ‘The Coming Force’, *NL*, 1.2 (1938), pp. 29-30.

²³² Norman Rose (ed.), *Baffy: The Diaries of Blanche Dugdale, 1936-1947* (Vallentine Mitchell, 1973), p. 88.

²³³ *The Times*, ‘National Labour’, 19 March 1938, p. 13.

²³⁴ De La Warr, ‘The Coming Force’, pp. 29-30.

²³⁵ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1183, Minutes of Executive Committee meeting, 27 September 1937 and Elton to MacDonald, 21 October 1937. For details of the structural reorganisation and members of the editorial board, see *NL*, ‘The “News-Letter”’, 11.8 (1938), p. 115.

²³⁶ *NL*, ‘Hail and Farewell’, 11.9 (1938), p. 131.

resembling much more a current affairs magazine like *The New Statesman* rather than a collection of essays or a “parish magazine”.²³⁷

How was all this paid for? In probably his final letter to MacDonald, Richard Denman wrote in his role as trustee of party funds to report a donation of £500 from the National Labour peer Lord Marks. Denman commented “We’re pretty well off at present”, to the extent that he implied this latest donation was surplus to requirements, instead suggesting it be hidden from HQ and produced “in a moment of famine.”²³⁸ It seems likely that MacDonald’s extensive contacts among the well-heeled, especially the Scottish elite, provided the funding. Thus, money was clearly not an issue for National Labour and this helps explain the largesse of the expansionary period.

The tone of internal party correspondence from this period is universally positive, a complete reversal of the sombre mood and gallows humour of 1935 and early 1936. One cannot read the ‘National Labour in the Country’ series in *News-Letter* during the second half of 1937 without being struck by the relentless optimism of the party’s regional functionaries. Indeed, the very existence of provincial infrastructure was no mean feat; while in spring 1936 Asquith’s initial report betrayed the lack of even constituency parties in National Labour seats, by the winter of 1937-38 the second series of regional conferences were held under the auspices of the independent area councils. At the East Midlands conference at the end of the year, De La Warr reflected with satisfaction that over the last twelve months, “thousands” of members had enrolled and 27 new constituency branches had been established. In exhorting the activists present to redouble their efforts he declared “Let nothing damp your present spirit of enthusiasm. The tide is with us.”²³⁹

²³⁷ For comments on the success of the rebrand, see *NL*, “News-Letter No. 2’, 1.2 (1938), p. 28, and ‘News-Letter No. 3’, 1.3 (1938), p. 56.

²³⁸ *JRM*, PRO 30/69/1183, Denman to MacDonald, 26 October 1937. See *JRM* PRO 30/69/1779 and *DP*, MS 12124/10 for substantial evidence that the party had huge reserves of cash even in the late 1940s.

²³⁹ *DLW*, ACC 5411/127, National Labour Speech.

The Archibald Church papers give us a snapshot of the party infrastructure in Derby, the scene of the bruising 1936 by-election defeat. Church was re-adopted in September 1937 after overcoming some resistance from the local Tory party chair. He believed that two successful National Labour rallies in Derby that summer, especially the “size and enthusiasm” of an open-air event on 27 July, convinced the local Conservatives to acquiesce to a National Labour running-mate in the two-member constituency. Interestingly the Tories laid down the condition that National Labour organise and finance their own campaign and De La Warr gave assurances to that effect.²⁴⁰ The unemployed coal miner G. A. W. Tomlinson, who had campaigned for Malcolm MacDonald in Bassetlaw was appointed to the paid post of organising secretary of Derby National Labour Committee, with an office and several staff. There followed a flurry of activity, with debate clubs, dances and the foundation of a speaker school to prepare propagandists for weekly demonstrations in the city’s Market Square.²⁴¹ Interestingly, after a series of scheduling muddles, Tomlinson was replaced as organiser in November 1937 by Rosemary Maynell, suggesting a degree of institutional ruthlessness not seen earlier.²⁴²

Growing Pains

While the green shoots of grassroots growth were clear to see, not all the signs were positive for National Labour. De La Warr (now Lord Privy Seal) felt that since Neville Chamberlain had taken over, the cabinet had become “really Tory and reactionary”, although the PM was more sympathetic to his goal of “socialism imposed by the National Government.” The party’s leaders were keen supporters

²⁴⁰ See the exchange of letters between Aiton, Church and De La Warr in *CP*, MS Add. 9560/8/14-17. See also brief report in *NL*, ‘National Labour News’, 10.22 (1937), p. 352.

²⁴¹ *CP*, MS Add. 9560/8/22-41. See also frequent mentions of Derby in *NL*’s regular ‘National Labour News’ column in late 1937 and early 1938.

²⁴² See *CP*, MS Add. 9560/8/22-41 and *NL*, ‘National Labour News’, 11.5 (1937), p. 80

of the Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, yet De La Warr felt Eden lacked backing among senior Tories and his departure clearly demoralised the progressives in the cabinet.²⁴³

Furthermore, the hopes that the party would become a stronger and more distinctive voice in Parliament had still not been realised. The party's unofficial whip, Frank Markham, issued a memo to parliamentary colleagues in December 1937 deriding their lack of effectiveness in the House: the party was "not as active as it might be" and was "missing opportunities of putting the National Labour case effectively". Markham felt that lack of contact between the party's front and backbenchers, the failure of the Speaker to recognise National Labour as an independent party, and a lack of interest from government whips were the root causes of the issue.²⁴⁴ The most substantive backbench work was that of the party's peers, particularly Lords Amulree, Elton, Gorrell and new recruit Lord Holden, with their interventions on the Factory and Marriage Bills being worthy of note. Denman had done good committee work on the Factory Bill, but his amendment was opposed by the government, while Nicolson, although praised as a "rising parliamentarian", wisely confined his interventions to foreign policy. Of the remaining three National Labour backbenchers – Bennett, Lovat-Fraser and Rosbotham – even *The News-Letter* could not hide their lack of contributions.²⁴⁵

Lovat-Fraser's death and the subsequent loss of his Lichfield seat in May 1938 further diminished the parliamentary party. Hardly the most dynamic of MPs, Lovat-Fraser had not exported National Labour's rebuild to his own constituency. Indeed Lichfield does not appear once in the regular 'National Labour News' feature in *The News-Letter*, suggesting the enthusiasm of individual MPs and candidates was a key factor in the grassroots growth of the party.²⁴⁶ The by-election campaign was fought by local Conservatives and Liberals, however once again apathy and a lack of

²⁴³ *ND*, 10 September 1937, *DLW*, ACC 5411/127, Speech at Third Annual Conference of the National Labour Organisation, Caxton Hall, Friday 18th March 1938.

²⁴⁴ *DP*, MS 12124/10, Markham to Denman, 8 December 1937 & attached memorandum.

