



May 2015

Can't Buy Our Love: Prime Minister Harold Wilson and His Attempts to Woo The Beatles

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Recommended Citation

Aldag, Austin '15 (2015) "Can't Buy Our Love: Prime Minister Harold Wilson and His Attempts to Woo The Beatles," *Res Publica - Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 20

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/respublica/vol20/iss1/6>

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Can't Buy Our Love: Prime Minister Harold Wilson and His Attempts to Woo The Beatles

Abstract

The monumental influence of the Beatles, their music, and "Beatlemania" deeply penetrated into many facets of British lifestyle during a substantial portion of the 1960s, and the dynamic political landscape of this waning world power was no exception. The resurgence of the Labour Party in Parliament, following fourteen long years of being situated in the opposition, simultaneously materialized during the reign of the Beatles. Subsequent to the 1964 General Election, the Labour Party narrowly achieved a legislative majority in Parliament despite achieving a total net gain of fifty-six seats.¹ Leading this movement and a man who advocated for a "New Britain" was a skillful politician by the name of Harold Wilson. Wilson tactfully and strategically utilized many tools at his disposal to push his own political agenda while also promoting his Labour Party, with one of these tools being the Beatles. I intend to analyze the factors that facilitated the rise of the Labour Party, in the context of Beatlemania, along with what led to and what was produced by the interesting relationship of the Fab Four and the Prime Minister.

CAN'T BUY OUR LOVE: PRIME MINISTER HAROLD WILSON AND HIS ATTEMPTS TO WOO THE BEATLES

Austin Aldag

Harold Wilson, in a sense, was to politics what the Beatles were to popular culture. He simply dominated the nation's political landscape, and he personified the new era, not stuffy or hidebound but classless, forward-looking, modern.

– U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair (2005)
Remarks following the death of Harold Wilson
House of Commons Debates vol. 260, col. 907

The monumental influence of the Beatles, their music, and “Beatlemania” deeply penetrated into many facets of British lifestyle during a substantial portion of the 1960s, and the dynamic political landscape of this waning world power was no exception. The resurgence of the Labour Party in Parliament, following fourteen long years of being situated in the opposition, simultaneously materialized during the reign of the Beatles. Subsequent to the 1964 General Election, the Labour Party narrowly achieved a legislative majority in Parliament despite achieving a total net gain of fifty-six seats.¹ Leading this movement and a man who advocated for a “New Britain” was a skillful politician by the name of Harold Wilson. Wilson tactfully and strategically utilized many tools at his disposal to push his own political agenda while also promoting his Labour Party, with one of these tools being the Beatles. I intend to analyze the factors that facilitated the rise of the Labour Party, in the context of Beatlemania, along with what led to and what was produced by the interesting relationship of the Fab Four and the Prime Minister.

The Beatles with their bobbed haircuts were a logical connection for Wilson to both connect himself to the masses and market his Labour Party as a critical piece of popular culture. Wilson desired to ride the Beatlemania wave all the way to 10 Downing Street. This was explicitly demonstrated in 1965 when Wilson played a major role in awarding the Beatles with Members of the British Empire (MBE) status for their positive influences on the “export economy” of Britain as a result of the commodification of their

¹ Wilson 1971, 1

music.² Further, the Beatles and the Labour Party also targeted similar societal groups. Both needed the support of the younger generation and members of the lower socioeconomic class. Wilson also made a number of references to the band in his own memoirs.³ The fascinating association between the Beatles and Prime Minister Wilson was not only one-sided, but was reciprocal in nature. One just needs to listen to George Harrison's leading song on *Revolver* entitled "Taxman" where he explicitly called Wilson out by name.⁴

What it truly meant to be "British" changed a substantial degree during the 1960s. The once monumental empire that the sun never set upon was floundering with its political power retreating to within its own borders. As a result, politics in the UK greatly evolved. Many voters altered both how they saw their own personal role in the political process and how they voted. That being said, the Beatles and all the Beatlemania phenomena could not have happened during a more advantageous time. They debuted when people from all around Britain were questioning their traditional values, political views, and their real place in the quickly globalizing world. As a result, popular music served as an important medium for expression for a number of political movements during this time, such as the Counterculture and the Civil Rights movement. They used music to spread their many messages and it also served as a form of advertisement. Similar to this, Beatlemania gave citizens an outlet for internal questioning along with a place to interpret their own reality. Like the Beatles, Harold Wilson equally recognized the changing country, and he knew exactly how to utilize it to his full political advantage.

