Fabian Society

In October 1883 Edith Nesbit and Hubert Bland decided to form a socialist debating group with their Quaker friend Edward Pease. They were also joined by Havelock Ellis and Frank Podmore and in January 1884 they decided to call themselves the Fabian Society. Podmore suggested that the group should be named after the Roman General, Quintus Fabius Maximus, who advocated the weakening the opposition by harassing operations rather than becoming involved in pitched battles.

Hubert Bland chaired the first meeting and was elected treasurer. By March 1884 the group had twenty members. In April 1884 Edith Nesbit wrote to her friend, Ada Breakell: "I should like to try and tell you a little about the Fabian Society - it's aim is to improve the social system - or rather to spread its news as to the possible improvements of the social system. There are about thirty members - some of whom are working men. We meet once a fortnight - and then someone reads a paper and we all talk about it. We are now going to issue a pamphlet. I am on the Pamphlet Committee. Now can you fancy me on a committee? I really surprise myself sometimes."

George Bernard Shaw joined the Fabian Society in August 1884. Nesbit wrote: "The Fabian Society is getting rather large now and includes some very nice people, of whom Mr. Stapelton is the nicest and a certain George Bernard Shaw the most interesting. G.B.S. has a fund of dry Irish humour that is simply irresistible. He is a clever writer and speaker - is the grossest flatterer I ever met, is horribly untrustworthy as he repeats everything he hears, and does not always stick to the truth, and is very plain like a long corpse with dead white face - sandy sleek hair, and a loathsome small straggly beard, and yet is one of the most fascinating men I ever met."

Over the next couple of years the group increased in size and included socialists such as Sydney Olivier, William Clarke, Eleanor Marx, Edith Lees, Annie Besant, Graham Wallas, J. A. Hobson, Sidney Webb, Beatrice Webb, Charles Trevelyan, J. R. Clynes, Harry Snell, Clementina Black, Edward Carpenter, Clement Atlee, Ramsay MacDonald,

Early talks at the Fabian Society included: How Can We Nationalise Accumulated Wealth by Annie Besant, Private Property by Edward Carpenter, The Economics of a Postivist Community by Sidney Webb and Personal Duty under the Present System by Graham Wallas.

In 1886 Frank Podmore and Sidney Webb carried out an investigation into unemployment. In the Fabian Society pamphlet, The Government Organization of Unemployed Labour they advocated the funding of rural land armies but declined to endorse large-scale public employment as they feared it would encourage inefficiency.

By 1886 the Fabians had sixty-seven members and an income of £35 19s. The official headquarters of the organization was 14 Dean's Yard, Westminster, the home of Frank Podmore. The Fabian Society journal, Today, was edited by Edith Nesbit and Hubert Bland.

The Fabians believed that capitalism had created an unjust and inefficient society. They agreed that the ultimate aim of the group should be to reconstruct "society in accordance with the highest moral possibilities". The Fabians rejected the revolutionary socialism of H. M. Hyndman and the Social Democratic Federation and were concerned with helping society to move to a socialist society "as painless and effective as possible".

The Fabians adopted the tactic of trying to convince people by "rational factual socialist argument", rather than the "emotional rhetoric and street brawls" of the Social Democratic Federation. The Fabian group was a "fact-finding and fact-dispensing body" and they produced a series of pamphlets on a wide variety of different social issues.

In 1889 the Fabian Group decided to publish a book that would provide a comprehensive account of the organization's beliefs. Fabian Essays in Socialism included chapters written by George Bernard Shaw, Sydney Webb, Annie Besant, Sydney Olivier, Graham Wallas, William Clarke and Hubert Bland. Edited by Shaw, the book sold 27,000 copies in two years.

William Morris, a former member of the Social Democratic Federation, and founder of the Socialist League, strongly criticized the Fabian Essays in the journal Commonweal. Morris disagreed with what he called "the fantastic and unreal tactic" of permeation which "could not be carried out in practice, and which, if it could be, would still leave us in a position from which we should have to begin our attack on capitalism over again".

The success of Fabian Essays in Socialism (1889) convinced the Fabian Society that they needed a full-time employee. In 1890 Edward Pease was appointed as Secretary of the Society. His duties included keeping the minutes at meetings, dealing with the correspondence, arranging lecture schedules, managing the Fabian information Bureau, circulating book-boxes and editing and contributing to the Fabian News.