²⁴⁵ *NL*, 'The Factory Bill', 10.22 (1937), pp. 339 & in the same issue, 'National Labour in the Session', pp. 342-4.

²⁴⁶ There is no record of his involvement in the party's renaissance. Lichfield was a constituency that lacked a National Association/Committee before spring 1936.

enthusiasm for a National Labour man meant that some Tory and Liberal voters stayed at home.²⁴⁷ The candidate, Scotsman Beresford Craddock, was described by Willie Blackwood as “splendid” and Nicolson as “very attractive” but he had no previous connection to the area, nor political pedigree, and faced the “frenzied hatred” of Lloyd George’s Council of Action, once again campaigning against National Labour.²⁴⁸ Two days before the poll, Harold Nicolson was denied a hearing at a public meeting, drowned out by booing. Craddock followed with a “poor but brave speech”, battling chants of “We want Poole [the Labour candidate]”.²⁴⁹ The seat had been retained with a majority of 3,298 in 1935 but swung narrowly to Labour this time, Cecil Poole winning by 826 votes in a straight fight. Craddock would remain in situ in Lichfield in the hope of regaining the seat for National Labour – Tory activists apparently insisted “it will be all right at the General Election”.²⁵⁰ There can be no doubt that the result must have been disappointing, serving as it did as the first electoral test for the new model National Labour; De La Warr expressed concern that defeat would damage the party’s standing with their Tory allies.²⁵¹ In fairness, the Labour Party were riding something of a wave that spring, with the Conservatives suffering a torrid defeat at Ipswich in February, then losing Fulham West by 1,200 votes in April 1938, defending a comparable majority to Lichfield.

A more serious problem was a bitter dispute over the party leadership that began in May 1937. The spark was Ramsay MacDonald’s retirement from the cabinet that month. With the leader in poor health and planning an extended South American rest cure, there resulted a power vacuum at the top of the party. Just three days after the elder MacDonald stepped down, Nicolson recorded in his diary a conversation with Asquith and deputy chairman Worthington about the leadership. Nicolson had assumed Ramsay MacDonald would resign and De La Warr take his place, but was disabused of this notion:

²⁴⁷ William Blackwood, ‘Lessons from Lichfield’, *NL*, 1.6 (1938), pp. 143-4.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid* & *ND*, 2 May 1938.

²⁴⁹ *PND*, p. 332, *ND*, 3 May 1938.

²⁵⁰ William Blackwood, ‘Lessons from Lichfield’, p. 144.

²⁵¹ *ND*, 5 April 1938.

It now seems as if MacDonald had no intention of resigning [as party leader], and even if he does Malcolm MacDonald might be the obvious candidate. Unquestionably Buck is by far the best leader of the Party; but the rank and file of the Parliamentary Group... are not really fond of Buck, who is apt to snub them, would almost certainly vote for Malcolm.²⁵²

While De La Warr was undoubtedly the driving force behind the party's reorganisation, he was disadvantaged by being marooned in the House of Lords, while clearly there was residual MacDonaldite loyalty that transferred to Malcolm from the likes of Elton (his Oxford tutor), Denman and others. Indeed, the division to some extent mirrored in terms of personnel the divide between the fusion faction and the moderates of the previous year. Denman wrote to Ramsay MacDonald in July 1937 about "the unpleasant job of selecting a leader" in some detail. Although he conceded that De La Warr was the "vigorous inspiration" for the party's rebuild and was "putting life into the thing" and "getting supporters and money", Denman still felt:

Most of my tastes are on the side of Malcolm – old associations, his outstanding capacity and political judgement. And, of course, he has great status in the Cabinet. But he has neither the time nor the drive to put us on the map and Buck has latterly done all the work that has kept us a recognisable, independent unit.²⁵³

Denman believed it was a "serious handicap" that De La Warr was in the Lords. The original Nicolson diary reveals that the leadership battle was unpleasant, bitter and long-lasting – a "beastly business", although there is no trace of it in the published edition.²⁵⁴

After an initial bout of bad-tempered peacocking between the two contenders, an uneasy truce prevailed until Ramsay MacDonald's death in November 1937, after which the struggle once

²⁵² *ND*, 31 May 1937.

²⁵³ *DP*, MS 12124/10, Denman to Ramsay MacDonald, 14 July 1937.

²⁵⁴ *ND*, 3 June, 9 June, 11 June, 12 June 1937.

again became “acute”.²⁵⁵ Malcolm and De La Warr were young men in a hurry, comfortably the two youngest members of the cabinet and they likely realised that leadership of the party would open the door to the highest offices, given how Sir John Simon’s career had progressed. Additionally, the leadership of a reinvigorated National Labour Organisation was a prize worth winning in comparison to the comatose National Labour Committee that had existed just two years before. De La Warr for his part had “done all the work and... would really like the leadership”, while Malcolm was evidently unwilling to give up what he likely saw as his political inheritance.²⁵⁶ In the end, the near-total lack of support for De La Warr among the upper echelons of the party, and his absence on an official visit to Australia, meant the contest ran out of steam in early 1938. It fell to Nicolson to persuade his friend not to take the matter any further or else face the humiliation of defeat.²⁵⁷

The tussle effectively closed with a stage-managed power sharing deal. At the March 1938 party conference, Ramsay MacDonald’s vacant office of president was abolished in a motion moved by De La Warr – it had been “specially created” for the former leader – while Malcolm MacDonald moved the re-election of De La Warr as chairman of the National Labour Organisation, stating that he had done “more than anyone else to build up the strength of [National Labour] in the country”.²⁵⁸ A fortnight later, at a meeting of National Labour MPs and peers, Malcolm was unanimously elected chairman of the parliamentary party.²⁵⁹ Both men thus finished as chairmen, however Malcolm was the winner. As leader in parliament, he had the greater prestige and would likely be preferred for cabinet promotion, while De La Warr, rather than a promotion, had to be content with the same role he had already held for six years, at the head of the party machine.

²⁵⁵ For the first clashes, see *ND*, 3-12 June 1937. For the resumption of hostilities *ND*, 18 November 1937, 2 December 1937.

²⁵⁶ *ND*, 3 June, 2 December, 14 December 1937, Rose, *Baffy*, p. 71.

²⁵⁷ *ND*, 18 November 1937, 2 February, 3 February 1938.

²⁵⁸ *The Times*, ‘National Labour Policy’, 19 March 1938, p. 14.

²⁵⁹ *The Times*, ‘National Labour Party’, 1 April 1938, p. 16.

