

# Commentary

THE BUFFIN FOUNDATION

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

## Britain's Post WW2 Economic Recovery Profiles in Leadership: Herbert Morrison

**H**erbert Morrison was the British Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the House of Commons during the period 1945-51. The Labour government owes much of its postwar success to Morrison, whose outstanding organizational and leadership skills provided the management and direction for the restructuring of the British economy after WW2. He was one of the “Big Five” national leaders who dominated the Attlee government and implemented a program of progressive change. Morrison proved to be an influential thinker, even before the war, urging the implementation of Keynesian policies and values in the British economic system after his election to the London County Council (LCC) in 1922. Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald appointed Morrison as Minister of Transport from 1929-31, during which time Morrison planned the restructuring of the London public transport system.

A leading advocate for the Labour Party in the 1920s, Morrison was praised for his administrative skill and work ethic by his peers and critics alike. He regarded the policy issues and challenges experienced by the existing government as being due mainly to “organizational problems” and resolutely addressed them directly with practical solutions. He was a politician of the people; throughout his career, Morrison advocated policies with the wellbeing of ordinary people at their core. He skillfully used the media, emphasizing his consideration of the people his policies affected in his campaign efforts. He promoted himself as the people’s representative; a “worker for the workers.”

Morrison criticized London’s local government for its lack of coordination between departments. As an active member of the LCC, Morrison reorganized the city’s administrative committees, allowing quick, effective changes in education, housing, and other areas. He believed in the need for nationalization of the country’s major industries and to the restructuring and unification

of London’s transport system in particular. He had advocated for public ownership of transportation before his time as Minister of Transport. Morrison believed full public ownership of the city’s transportation system would resolve the issues posed by competitive private transportation companies. To meet this end, Morrison proposed the London Passenger Transport Board, a new regional and publicly-owned authority. The Board would operate all of London’s buses, trams, railways, and taxis, in an efficient system of public transport, and provide employment security for transport workers, independent of private corporate interests. The Transport Board came into effect with the 1933 London Passenger Transport Act, which Morrison had determinedly pushed since before his tenure as Minister of Transport in 1929.

Morrison faced criticism on all sides for his efforts and fought a difficult battle over several years to see the transport bill pass. Yet through this adversity, Morrison remained a staunch supporter of public ownership and appealed to the public through a campaign that decried private ownership of “our trams.” After several strategic delays, the bill finally passed in 1933. Transport was unified under one authority; railway routes were modified and rebuilt. The former owners of the now publicly-owned transport companies received continuing revenue from their former properties in a tactical compromise Morrison devised. The Transport Board consisted of experienced transport officials; former private transport owner Albert Stanley was appointed chairman to win over the conservative vote. The Board managed the public transport systems in London from 1933 onwards.

Morrison drafted the Labour Party’s famous 1945 “Let us Face the Future” campaign manifesto and made the party’s values accessible to the public through political posters and speeches. The manifesto was committed to rebuilding the economy of postwar Britain based on Keynesian principles

with a focus on employment and productivity. Morrison focused the Party’s campaign on the nationalization of major industries, including fuel, power, steel, iron, electricity, and transport. After publishing the manifesto, Morrison gave many speeches across the country to sway public opinion in favor of the nationalization program. His efforts were an immense success, helping Attlee’s Labour party to win the 1945 general election. The economic reorganization under Morrison’s direction began immediately and he personally oversaw nationalization efforts as the government consolidated industrial monopolies under public ownership.

Herbert Morrison proved to be an effective advocate for the working class and an outstanding administrator. His voice in the LCC was strong but never authoritarian. Morrison was fair but firm, always a man of the people he represented. He let committees manage their mandates, actively listened to their concerns and arguments, and sought their guidance in establishing policies in their name. Under his administration, the LCC and the Labour Party experienced creative, progressive, and most importantly, public-oriented planning. Morrison’s procedures were applicable to more than just the new transport system. His organizational plans contributed to the economic recovery of postwar Britain by providing a framework for nationalizing various industries. Morrison initiated and led Labour Party discussions on the recovery period in 1941, paving the way for the impressive postwar recovery and successful economic growth during his tenure as Deputy Prime Minister.

*Summer R. Buffin, Assistant Editor*

### The Buffin Foundation

1629 K Street, NW  
Suite 300  
Washington, DC 20006

Email: [info@buffinfoundation.org](mailto:info@buffinfoundation.org)  
[www.buffinfoundation.org](http://www.buffinfoundation.org)