In 1890 Henry Hutchinson, a wealthy solicitor from Derby, decided to give the Fabian Society £200 a year to spend on public lectures. Some of this was used to pay Fabian members such as Harry Snell, Ramsay MacDonald, Graham Wallas, Catherine Glasier and Bruce Glasier to travel around the country giving lectures on subjects such as 'Socialism', 'Trade Unionism', 'Co-operation' and 'Economic History'.

Hutchinson died four years later leaving the Fabian Society 10,000 pounds. Hutchinson left instructions that the money should be used for "propaganda and socialism". Hutchinson selected his daughter as well as Edward Pease, Sidney Webb, William Clarke and W. S. De Mattos as trustees of the fund, and together they decided the money should be used to develop a new university in London. The London School of Economics (LSE) was founded in 1895. As Sidney Webb pointed out, the intention of the institution was to "teach political economy on more modern and
more socialist lines than those on which it had been taught hitherto, and to serve at the same time as a school of higher commercial education”.

The Webbs first approached Graham Wallas, now one of the most prominent members of the Fabians, to become the Director of the LSE. Wallas agreed to lecture there but declined the offer as director, and W. A. S. Hewins, a young economist at Pembroke College, Oxford, was appointed instead. With the support of the London County Council (LCC) the LSE flourished as a centre of learning.

On 27th February 1900, Edward Pease represented the Fabian Society at the meeting of socialist and trade union groups at the Memorial Hall in Farringdon Street, London. After a debate the 129 delegates decided to pass Hardie’s motion to establish "a distinct Labour group in Parliament, who shall have their own whips, and agree upon their policy, which must embrace a readiness to cooperate with any party which for the time being may be engaged in promoting legislation in the direct interests of labour."

To make this possible the Conference established a Labour Representation Committee (LRC). This committee included two members from the Independent Labour Party, two from the Social Democratic Federation, one member of the Fabian Society, and seven trade unionists. Some members of the Fabian Society had doubts about this and Edward Pease personally paid the affiliation dues.

In 1912 Beatrice Webb established he Fabian Research Department. Its first secretary was Robin Page Arnot. He was later replaced by William Mellor. As Paul Thompson pointed out in his book, Socialist, Liberals and Labour (1967): "Its secretary was William Mellor and another leading member G. D. H. Cole, both young Oxford Fabians and both Guild Socialists. Together in April 1913 and March 1914 they led two attempts to disaffiliate the Fabian Society from the Labour Party. They failed, but when Cole resigned in 1915 he was able to take the Research Department with him, thus depriving the Fabian Society of its most talented younger members and resulting in its subsequent stagnation in the 1920s."

The Fabian Society continues today with over 6000 members.

The Fabian Socialists

The British counterpart of the German Marxian revisionists and heavily influenced by the English Historical school, the upper-middle-class intellectual group - the "Fabian Society" - emerged in 1884 as a strand of latter-day utopian socialism. They became known to the public firstly through Sidney Webb's Facts for Socialists (1884) and then through the famous Fabian Essays in Socialism (1889) written by the Webbs, Shaw, and others.

The "Fabians" were named after Fabius, the famous Roman general which opposed Hannibal as they were "biding their time" until they would "strike hard". Exactly when this strike would occur was a perennial question. Eschewing the revolutionary tactics of more orthodox Marxians, the middle-class Fabians were more directly involved with politics and practical gains - through contacts not only in the "International Labor Party", trade unions and cooperative movements but also throughout the entire British political apparatus (Liberals and Tories included).

At the core of the Fabian Society were the Webbs - Sidney J. Webb and his wife, Beatrice Potter Webb (married 1892). Together, they wrote numerous studies of industrial Britain, alternative economic arrangements (esp. cooperatives) and pamphlets for political reform. At the core of their system was the Ricardian theory of rent which they applied to capital as well as land (and labor as well - their opposition to high labor incomes was also an issue). Their conclusion was that it was the state's responsibility to acquire this rent (a position strikingly familiar to Henry George - whom Shaw credited explicitly). Their later admiration of Soviet Russia stemmed partly from Stalin's "efficiency" at acquiring this rent.
As one contemporary noted, "they combined an ounce of theory with a ton of practice". The practice, for the Fabians, was to influence public opinion in this direction. This was to be accomplished, they argued, not through mass organization but rather by the selective education of the powerful "few" who would lead the reforms in government (hopefully themselves), thus they only belatedly extended their appeal beyond the narrow intelligentsia class from which they arose. It was the Webbs who founded the London School of Economics (L.S.E.) in 1895.