Despite these troubles, various aspects of the organisational growth of the party continued apace in 1938, exemplified by the foundation in July of both a National Labour Candidates Association and a party youth wing for under-thirties, the New Democrats.²⁶⁰ Both organisations had officers and executive committees chosen by annual election, with Harold Nicolson voted president of the New Democrats. Nothing better embodied the “vitality and progress” of National Labour than the “crowded” inaugural meeting of the New Democrats according to *News-Letter*, with the organisation having already produced a pamphlet detailing its ideals.²⁶¹ By 1939, both organisations had their own elected seat on National Labour’s executive committee, returning Nicolson for the New Democrats and Ernest Stanford for the Candidates Association, while a new Women’s Council had two places on the expanded 28-seat executive.²⁶² There was even a National Labour women’s conference in 1939. The previous year, no less than 45 candidates had battled it out for the fourteen elected executive committee spots the 1937 constitution had provided for.²⁶³ Evidently it was felt demand was outstripping supply. Another new feature of the 1939 executive contest was the addition of eight representatives for the area councils, suggesting that these bodies were maturing and now deemed worthy of (or demanding) representation, but also implying that an additional area council had been established. Either a Welsh area might have been created, or else if Wales remained under the auspices of the Western Area, then a council for the North-East of England would have completed the geographical coverage of the entirety of Great Britain.

These developments strongly suggest that, by the end of the decade, National Labour had developed a vibrant internal life. It seems hard to believe that activists would be creating new youth, women’s and candidates’ associations, nor bothering to stand in competitive internal elections, if

²⁶⁰ The constitution of the Candidates’ Association is in *TP*. There is correspondence about the formation of the New Democrats (originally Young Democrats), and its constitution, in *MMP*, 6/5/59-61.

²⁶¹ *NL*, ‘New Democrats’, 1.11 (1938), p. 280.

²⁶² Given E. J. Titler was a founding member of the candidates’ association, candidates past and present were clearly invited. For 1939 executive committee election, see *NL*, ‘National Labour’s New Executive’, 3.34 (1939), p. 219.

²⁶³ *NL*, ‘National Labour Executive’, 1.10 (1938), p. 263.

National Labour was blatantly moribund. Rather, by October 1938 National Labour was issuing its platform for the next general election: 'Towards a New Britain' set out five principles that National Labour stood for:

A strong Britain and a united Empire resolutely determined to maintain freedom and democracy...

A strong League of Nations...

The national planning of our economic life...

The preservation of the countryside...

The steady improvement and greater co-ordination of our social services, with special reference to the system of pensions, education, the problem of nutrition, and facilities for leisure.²⁶⁴

National Labour also attracted a number of high-profile recruits in the years 1936-38 which, again, would seem implausible if it patently had no future. The most notable additions were the aforementioned Beresford Craddock, ex-Liberal peer Lord Holden, well-known author Stephen King-Hall, Lord Balfour's niece Blanche 'Baffy' Dugdale, the first Labour mayor of Middlesbrough T. K. Briggs, left-wing lawyer Arthur Reade and Sir Ronald Wingate, an experienced imperial administrator. All except the peer Holden would become prospective parliamentary candidates.

A growing party also produced a degree of ideological disagreement. Inevitably given the international context, fractures within National Labour formed on the issue of foreign policy. Maurice Cowling was not quite accurate when he portrayed the party as essentially an anti-appeasement ginger group within the coalition, although he did fleetingly concede National Labour was not "united in disliking" appeasement.²⁶⁵ Rather, there emerged two distinct National Labour factions,

²⁶⁴ *NL*, 'Towards a New Britain', 2.17 (1938), p. ii & p. 88.

²⁶⁵ Cowling, pp. 322-6 on National Labour, disliking comment on p. 324.

pro- and anti-appeasement, which again roughly followed the same lines of the fusion faction and the moderates of 1936. The supporters of Chamberlain and appeasement were, in general, old MacDonaldites who had been with National Labour since 1931.²⁶⁶ Lord Elton admitted in 1941 that he had had “illusions about Germany, for, unlike many of my friends, I once fancied that there might be peace with Hitler.”²⁶⁷ Denman was similarly a champion of Chamberlain’s diplomacy, while the ageing Ernest Bennett was even a member of the Anglo-German Fellowship.²⁶⁸

The younger generation, many of whom had joined later, including Nicolson, Dugdale and King-Hall, as well as De La Warr and Lindsay, might be termed anti-appeasers, or at least supporters of Anthony Eden. De La Warr felt deep discomfort with Chamberlain’s “desire to make friends with the Fascist Powers”, contemplating resignation as early as September 1937. He never took the final step of quitting the cabinet, discouraged by Eden and Nicolson at various moments. At a Scottish political school in the wake of Munich, De La Warr contradicted a preceding pro-Chamberlain speech by Church by insisting Britain was living beside the dictators, “but not *underneath* them” and talked of carrying the standard of democracy “if need be in war”.²⁶⁹ Blanche Dugdale attempted during 1937-38 to create a “Foreign Policy Group” within National Labour consisting of herself, Lindsay, Nicolson, King-Hall and Alfred Zimmern which was patently anti-appeasement – in Dugdale’s words, they were all “Anthony’s men”. She asserted National Labour “could not stand for that” should Chamberlain recognise the Italian conquest of Abyssinia and encouraged MacDonald and De La Warr to abandon the prime minister on numerous occasions.²⁷⁰ Nicolson’s opposition to appeasement is of course well-known.

²⁶⁶ DP, MS 12124/13, Letter to Constituents No. 4, October 1938. See also Rose, *Baffy*, p. 86.

²⁶⁷ Godfrey Elton, *Notebook in Wartime* (Collins, 1941), p. 29.

²⁶⁸ David Howell, ‘Sir Ernest Nathaniel Bennett’, in *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, Vol. XIII, ed. by Gildart et al (Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), pp. 13-24, (p. 22).

²⁶⁹ Rose, *Baffy*, p. 62, Cowling, pp. 322-5, ND, 11 September 1938 & 2 October 1938. William Blackwood, ‘Scotland Leads the Way’ NL, 2.17 (1938), p. 109-11. For Church’s attitude see, CP, MS Add. 9560/14/6. Confusingly, Nicolson lists Church as the only other member of the executive committee who voted against the resolution endorsing Munich, ND, 3 October 1938.

²⁷⁰ Rose, *Baffy*, pp. 62, 65, 84-5, 88, 98, 100.