The battleground for political supremacy played out in the 1964 Parliamentary General Election. While this election may seem like any other, the Labour Party, which had then been out of power for fourteen years, was hungry for power and sought after a legislative majority. Many citizens also yearned for a partisan changeover in Parliament because many did not see a high degree of progress under the Conservative government, which was led by Harold Macmillan and later by Alec Douglas-Home. Labour articulated its electoral platform and entitled it "The New Britain." It called for an increase in many

² Sandall 2004, 130-132

³ Wilson 1971, 261

⁴ Harrison 1981, 93-95

social programs, such as education and social security. Labour wanted to apply “a new way of thinking” to Parliament and blamed the Tories for forgetting the everyday common man during its own time in power.⁵ Wilson was charged to write this platform, and many scholars have attributed the narrow electoral victory by the Labour Party to this populist manifesto. After the last ballots were counted, the final seat count was Labour with 317 seats, Conservatives with 303, and the Liberal Party with nine seats.⁶

Following his narrow victory, comparisons quickly became evident between the character of Prime Minister Wilson and the late President John F. Kennedy. Both were relatively young for the offices they held, gave speeches in a dynamic and populous fashion, and cared greatly about their public image. Another similarity was Kennedy’s “New Frontier” branding of his electoral brand in comparison to Wilson’s “New Britain.” Jonathan Gould explained both this political phenomenon and their similarities as the following:

Once elected, Wilson’s emulation of the Kennedy style included a desire to associate himself and his government with the lively arts, and with the unprecedented popularity of certain lively artists, which was where the Beatles entered in.⁷

This type of popularity and populism in Britain proved that the so-called “Kennedy cult” could be exported in a way and applied to British politics.⁸ This is important because many also compared JFK with the Beatles and their movement. Politicians needed to change the rules of the game to keep ahold of to their power, and to do this required capturing the masses in the way that both Wilson and JFK did. Whereas some prominent politicians, most notably Alec-Douglas-Home, mocked the Beatles’ music, Wilson thought this was entirely counterproductive and envisioned the group as a possible ally to build up his political base.⁹

To better strengthen their relationship and to better align Labour and popular culture, Wilson included the four Beatles on the Queen’s birthday honors list, which was

⁵ “1964 Labour Party Election Manifesto” 1964

⁶ Wilson 1971, 1

⁷ Gould 2007, 272

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Simonelli 2013, 31

officially announced on the twelfth of June 1965.¹⁰ In addition to the band members, the list also included names of 182 military officers, leaders of certain prominent industries, and others leaders that were deemed worthy of the honor. The Beatles were decreed to receive the MBE, which was the most junior order of the British Empire. The individual members' reactions to this award were considerably mixed. Lennon was rather amused by this political public relations stunt and remarked, "I thought you had to drive tanks and win wars to get the MBE."¹¹ On the other hand, Paul McCartney maintained his normal joking demeanor and asked what him being honored with an MBE would make his father. Nevertheless, one important person whom greatly contributed to the Beatles was left out, Brian Epstein. This was a result of Wilson's singular purpose of drawing the group closer to his party, and there was no room for anyone who worked behind the scenes and out of the public eye. Princess Margaret even reacted to this particular disconnect in an interview that was printed in the *Birmingham Post and Mail* and said, "I think MBE must stand for Mr. Brian Epstein."¹²

The ceremonial honor induced a national debate that greatly divided the nation. Many interpreted Wilson's action as a way of cheapening the MBE honor. This eventually led to a number of previous award recipients, many of which were decorated soldiers, to publically return their own MBEs to the Crown.¹³ Soldiers were not the only ones to return their MBEs. As a result of Britain's foreign policy and their support for the actions taken by the United States of America in Vietnam, John Lennon similarly returned his MBE in protest in 1969.¹⁴ When interviewed by Jann Wenner and asked about the re-gifting of his MBE, Lennon candidly replied, "Yeah. Yeah. I'd been planning on it for over a year and a bit. I was waiting for the time to do it."¹⁵ Nevertheless, this is not to say that Lennon possessed a completely negative outlook of Wilson's. When Wilson's government fell following the 1968 Parliamentary Election, Lennon was asked about his views on the political transition where we remarked, "I