Through the relentless outpouring of Fabian Essays and the charismatic appeal of the Webbs - coupled with the prowess of literary figures such as George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells - ensured that they would be indeed influential among British intellectuals and government officials. Alfred Marshall, for one, readily admitted his sympathies for the Fabian cause (although he abhorred their anti-theoretical stance). Philip Wicksteed - who tangled with Shaw over the labor theory of value and marginal utility theory - in contrast, was considerably more critical.

It was this narrowness of appeal that led some Fabians, such as G.D.H. Cole and novelist H.G. Wells to break with the Fabians. Cole went on to establish the "Guild Socialists" who relied more on state-chartered but nonetheless self-governing producer organizations of workers - "guilds" - than on the intellectual-government machine the Fabians preferred. In this sense, the "Guild Socialists" were closer to the French syndicalism of Sorel - albeit a bit more muted.

Further splits in the Fabian camp emerged when the Webbs and Shaw decided to throw their weight behind the British Imperial enterprise - supporting the Boer War and other colonial misadventures - as they felt their reforms (when they came about) would thus have a wider application. An overarching British Empire, they believed, would be a more efficient conductor of reform than a multitude of smaller countries. The Webb's support of monopolies was also well-known - particularly, in their famous 1897 claim that "haggling in the market" (i.e. competition) was inimical because competitive prices always bore down on the workers. Thus, monopolies are more desirable as they would have more room to treat their workers better.

The Fabians finally disintegrated in the 1930s for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the Webbs' unqualified admiration of Soviet Russia seemed distasteful to too many in their group. Secondly, the ascendancy of the British Labour Party on the back of trade union activism had rendered the Fabians superfluous - and this body of working class activists did not trust the paternalistic and nationalistic Fabians (esp. after the Education Act of 1902, essayed by Sidney Webb and against which almost all of the Labour Party was mobilized - although Arthur Henderson, Labour Party leader from 1914 to 1922 was himself a Fabian and it was Sidney Webb who authored the famous Clause Four of the Labour Party charter committing it to a Socialist basis). Thirdly, they lost control of the L.S.E. when Cannan and then, more vigorously, Robbins turned it on a decidedly Jevonian track; fourthly, their intellectual influence during the 1930s was overshadowed by that of Keynes. Finally, many of the reforms they had advocated had actually been undertaken during and after the Great Depression, thus rendering their work, in a sense, "complete". Of particular importance was the establishment of a comprehensive welfare state in Britain in the 1940s following the famous 1942 "Beveridge Report".
The Fabians

Beatrice Potter Webb, 1858-1943

George Bernard Shaw, 1856-1956

Early Fabian essayist and famous literary persona who was one of the most prominent members of the Fabian Society. Apparently, it was Shaw who prodded the Fabians into supporting the Boer War. He once claimed to be the only man in England who had actually read Marx's Capital (although Shaw gave the labor theory of value a twist by noting that it was the purchaser, not the capitalist, who is ultimately robbing the surplus value from labor). However, the private tutorship of his good friend Philip Wicksteed led him to abandon the labor theory of value to become a "raving Jevonian". Most of his contributions were in the Fabian Essays of 1889 and in scattered Fabian pamphlets.

- The Jevonian Criticism of Marx, 1885.
- Essays in Fabian Socialism, 1932.
- Early Fabian essayist and famous literary persona who was one of the most prominent members of the

Graham Wallas, 1858-1932

Political scientist and one of the Fabian Society's "inner circle", one of the contributors to the 1889 Fabian Essays, although he later became disenchanted and resigned. Notable for stressing the importance of human and social psychology, rather than institutional forces, in the analysis of political events. Wallas became the dominant figure in the political science department at the L.S.E. in its early years.

- The Life of Francis Place, 1898
- Human Nature in Politics 1908.
- The Great Society, 1914
- Our Social Heritage, 1921.
- Art of Thought, 1926.
- Ramsay MacDonald

G.D.H. Cole, 1890-1959

Split with the Fabians to advocate "Guild Socialism". Unlike the Webbs, he disliked "state socialism" of the Russian (or any other) variety.

- The World of Labour, 1913.
- "Recent Developments in the British Labor Movement", 1918, AER
- Introduction to Trade Unionism, 1918 - review
- The Payment of Wages, 1918 - review
- Social Theory, 1920 - review
- Essays in Social Theory, 1952.

H.G. Wells, 1866-1946

Famous novelist who broke with the Fabians in 1909 on the issue of mass agitation (or rather lack of it).

- The Time Machine, 1895
- Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress on Human Life and Thought, 1902.

William H. Beveridge, 1879-1963
Richard H. Tawney, 1880-1962
Harold J. Laski, 1893-1950
The London School of Economics