New leader Malcolm MacDonald sat, perhaps necessarily, somewhere in the middle. He told the parliamentary party in the immediate aftermath of Eden's resignation that he felt the latter had made a mistake by resigning on a point of procedure rather than principle, and although he supported Eden, "he could scarcely break up the National Government on so small an issue."²⁷¹ Nicolson had been deeply depressed by National Labour's attitude to the Eden resignation, but described himself as "devoted to Malcolm as ever" after a March 1938 tête-à-tête on foreign policy. MacDonald granted Nicolson license to criticise from the outside while Malcolm, as a cabinet minister, had to remain muted, with Nicolson apparently seeing no contradiction in describing himself as a follower of "Anthony and Malcom."²⁷² MacDonald's comments to Nicolson may of course have merely been good party management, keeping a backbencher happy by telling him what he wanted to hear. Another factor that affected MacDonald's attitude was that, as Dominions Secretary for most of the period 1935-39, he was aware that Britain's imperial allies were not enthusiastic about European entanglements and to go to war on such an issue might threaten the unity of the Commonwealth. Finally, MacDonald held Chamberlain in considerably higher regard than did the anti-appeasers, in part because Chamberlain had backed Malcolm so avowedly in his pursuit of a settlement with Ireland, in the teeth of diehard opposition. There were even rumours that the prime minister was grooming MacDonald for the Foreign Office.²⁷³ Thus, we might regard Malcolm as a conditional supporter of the anti-appeasement faction; he largely agreed with their analysis of British foreign policy but was painfully aware of the constraints the government was operating under and had to maintain both collective cabinet responsibility and party unity.²⁷⁴

²⁷¹ *PND*, p. 317.

²⁷² *PND*, pp. 321, 326.

²⁷³ See the complimentary comments in Malcolm MacDonald, *Titans and Others*, pp. 61-2, 75-6, for MacDonald to the FO, see Smart, *Bernays Diaries*, p. 354.

²⁷⁴ Cowling, pp. 324-6, saw De La Warr and MacDonald as belonging to the "same circle", however unlike the former, it took Malcolm "a very long time" to turn against Chamberlain. The present author would contend that the differences between the two were perhaps greater than Cowling realised. E.g. see *ND*, 3 October 1938.

Unsurprisingly, the Czech Crisis and subsequent Munich agreement proved to be the flashpoint in this ideological clash. A substantial portion of the party's leading figures openly celebrated 'peace in our time'. MacDonald and De La Warr decided against resignation despite their doubts, although the latter did write to Chamberlain to express his "misgivings" about Munich and call for faster rearmament and a system of alliances that would include the Soviet Union.²⁷⁵ Thus, on 3 October 1938, the executive committee and parliamentary party could issue a joint statement endorsing their cabinet ministers' actions and recording their "high appreciation" for Chamberlain.²⁷⁶ As early as 20 September 1938, Blanche Dugdale had resigned from the party, throwing up three times after reading of Chamberlain's concessions at Berchtesgaden.²⁷⁷ Nicolson was distressed but, after some wavering, did not follow Dugdale.²⁷⁸ Nevertheless, Nicolson made critical speeches in the aftermath of Munich and at a National Labour political school held at Eastbourne in early November, he gained "the impression that most of the Nat. Lab. rank and file are on my side against the rest of the Committee", a sentiment echoed by a correspondent of Malcolm's who was present.²⁷⁹ Perhaps emboldened, at the next meeting of the editorial board Nicolson attacked Elton and derided *The News-Letter* as a "parish magazine... that is no more National Labour than Malcolm MacDonald", comments he seems to have almost immediately regretted but point to Malcolm's ambiguous position.²⁸⁰ On 4 December, De La Warr broke cover and made an unambiguous attack on Munich in a speech to a National Labour demonstration at Bradford that was broadcast on the BBC.²⁸¹ Six days later De La Warr stuck to his guns, telling the East Midlands Area Conference that "Democracy will not survive if it is content always to be two years late."²⁸² Three leading anti-appeasers – Nicolson,

²⁷⁵ *DLW*, ACC 5411/127, De La Warr to Chamberlain, 4 October 1938.

²⁷⁶ *NL*, 'National Labour's Attitude', 2.16 (1938), p. 58. Nicolson and Church dissented (see footnote 269). Markham abstained.

²⁷⁷ Rose, *Baffy*, pp. 99-100, *PND*, p. 355.

²⁷⁸ *ND*, 29 October 1938.

²⁷⁹ *DLW*, ACC 5411/127, Goodwin to MacDonald, 15 November 1938.

²⁸⁰ *ND*, 5 November, 14 November 1938.

²⁸¹ *DLW*, ACC. 5411/127, Bradford Speech 4 December 1938.

²⁸² *Ibid*, within the press cuttings for the Bradford speech is an extract from *The Sunday Times*, 11 December 1938.

King-Hall and Lindsay – were invited to speak at a New Democrats meeting later that week, which attracted a “big crowd.” King-Hall believed that Malcolm was “cracking” and had come round to their view that “Munich was wrong and that appeasement is impossible.”²⁸³

After Kristallnacht, and with buyer’s remorse over Munich setting in, the anti-appeasers gained the momentum within the party. Indeed, while a central council meeting in November had been frosty and ended in a row between De La Warr and the pacifist Dunnico, by the time of February 1939’s council gathering, Nicolson was in a buoyant mood – “good speeches and some real liveliness.”²⁸⁴ The Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 confused and frightened the Chamberlainite faction and the rout was completed at the party conference held at Caxton Hall just nine days later.²⁸⁵ By then of course, Chamberlain had delivered his Birmingham speech that drew a curtain over appeasement and the guarantee to Poland was just around the corner. At the conference, De La Warr delivered a “pretty stiff” anti-Chamberlain speech, MacDonald was conveniently absent through illness, and the centre-piece was the New Democrats’ resolution, moved by Nicolson, that urged the government to:

Strengthen our economic, military, and diplomatic resources so as to enable us to reaffirm the traditional principles of British foreign policy from which Britain has temporarily departed, through the events of the past year.²⁸⁶

An amended version of the resolution passed with just one vote against among the 450 delegates. As *The News-Letter* commented, in the “very short time” since they were founded, the New Democrats had made very considerable progress, already able to wrest control of conference and party policy in

²⁸³ *ND*, 13 December 1938. See Cowling, p. 334 for the political tightrope MacDonald and De La Warr were walking.

²⁸⁴ *ND*, 30 November 1938, 22 February 1939.

²⁸⁵ Denman admitted to being “not at all clear” regarding foreign policy after the fall of Prague, *DP*, MS 12124/2, Denman to Guntrip, 29 March 1939.

