

## REES, MERLYN (1920 - 2006), Lord Merlyn-Rees, politician

**Name:** Merlyn Rees  
**Date of birth:** 1920  
**Date of death:** 2006  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** politician  
**Area of activity:** Politics, Government and Political Movements

Merlyn Rees was born on 18 December 1920 at William Street, Cilfynydd near Pontypridd, Glamorgan, the only child of Levi Daniel Rees, a coal miner, and his wife Edith Mary (née Williams). At least three generations of the Rees family had worked underground in the coal pits of south. The family were committed Baptists, and an early memory was attending the local Baptist Sunday school. Levi Rees was active in the 1926 General Strike, and his political activities, which included being the first man in Cilfynydd to sell the socialist Daily Herald newspaper, led to the family moving to London, where he had walked to find work and gained employment in a chewing gum factory. At first, Merlyn Rees attended the local primary school in Cilfynydd, where he stayed with his grandmother, before he moved to Wembley and completed primary education there.

By the time Rees was eleven, the family had settled in London, and he won a scholarship to study at Harrow Weald Grammar School, where he was the Labour candidate in the school's 1935 general election. The family moved to Harrow in 1933. Rees went on to Goldsmiths College to train as a teacher. However, war intervened in 1939 and after a brief move to Nottingham, he joined the Royal Air Force. Military service took him to the Mediterranean, including service in the Desert Air Force in north Africa, the invasion of Italy, and the south of France. He was appointed a Squadron Leader by the age of 24, an unusual promotion for a non-flying officer, and was offered a permanent commission at war's end. However, he chose to return to education, attending the London School of Economics, where he studied history and economics under Prof. Harold Laski, before returning to Harrow Weald School to run the sixth form from 1949 to 1960. He also completed a master's degree in 1955. In 1949 he married Colleen Cleveley (b. 1927). They had three sons, Patrick Merlyn (b. 1954), Gareth David (b. 1956) and Glyn Robert (b. 1960).

During the 1950s, Rees became heavily involved in Labour party politics. He contested Harrow East, where his school was located, in the 1955 and 1959 general elections, alongside a 1959 by-election, but was unsuccessful, which mirrored Labour's national performance. In 1960, Labour's Welsh-born General Secretary, [Morgan Phillips](#), appointed him to organise and oversee the 'Festival of Labour', which took place in 1962. The festival was as much about emphasising the cultural side of the wider labour movement, and included sports, shows, and parades and was attended by 150,000 Labour supporters over the 16-17 June 1962 at sites in London and Manchester. Less than a year later, after a brief period as a lecturer in Economics at Luton Polytechnic, he was Labour's candidate to replace its late Leader, Hugh Gaitskell, as MP for South Leeds at a by-election on 20 June 1963. He was elected and held the seat until 1983 and then represented the successor Morley and Leeds South (1983-1992). In parliament Rees built a close relationship with Cardiff MP and shadow Chancellor James Callaghan and was appointed as his Parliamentary Private Secretary (1964-1965) after Labour won the 1964 election. They remained life-long friends and political allies.

Throughout the 1964-70 governments, Rees served in a number of important ministerial roles. He was Army Minister (1965-1966) and RAF Minister (1966-1968) at the Ministry of Defence before moving back to work as Callaghan's effective deputy at the Home Office (1968-1970). In opposition he wrote *The Public Sector in the Mixed Economy* (1973), a textbook that addressed the role of the public sector and was used on sixth form economics courses. While the treatise might have suggested ambitions for an economic ministry, in October 1971 Rees joined the shadow cabinet as opposition spokesman on Northern Ireland. The developing crisis across the Irish sea, of which he had experience as a former Home Office minister, would engross the next 10 years of Merlyn Rees's career. After Labour returned to power under Harold Wilson, he served as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1974-1976), but as the Sunningdale power sharing agreement failed due to the Ulster Workers' Council strike, violence increased, and his attempted management of the situation proved unsuccessful. After Harold Wilson's resignation, Rees was instrumental in persuading Callaghan to stand. He managed his friend's successful leadership campaign and was rewarded with appointment as Home Secretary (1976-1979). Again, IRA bombing campaigns dominated the period, alongside the visibility of the National Front, and the government lacked its own majority to implement potentially meaningful reforms. Ambitions to reform nationality law, for example, never got beyond consultation. However, despite the predominance of difficult public order issues, he instigated important inquiries into police corruption and Britain's secret services.

After Labour went into opposition in 1979, Rees remained in the Shadow Cabinet as spokesman for Home affairs (1979-1981) and Energy (1981-83) and served on the Franks inquiry into the Falklands War. Rees published a reflection, *Northern Ireland: A Personal Perspective* on his long engagement with Northern Ireland and joined a 1987 deputation with Cardinal

Basil Hume, Lord Devlin, Lord Scarman, and Roy Jenkins to campaign for the release of the Guildford Four and Maguire Seven. He opposed the party's leftward trajectory under new leader Michael Foot and remained a vocal and loyal backbencher under Neil Kinnock. He played an important role in the passage of the War Crimes Act, 1991, which allowed British courts to try German war criminals, and served on the Video Standards Council (1990-2006).

He joined the House of Lords in 1992 when he was ennobled as Lord Merlyn-Rees of Morley and South Leeds in the County of West Yorkshire and of Cilfynydd in the County of Mid-Glamorgan, changing his name to Merlyn Merlyn-Rees by deed poll. During his later years he maintained important links with south Wales, receiving an Honorary LLD from the University of Wales (1987) and an Honorary Fellowship from the Polytechnic of Wales (1989). When the latter institution became the University of Glamorgan five years later, he was appointed as its first Chancellor (1994-2002). Despite illness in his later years, he remained active in the House of Lords.

Lord Merlyn-Rees died on 5 January 2006 at St Thomas's Hospital, Lambeth. Following a private funeral, a public memorial service was held at St Margaret's Church, Westminster Abbey on 20 April 2006, where the London Welsh Male Voice Choir performed 'Gwahoddiad' and 'Myfanwy'.

## Author

Marc Collinson

## Sources

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Patrick Maume, '[Rees, Merlyn](#)', *The Dictionary of Irish Biography: from the earliest times to the year 2002* (Cambridge 2009)

Edward Pierce, '[Obituary, Lord Merlyn-Rees](#)', *The Guardian*, 5 January 2006

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## Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Merlyn Rees](#)

## Additional Links

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Wikidata: [Q336534](#)

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