

Malcolm Wicks, 'My Life' - Posthumous publication of memoirs

Monday 20 January, 2014

"As the clock reached midnight at the start of June 17th 1976 I was to be found intently listening to the BBC News on Radio 4. The lead item concerned a report being published in that day's edition of New Society magazine based on an unprecedented leak of Cabinet minutes. These detailed an unexpected U-turn by the Labour Government on its radical plans to introduce Child Benefit..."

- Malcolm Wicks, 'My Life', 2014 (written in 2012)

Malcolm Wicks, former social policy expert, Labour MP and government minister, died in September 2012. In his last year, aware of a terminal diagnosis for cancer, he wrote an autobiography which is published today.

One of the chapters reveals that, while working as a junior civil servant, he leaked Cabinet Minutes on Child Benefit in 1976 to Frank Field, then Director of the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG). They revealed that the then Prime Minister and Chancellor had manipulated the Cabinet to force the abandonment of a 1974 election pledge – to introduce Child Benefit.

The resulting political furore rescued the scheme and it began to be payable in 1977. Without the leak it is very unlikely Child Benefit would ever have existed. Mrs Thatcher was elected in 1979 committed to rolling back the welfare state.

As the autobiography of the late Malcolm Wicks MP is published today, the full story is told for the first time and Malcolm's role is revealed.

In a foreword to the book, Frank Field MP writes:

"Almost everyone who reads this book, even those who knew Malcolm personally, will gain new insight into his life. I can say this with confidence, knowing that the autobiography reveals one secret that until his death was known only to a tiny handful of people. The event took place in 1976 when Malcolm was a civil servant at the Home Office. What he did was to leak Cabinet Minutes of the then Labour Government concerning efforts to postpone and potentially prevent the introduction of Child Benefit.

"I as the then Director of the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) was the fortunate recipient of the leak. So I can readily confirm that Malcolm was, indeed, the source that – with reference to the leaker in America's Watergate scandal – I referred to as 'Deep Throat'. Without the leak of Cabinet Papers, it is entirely possible that Child Benefit would never have been introduced. Malcolm ensured that some truly shameful manoeuvring within the Callaghan Cabinet to ditch one of Labour's central manifesto pledges was exposed. Through what the Observer newspaper went on to describe as "the most extensive leak of cabinet papers [in a] century", he also made sure the CPAG was in poll position to pressure the Government into a further U-turn to get itself back on track. The biggest-ever redistribution of income to families, and particularly poor families was thereby secured – and without Malcolm's leak none of this redistribution would have taken place."

International expert on child poverty, Professor Jonathan Bradshaw, comments:

"The parents and the children of this country owe a debt of gratitude to Malcolm Wicks who died in September 2012. If you have benefited from Child Benefit thank Malcolm Wicks."

"Malcolm Wicks can be given the credit for nearly forty years of financial help to mothers and children, an enormous contribution to the relief of child poverty and to child well-being."

"Leaking the documents was a hugely courageous act. The government were outraged that their shenanigans had been exposed. The Cabinet Secretary was ordered to find the culprit and, when he failed, the Head of Special Branch who "always got his man" was set to search him out. Wicks, then a civil servant in the Urban Deprivation Unit in the Home Office, was never identified. He went on to write the landmark book on hypothermia, 'Old & Cold', establish the Family Policy Studies Centre, become Labour MP for Croydon North and a senior Minister in the Blair and Brown governments."

The social policy expert, Melanie Henwood, said today:

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“Following his death aged 65 on September 29th 2012 the many tributes paid from all sides of politics underlined Malcolm’s dedication, commitment and integrity. Few people would have realised just how appropriate these epigrams were for this determined, courageous, self-effacing truth teller who arguably changed the course of child support and improved the wellbeing of children for generations of families.”

Malcolm Wicks writes in the book, posthumously published today:

“Was I right to leak the cabinet papers? I still think I was. In the normal course of events civil servants, Ministers and special advisers should not leak confidential material. It goes without saying that matters relating to national security have to be heavily safeguarded. But regarding the introduction of Child Benefit there was, I felt, a moral issue. It simply could not be right that Ministers, at the most senior level, should manipulate internal discussions in such a way that the Cabinet itself was misled. I thought – and still think – that in those circumstances it was justifiable to leak or, putting it more positively, to let the wider public know what was going on.”

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