²⁸⁶ *NL*, ‘National Labour Conference’, 3.27 (1939), p. 4.

the anti-appeasers' favour.²⁸⁷ While the likes of Elton would continue to clash with Nicolson (for instance in opposing a Russian alliance), the bankruptcy of appeasement was plain for all to see by the spring of 1939 and thus the divisions within the party were essentially at an end. On 8 April, a *News-Letter* editorial entitled 'Remember 1931' openly backed Eden and Churchill's call for Labour to be invited into the coalition at this moment of national crisis.²⁸⁸

The election that wasn't

A general election was due by the end of 1940 at the latest and it was widely felt it would be held in October 1939. Without question, National Labour faced the prospect of a fresh election in a better position in practically every respect compared to 1935, and organisationally, in a superior position even to 1931. *The News-Letter* noted contentedly after the 1939 conference:

Once upon a time, National Labour was content to call itself a Committee. No one who was present at the Conference this year can have regarded it as anything less than a party, and a party which is growing. But there is hard work ahead, and still a backwash of prejudice to be overcome... Now that there is a Women's Organisation and a youth section, National Labour is going ahead even faster.²⁸⁹

Thus, the assumption that 1935 marked the effective death of National Labour and that it merely lingered, cadaver-like, for the remainder of the decade is unsustainable. By the outbreak of the Second World War, the party had held four national conferences, three rounds of regional conferences, had established eight area councils with permanent offices and salaried functionaries, and was ready to fight twenty-two constituencies in the anticipated election. The majority of its

²⁸⁷ *NL*, 'Sense and Conviction', 3.29 (1939), pp. 61-3.

²⁸⁸ *NL*, 'Remember 1931' 3.29 (1939), p. 58.

²⁸⁹ *NL*, 'Sense and Conviction', 3.29 (1939), pp. 61-3.

candidates had been in place more than a year (some considerably longer), in sharp contrast to the last-minute adoptions of 1935. On top of this, there had been multiple publicity and literature drives, political schools, loudspeaker tours, an apparently successful rebrand of the party journal and the launch of provincial papers. The rapid success of the New Democrats highlights the youthful exuberance of a party led by men in their thirties that could look back with pride at the considerable social reforms of the decade and promise more progress in welfare, healthcare, housing and education. In an increasingly grim international context, the party's longstanding commitment to national unity and coalition rule no longer appeared so transparently self-serving.

The contrast with 1935, where a party of ageing leaders and parliamentarians had entered the contest with a backwards-facing, defensive campaign and threadbare grassroots organisation, could not be starker. The activities National Labour undertook in the first months of war, necessarily limited as they were, give some indication of the party's readiness for an election. A new pamphlet series was launched, and the annual run of regional conferences went ahead in the winter-spring of 1940. The platform of the Yorkshire Area conference, held in Bradford in February 1940, was bedecked with a poster presumably produced for the election campaign. Ranks of Britons of various classes and professions are shown marching towards the viewer under the slogan 'National Labour: The Coming Force'.²⁹⁰

Unfortunately, as in 1935 with Leeds West, we have only a tiny snapshot of canvassing data for 1939. In the ultra-safe Tory seat of Edinburgh West, of 4,742 households canvassed in the summer of that year, 47 were recorded as National Labour as opposed to 581 Labour.²⁹¹ National Labour's activities in Scotland had focused on Kenneth Lindsay's Kilmarnock seat and nearby Glasgow, home to the area council and office, so the presence of any National Labour supporters is

²⁹⁰ DP, MS 12124/13, cutting from *Yorkshire Observer*, 12 February 1940. See also CP, MS. Add. 9560/14/3 & 9 for dated speeches delivered in this conference series.

²⁹¹ Canvassing results were kindly provided to the present author by Professor Stuart Ball, University of Leicester. The Tories held Edinburgh West with a majority of over 14,000 in 1935. Thus, it was not in any sense natural National Labour territory.

somewhat surprising. On the other hand, Nicolson and Lindsay did address a “crowded” meeting at Edinburgh’s Central Hall in November 1938, so the party had evidently undertaken a modicum of campaigning in the city.²⁹² Historians are as confident as they reasonably can be in such matters in predicting that the National Government would have won a third term in the prospective election of 1939-40. In their analysis of the by-election trends of 1935-39, Stevenson and Cook argued that “none of the swings was large enough to suggest an overall Labour majority” at the next election. Indeed, the pattern of results was “very similar” to 1931-35, which of course ended with Baldwin’s landslide.²⁹³ After the three notable Labour by-election wins in spring 1938 (Lichfield included), Labour’s popularity “seems definitely to have waned”, with the average swing to Labour in the final three by-elections before the war standing at just 3.7%. This suggests the failure of appeasement did not persuade voters to abandon the National Government. Local election results point the same way, with Labour actually suffering net seat losses in the municipal elections of 1936, 1937 and 1938 before the wartime truce intervened.²⁹⁴

What were National Labour’s chances of success had an election taken place?²⁹⁵ Of the seven seats the party was defending, six appear practically safe (see table four), with Nicolson dependent on a repeat of his Leicester miracle. His chances may have rested on whether the Liberals fielded a candidate, as they had in 1935. National Labour was also attempting to regain seven seats: Derby and Lichfield appeared good prospects, despite by-election defeats in 1936 and 1938, given how the party had done there at the last general election. The party also perhaps had some hope of

²⁹² *ND*, 7 November 1938.

²⁹³ Stevenson & Cook, pp. 260-1.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 261-3. Opinion polling, although still in its infancy, also indicated a comfortable government victory, see Mortimore & Blick, p. 420.

²⁹⁵ For candidatures, see *The News-Letter*, and the list of parliamentary candidates in the May 1938 executive committee nomination papers found in *MMP*, 6/5/44-56. Asquith wrote that the party had intended to contest 22 seats in 1939-40, *DP*, MS 12124/10, Asquith to Denman, 1 August 1944. Only 21 have been identified, Bassetlaw is a plausible 22nd seat. The only reference in the source material to Seaham after 1936 is the 1944 letter, so it may have been a paper candidature. H. Rathbone Dunnico was the candidate for either Bermondsey West or Southwark Central – Southwark is highly unlikely as Dugdale was its prospective candidate up to September 1938. Ernest Stanford was likely adopted for Southwark, having contested it in 1935 and was the Candidates Association representative on the executive committee in 1939.

recapturing Finsbury and Southwark Central, but faced tougher tasks in Tottenham, Forest of Dean and a hopeless fight in Seaham. Three of National Labour's target seats in 1935 (Bristol East, Middlesbrough West and Wednesbury) were due to be contested again and presented interesting propositions. As we have seen, the party had put in little work in target seats ahead of 1935 (in some cases none whatsoever), but by the end of the decade these seats were familiar territory. If Labour had run an official candidate against the expelled Cripps in Bristol, might Reade have slipped through the middle? And in Middlesbrough, which had been an exceedingly tight three-cornered fight in 1935, the party had an excellent candidate in the former Labour mayor T. K. Briggs. With the advantage of four years of grassroots work and settled candidates, National Labour may well have improved on its 1935 showing in these three seats. Finally, there were four constituencies the party was fighting that were new ground: Aberavon, Bermondsey West, Bradford Central and Sheffield Attercliffe. While these candidatures demonstrate the expansion of the party (especially in Yorkshire), all except Bradford appear to have been lost causes. How National Labour would have performed in Bradford Central, something of a swing seat in the interwar years, would have been an interesting barometer of party's success in building up its presence in new areas.