¹⁰ Sandall 2004, 130-132

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Simonelli 2013, 32

¹⁴ Sandall 2004, 130-132

¹⁵ Lennon 1970, 30

thought that the Wilson Government was a big let-down but this Heath lot are worse.”¹⁶ Highlighted here is the specific relationship between Wilson and Lennon, and where one of Wilson’s tactics failed to further align the two.

Although many labeled this ceremonial maneuver by Wilson a misstep, he continually attempted to strengthen their relationship. Later on, Wilson personally traveled to the port city of Liverpool to be present at the grand re-opening of the rebuilt Cavern Club.¹⁷ This is where Brian Epstein first discovered the Beatles on a November night back in 1961.¹⁸ Wilson wrote about this particular appearance in his memoirs as his, “Long-standing date...to open the rebuilt Cavern Club, the Liverpool cellar where it is claimed the Mersey Beat was born and the Beatles began their career.”¹⁹ This is yet another example of both Wilson’s populous political tactics and his attempts to closely fraternize his Labour Government alongside the Beatles.

The Beatles played into the relationship with the Labour Party to a certain extent, but it was not always in the manner Wilson appreciated. Labour made tremendous strides towards a Centre-Leftist political agenda that emphasized increases in particular social service programs, such as increased funding for pensions. However, to legitimately deliver on these programs the tax rate in Britain needed to be increased substantially despite its inherent unpopularity. “He announced two major tax reforms,” Wilson wrote about the announcement given by Jim Callaghan, who was the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time, “One was the introduction of our new capital gains tax, and the other involved a fundamental change in company taxation, by creating a corporation tax to replace the former profits tax and the income tax on companies.”²⁰ As one would logically guess, the citizenry was not particularly fond of this progressive tax policy because the tax rate at the time was already comparatively high.²¹ Furthermore, the top earners were singled out and taxed at a higher proportion when compared to other portions of society.

¹⁶ Lennon 1968, 359

¹⁷ Melly 2004, 172

¹⁸ Gould 2007, 115

¹⁹ Wilson 1971, 261

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 31

²¹ Clark and Dilton 2002

Because of their many musical successes, all four members of the Beatles were members of this top tax bracket. One was more in opposition to this policy than the other three, and that was George Harrison. Harrison channeled both his artistic abilities and feelings for this tax policy into a song he titled “Taxman,” the opening track on the 1966 hit Beatles record *Revolver*. “Taxman” directly referenced both Prime Minister Wilson and his opponent Edward Heath and compared both of them to a tax collector.²² Harrison extrapolated upon his thoughts regarding the song in his memoirs and explained it as the following:

Taxman was when I first realized that even though we had started earning money, we were actually giving most of it away in taxes; it was and still is typical. Why should this be so? Are we being punished for something we have forgotten to do?²³

This reaction from the Beatles both surprised and upset Wilson because he believed that he could easily gain the support of the band, and in turn the votes from their fans, by flattering them with gifts and recognition. From this point on in time, the idealistic relationship between the populist Wilson and the Beatles worsened.

Studying the fascinating relationship between Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson and members of the Beatles is paramount to fully comprehend how Britain changed during the 1960s. Not only did Britain’s international power greatly fade during this time period, but also the societal norms and the citizenry were changing at an unprecedented rate. The Beatles, their music, and Beatlemania could best represent this change. No one utilized both these societal changes and the Beatles to their political advantage quite like Harold Wilson. Although he attempted to flatter the Beatles in a variety of ways to gain the political support of their younger fans, in practice the tactics backfired to a degree on Wilson. Such was the case with the MBEs and George Harrison’s song “Taxman” and the Beatles were telling Wilson that money, and favors, could not buy their love.

²² Harrison 1981, 93

²³ Ibid., 94

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