If an election had been held and the polls and by-election results were right in projecting an approximate repeat of 1935, National Labour would likely have modestly increased their parliamentary representation. If we were to cut the marginal seats 50:50, it might be reasonable to forecast 11 National Labour MPs returned. With a fair wind, that number may conceivably have risen to 14, matching the 1931 result. A moderate but noticeable improvement on 1935 would at least have altered the historical narrative of a party that was already "quite dead" by 1936. If National Labour had got back to where it was in 1931, a result achieved in unique crisis conditions amidst the greatest landslide in British history, it would have been a noteworthy achievement. Moreover, the election would have marked a changing of the guard (see table three). The septuagenarians Bennett and Rosbotham were retiring and handing their safe seats to far more impressive candidates in King-

Hall and Wingate. Only three 1931 defectors would have remained (Denman, MacDonald and Markham – Church may have won Derby and augmented their number), with the majority of the parliamentary party now being more recent recruits, unencumbered by the baggage of the Labour split. The transformation of National Labour into a forward-facing progressive party (albeit a decidedly middle-class one), rather than a MacDonaldite rump would have been completed.²⁹⁶ A tantalising glimpse of the composition of this new generation of National Labourites is provided by a 22-year-old Reginald Maudling's flirtation with the party. The future Conservative chancellor was, in 1939, "interested in the National Labour concept", suggesting that to budding young centrists, the party apparently appeared an enticing proposition rather than dead and buried.²⁹⁷

It was the outbreak of the Second World War, and even more importantly, the addition of the Labour Party to the governing coalition that destroyed National Labour. First, the delaying of the election pulled the rug from under the fledgling party, denying it a chance to prove its progress. Then, National Labour's explicit *raison d'être* – to be the representatives of Labour or progressive opinion within a Tory-led government – was totally undermined by the addition of Labour ministers to Churchill's administration. Once Labour had a chance to show it could be 'National', there was no need for National Labour.

²⁹⁶ For a good example of the party as self-consciously forward-facing, see *DLW*, ACC 5411/127, National Labour Speech.

²⁹⁷ *PND*, p. 339, Lewis Baston, *Reggie: the Life of Reginald Maudling* (Sutton, 2004), pp. 28-9.

Conclusion: The Strange Death of National Labour

National Labour's disappearance from British politics was painfully drawn out. Ironically, the source material for the party in decline in the period 1940-45 is exemplary.²⁹⁸ Churchill's accession to the premiership and the creation of the wartime coalition brought about immediate demotion for National Labour. Of the party's three ministers, Malcolm MacDonald was moved from Colonies to Health, while De La Warr and Lindsay were dropped entirely. Nicolson did finally gain office as parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Information, but both he and Malcolm were sacked in 1941, with the latter sent into exile as High Commissioner to Canada for the remainder of the war. In the cases of Lindsay and Nicolson, their junior ministerial posts were transferred directly to Labour, while Malcolm's departure from the cabinet resulted in the recruitment of a new Labour minister. There is evidence that the Labour Party saw National Labour spots as their natural inheritance, while Churchill's own antipathy to the MacDonalds was well known; he regarded Malcolm as "rat-poison" owing to the latter's Irish treaty.²⁹⁹

Many now concluded that National Labour's useful life had come to an end. On 31 July 1941, a meeting of the parliamentary party agreed that all MPs and peers should commit to paper their thoughts on the party's future. There followed a remarkably frank series of memoranda. Denman's response was typical in openly admitting that the "chief reason" for the continued existence of National Labour was "the extreme difficulty of dying."³⁰⁰ Elton described the National Labour label as "meaningless" and wanted a rebrand. Lindsay was most constructive, laying out a new policy platform, insisting a small but vocal group could win support in the House and country, and assigning

²⁹⁸ Both *DP* and *MMP* contain extensive material relating to the war years.

²⁹⁹ Although MacDonald's replacement as Health Minister was the Liberal National Ernest Brown, Brown's previous post went to Labour, Ben Pimlott (ed.), *Hugh Dalton, The Second World War Diary, 1940-45* (Jonathon Cape, 1986), pp. 155-6, David Dilks (ed.), *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, 1938-1945* (Putnam's, 1972), p 341.

³⁰⁰ *DP*, MS 12124/10, Asquith to Denman, 1 August 1941, Denman memorandum on 'The Future of the N.L.O.', 6 August 1941.

spokesmen briefs to the party's MPs. De La Warr on the other hand argued dissolution must come before discussion of new groups or names; it would be "more dignified and effective than drifting." Nicolson favoured a New Year's Day press announcement of dissolution so that "we should die decently and quietly."³⁰¹ That this outpouring of melancholy came so soon after Nicolson's sacking on 20 July 1941 is indicative; it marked the end of a decade of National Labour presence in government. Twelve of the party's fifteen parliamentarians submitted memorandums, with a tie six-six for and against immediate dissolution. No one advocated the retention of the National Labour name, nor the party continuing in its present form. In a predictable twist, this is precisely what happened. On 8 September, the parliamentary party voted seven to two in favour of dissolution, with Denman and Elton having switched sides.³⁰² But when the executive committee met on 14 October to consider the resolution, it was defeated. The party bureaucracy and regional structure that National Labour parliamentarians had built in the late thirties to strengthen their hand, rejected the desires of those same parliamentarians to chart a new course.³⁰³

With agreement impossible and several MPs and candidates determined to continue as a party, the issue of even changing the name was simply laid aside. Some disgruntled figures voted with their feet. Lord Holden resigned before the year was out and King-Hall (returned for Ormskirk unopposed in October 1939 on Rosbotham's retirement) left in 1942. Lindsay resigned in June 1943 and De La Warr followed soon after, severing "my connection with a party in which I no longer have

³⁰¹ All the memorandums can be found in *DP*, MS 12124/10. De La Warr, Gorell, Rochester, King-Hall, Nicolson and Holden wrote in favour of dissolution, Denman, Lindsay, Elton, Bennett, Amulree and Markham for some sort of continuation.

³⁰² De La Warr, Denman, Elton, Gorell, Holden, King-Hall and Nicolson voted in favour of a resolution recommending the executive committee and organisation be dissolved, Lindsay and Markham against.

³⁰³ See *DP*, MS 12124/10 for a flurry of executive committee agendas, minutes and memos for October-December 1941.

faith” even though his tentative feelers to the Labour Party were rejected.³⁰⁴ Elton distanced himself from the party around the same time and formally resigned in 1945.

Nicolson, clinging to National Labour to the end, wrote a manifesto for the 1945 election, which was dispatched to MacDonald in Canada for his approval.³⁰⁵ On 25 May 1945, after the calling of the election, Asquith hurriedly telegraphed Malcolm: “Presume you will return at once to contest Ross and Cromarty in support of Government.” MacDonald blindsided his colleagues by replying in the negative.³⁰⁶ The party’s leader would not contest the election, despite having consistently opposed immediate dissolution during the war. Asquith regarded this a “disgraceful betrayal” and Elton was “completely mystified” by Malcolm’s “staggering” last-minute withdrawal.³⁰⁷ A shell-shocked special conference met on 14 June 1945 and agreed, at long last, to dissolve National Labour.³⁰⁸ A successor party was immediately founded, the National Campaign Committee, supporting two sitting National Labour MPs and three candidates at the subsequent general election. All were defeated and the luckless Church was not even given a clear run by the Conservatives at Tottenham South.

Many of the National Labour diaspora subsequently were welcomed into the consensus-era Conservative party; as Asquith commented to Denman in 1953, “most of our colleagues seem to have found a comfortable and more permanent home with the Tories.”³⁰⁹ Burden, Craddock, Markham, and Leslie Thomas became Tory MPs in the fifties and De La Warr served as Postmaster-General under Churchill from 1951-55. Markham lost his Buckingham seat in 1964 to Robert

³⁰⁴ *DP* 12124/10, De La Warr to Executive Committee, 17 August 1943. For De La Warr’s contacts with Labour, see Dalton, p. 327. Intriguingly, this conversation dates from the dissolution drama of autumn 1941, and Dalton felt De La Warr’s return “could be arranged”, even though he thought the latter had “not done too badly” out of 1931.

³⁰⁵ *MMP*, 6/6/40-44. For discussion of seats see correspondence in *DP* 12124/10, especially Asquith to Denman, 31 October 1944.

³⁰⁶ *MMP*, 6/6/58-59.

³⁰⁷ *DP* 12124/10, Asquith to Denman, 30 May 1945, Elton to Denman 28 May 1945 & 12 June 1945.

³⁰⁸ *The Times*, ‘National Labour and the Election’, 15 June 1945, p. 8.

³⁰⁹ *DP* 12124/10, Asquith to Denman, 5 September 1953.

Maxwell, while Burden would display the greatest longevity, serving as MP for Gillingham from 1950-83. Harold Nicolson joined Labour and unsuccessfully contested the Croydon North by-election in 1948, while Lord Holden briefly held office in the Attlee government but died aged 52. Having been elected as an independent, Lindsay left parliament after his Combined Universities seat was abolished in 1950, while King-Hall was made a peer as late as 1966. Malcolm MacDonald pursued a successful second career as a decolonising imperial diplomat, most notably as High Commissioner to India and Governor then Governor-General of Kenya.

The period 1935-39 was the institutional high-water mark for National Labour. The decline of Ramsay MacDonald and J. H. Thomas, although signalling an end to the party's 'big six' status in cabinet, allowed a remarkably young generation of leaders to emerge. The vigour with which these men attempted to build a meaningful party is surprising, given the previous historical consensus on National Labour's moribund state. The self-confidence and optimism of National Labour source material, both public and private, in 1937-38 is notable, until Munich shattered unity and began the uncertainty of the road to war. The party attracted a small, idiosyncratic cohort of recruits in the decade's later years, who were nevertheless talented and well-connected and pointed to a future beyond MacDonaldism. The construction of National Labour's regional infrastructure was the party's signal organisational achievement and by 1938-39 lively conferences and competitive internal elections indicate a living, breathing political party had been created. National Labour had evolved from a committee that existed to buttress a handful of isolated MPs into a small progressive party within the hegemonic governing coalition. The prospective election of 1939-40 would have provided a fascinating insight into the true success of the party's rebuild and potentially laid a platform for future fusion, as opposed to absorption. Had Malcolm MacDonald accepted Churchill's 1944 offer of

a cabinet seat, National Labour might have eked out an unlikely existence for decades more as an allied party of the Conservatives, much as the Liberals Nationals did.³¹⁰

A very considerable weakness of National Labour was chronic indecisiveness; frequently, when faced with difficult decisions about the future of the party, the executive favoured waiting out events rather than taking the initiative. This led to a critical delay in building party infrastructure until 1936, nearly a decade of fruitless discussion about name change, a ten-month leadership drama and the drawn-out disintegration of the party during the war. De La Warr, who had had done more than any other individual to make National Labour a real party, reflected in 1945 that,

It is a tragedy about National Labour. It could have done so much, and yet at every moment when a decision and a definite stand was needed, they failed to come up to scratch.³¹¹

³¹⁰ *DP 12124/10*, Elton to Denman, 12 June 1945, Sanger, p. 257-8.

³¹¹ *DP 12124/10*, De La Warr to Denman, 25 April 1945.

Appendix

Table One - National Labour candidacies in the 1935 General Election. Data on constituency campaigning from March 1935 (JRM PRO 30/69/1333). Asterix denotes three- cornered contests

Constituency	NL MP/ Candidate	Agent in place?	<i>National Monthly distributed?</i>	Cinema van visit?	Calendar distributed?	Usher Prediction, July 1935	De La Warr Constituency Report, 10 November 1935	1935 result & vote %
Constituencies being defended in 1935								
Bassetlaw	Malcolm MacDonald			✓	✓	Hold	Candidate "well received" and "more than holding his own",	Loss, 48.7%
Cardiff Central	Ernest Bennett	✓	✓	✓	✓	Hold	"Campaign proceeding satisfactorily... hopeful spirit", "loyal band" of conservatives	Hold, 51.6%*
Derby	J. H. Thomas			✓		Hold	"Really hard fight... honestly think we shall return both candidates"	Hold, 36.4% (2 member)
Finsbury	George Gillett	✓	✓		✓	Doubtful, likely loss	Great difficulty with shortage of workers but "candidate having... surprisingly good reception"	Loss, 44.2%
Forest of Dean	John Worthington	✓	✓		✓	Loss	Not enough canvassing data to give accurate opinion, meetings "well attended"	Loss, 42.4%
Kilmarnock	Kenneth Lindsay				✓	Doubtful if straight fight	N/A	Hold, 50.9%* 4-way fight
Leeds Central	Richard Denman			✓	✓	Hold	"Lack of enthusiasm", "quite satisfied that we can win"	Hold, 56.4%
Lichfield	James Lovat-Fraser	✓	✓		✓	Doubtful	"Situation hopeful. Organisation good"	Hold, 53.8%
Nottingham South	Frank Markham	✓	✓	✓	✓	Likely Hold	Anticipate NL win but electorate "v. apathetic", lack of Con enthusiasm	Hold, 52.3%
Ormskirk	Thomas Rosbotham	✓	✓		✓	Hold	N/A	Hold, 58.5%
Seaham	Ramsay MacDonald	✓				Loss	N/A	Loss, 31.8%
Southwark Central	Ernest Stanford					Probable loss	Large number of uncertain voters due to Horrobin's "neglect of division"	Loss, 46.7%
Tottenham South	Francis Noel Palmer	✓	✓		✓	Loss	N/A	Loss, 41.5%
Target constituencies in 1935								
Bristol East	Archibald Church					N/A – not yet NL seat	"I shall be disappointed if we do not pull off... doing unexpectedly well."	Loss, 40.7%
Dewsbury	John Fennell					Loss – negotiations ongoing	N/A	Loss, 29.5%*
Leek	Leslie Thomas					Loss	"Running very close" agent believes majority of 1,500,	Loss, 42.6%
Leicester West	Harold Nicolson					N/A – not yet NL seat	"Position doubtful", forecast "small majority" for NL, candidate well-liked	Gain, 43.7%*
Middlesbrough West	William Spofforth	✓	✓		✓	Loss	Attracting following from floating voters, "General position quite good"	Loss, 30.1%*
South Shields	Frederick Burden					Loss	Close, "Candidate doing wonderfully well",	Loss, 23.6%*
Wednesbury	Herbert Dunnico					N/A – not yet NL seat	"I shall be disappointed if we do not pull off... doing unexpectedly well."	Loss, 46.7%

Table Two: Number of speeches at National Labour events delivered & News-Letter articles written by leading party figures, 1936-38. *Speeches figure derived from News-Letter and archival sources. Asterix = excludes by-election campaigns*

Figure	Number of speeches	News-Letter Articles	Total
Elton	4	<i>Editor & uncredited contributor 1932-37</i>	>40
Nicolson	14	26	40
De La Warr	21	2	23
Lindsay	15	4	19
King-Hall	8	8	16
Church	7*	8	15
M MacDonald	9*	1	10
Denman	4	4	8
Reade	4	4	8
Dunnico	5	0	5
Markham	3	2	5
R MacDonald	4	0	4

Table Three: Strength of ties to Labour of National Labour MPs & Candidates, measured by length of time associated with the Labour movement before defecting to National Labour

*The present author has been unable to find biographical information on George Carter, J. E. Crowe & H. A. I. Machen, other than that the latter was serving on Gloucestershire County Council at the time of his adoption in February 1937

Strength of association with Labour	1935 Election candidates	1939-40 Election candidates*
Lifelong Ties (more than 20 years)	Herbert Dunnico, Ramsay MacDonald, Francis Noel Palmer, J. H. Thomas	Herbert Dunnico, Francis Noel Palmer
Strong Ties (more than 10 years)	Ernest Bennett, Archibald Church, Malcolm MacDonald, William Spofforth, Ernest Stanford	Thomas Briggs, Archibald Church, Malcolm MacDonald, Arthur Reade, Ernest Stanford
Recent recruits to Labour (less than 10 years)	Richard Denman, George Gillett, Kenneth Lindsay, James Lovat-Fraser, Frank Markham, Thomas Rosbotham, John Worthington	Richard Denman, Kenneth Lindsay, Frank Markham
No ties to Labour	Frederick Burden, John Fennell, Harold Nicolson, Leslie Thomas	William Blackwood, Frederick Burden, Beresford Craddock, Rathbone Dunnico, Harold Nicolson, Stephen King-Hall, Ronald Wingate

Table Four: National Labour Candidates for the 1939-40 General Election. *One unidentified seat was to be contested, see footnote 295*

Seat	NL History in Seat	Candidate	Adopted?	Chances of victory?
Constituencies to be defended				
Cardiff Central	NL since 1931	Wingate	June 1939	V Good - held with 4,800 majority in '35 in three-cornered contest
Kilmarnock	NL since 1931, defended in '34 by-election	Lindsay	Sitting MP since 1934	V Good - held in '35 with 6,500 majority, polled more than Lab & ILP combined
Leeds Central	NL since 1931	Denman	Sitting MP since 1929	Good - relatively safe Nat Lab seat, held by 4,000 in '35
Leicester West	NL since 1935, previously Lib	Nicolson	Sitting MP since 1935	Marginal - won by 87 votes in '35
Nottingham South	NL since 1931	Markham	Sitting MP since 1935	V Good - safe Nat Lab seat, held by 4,500 in '35
Ormskirk	NL since 1931	King-Hall	December 1937	V Good - safe Nat Lab seat, held by 8,000 in '35
Ross & Cromarty	NL since 1936, previously Lib Nat	MacDonald	Sitting MP since 1936	Good - safe Lib Nat seat, won by 2,900 in '36 BE in four-way fight, won by Lib Nat in '45
Target constituencies				
Aberavon	N/A	Blackwood	June 1939	V Poor - Lab since 1922
Bermondsey West	N/A	Rathbone Dunnico	Before May 1938	V Poor - Lab since 1924
Bradford Central	N/A	Carter	1939?	Marginal - interwar swing seat, 9,000 Con majority in '31, Lab majority of 1,100 in '35
Bristol East	Contested in 1935	Reade	April 1937	Marginal? - Cripps expelled and no Lab candidate as of June 1939
Derby	NL 1931-36, lost at '36 by-election	Church	Sept 1937	Good - lost at '36 BE by 2,500, but NL majority of 12,600 in '35
Finsbury	NL 1931-35	Burden	Before May 1938	Marginal - held by Nat Lab by 7,100 in '31 but lost to Lab by 2,800 in '35
Forest of Dean	NL 1931-35	Machen	Feb 1937	Poor - lost in '35 by 4,400
Lichfield	NL 1931-38, lost '38 by-election	Craddock	Contested May 1938 by-election	Good - 3,200 NL majority in '35, only lost by 800 in '38 BE
Middlesbrough West	Contested in 1935	Briggs	October 1937	Marginal - very tight 3-cornered contest in '35
Seaham	NL 1931-35	?	?	V Poor - Lab majority of over 20,000
Sheffield Attercliffe	N/A	Crowe	Before May 1938	V Poor - 7,600 Lab majority in '35
Southwark Central	NL 1931-35	Stanford	1939	Marginal - won by NL by 7,400 in '31, Lab by 1,300 in '35
Tottenham South	NL 1931-35	Palmer	1936, previously MP 1931-35	Poor - won by Lab by 4,600 in '35
Wednesbury	Contested in 1935	Herbert Dunnico	Stood in 1935, adopted again June 1937	Unlikely - won by Lab by 2,800 in '35

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