



Public Record Office  
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# **INTRODUCTION**

# **MIDGLEY PAPERS**

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# Harry Midgley Papers (D4089)

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## **Summary**

c.2000 documents, newspaper cuttings, photographs, etc, 1916-1987, comprising the records of Harry Midgely, 1892-1957, Minister of Public Security in the Stormont war-time government, Minister of Labour in 1949 and Minister of Education in 1950.



## **Background**

Henry Cassidy Midgely (later to be known as Harry) was born in north Belfast on 8 September 1892. The family spent some time in Australia but returned to Ulster where Harry's father Alexander worked as a labourer in the city's shipbuilding industry until his sudden death in August 1899. This tragedy created conditions of severe deprivation but Harry's mother insisted that he stayed on full-time at Duncairn Gardens National School until he was twelve years old. After leaving school he began an apprenticeship as a joiner with the shipbuilders Workman & Clark, at the age of fourteen.

At this time the Independent Labour Party (ILP) was becoming prominent, its most notable branch being that of William Walker in North Belfast. Aware of the injustice and inequality that surrounded him, Midgely became involved with the Labour movement from an early age. During the period 1912-1914, the Labour cause in Belfast was completely overtaken by the Home Rule crisis. The city was torn with sectarian problems. Such turmoil may have been instrumental in Midgely's decision to leave for America in the winter of 1912-1913. He returned on holiday in the summer of 1914 and was in Belfast for the outbreak of the First World War.

As a serving soldier the war had a profound effect on him and in addition to the death of friends, Midgely suffered the loss of his brother Alex who died on 6 July 1917. He recorded his feelings and impressions of the War in poetry with his work eventually being published in 1924 under the title 'Thoughts from Flanders'. While at home on leave in August 1918, Midgely married his childhood sweetheart, Eleanor Adgey and soon achieved his ambition of securing a place in the Labour movement.



## **Northern Ireland Labour Party**

By the end of 1919 he became organising secretary of the Irish Linen Lappers and Warehouse Workers' Union and also took on a leading role in the Belfast Labour Party. His first real taste of politics came when he stood as an independent candidate in the Labour interest in East Belfast in the first elections for the new Northern Ireland Parliament in May 1921. It was during a period of serious sectarian strife in the city and Midgely and the three other Labour candidates were crushed. However, he was not to be deterred and stood as a Labour representative in West Belfast in the elections of 1923 and 1924. He worked hard for both the Roman Catholic and Protestant votes in the area and, although he lost both elections, his performances were more than credible.

In March 1932 Midgely was elected Chairman of the Northern Ireland Labour Party and he now found himself in a position to steer the party in the direction he wanted. First, he was determined to form closer links between his party and the British Labour Party, secondly, although in his very early career Midgely had been an anti-partitionist, by 1932 he had come to accept the reality of partition and aimed at impressing this view on his party. This was to prove difficult due to the fact that many party members believed that true socialism would only come from the unity of the island.

In the November 1933 Northern Ireland Parliamentary Elections Midgely finally tasted victory with his election for the Dock Division. He campaigned hard for support from both sides of the political divide and successfully defeated the Unionist candidate, Major Blakiston-Houston. Despite this success, Midgley was to lose his seat during the next General Election in 1938 to the new Unionist candidate, George Anthony Clark. The main reason for his defeat was his stance on the Spanish Civil War. Midgely was vehemently anti-Franco, a position which brought him into conflict with his Catholic constituents who, guided by the Catholic clergy, supported Franco and his cause. Throughout the Spanish controversy there was an obvious hardening in Midgely's attitude towards the Roman Catholic Church and as a direct result he lost the Catholic support that had played such a vital role in his previous electoral success.

He returned to Stormont in 1941 after a by-election in the Willowfield constituency in East Belfast during which he reiterated his view on the border issue - it could not and would not be altered without the consent of the people. The result was an astonishingly sound victory for Midgely, viewed by many people as a strike at the complacency of J.M. Andrews' Government, which had been floundering since the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.



## **Commonwealth Labour Party**

In December 1942 Midgley was expelled from the NILP, the end result of tensions that had been growing from within the party for years. Midgley had grown impatient with the party's attitude to the National question. He wanted to make a firm commitment to the Northern Ireland constitution. However, this brought him into conflict not only with the Nationalists within the party but also with moderates who were prepared to accept the constitution but did not want to declare the party favour of it for fear of losing its non-sectarian image. In early December 1942, it was decided that for the sake of cohesion within the party, that a leader, deputy leader and Chief Whip should be elected from the party's existing MPs. Midgley was unable to attend the meeting and in his absence he was made deputy leader. For him this was the last straw and when his objections were ignored he decided to make the break with the NILP. He was subsequently expelled and immediately formed his own party, the Commonwealth Labour Party, with himself as the Chairman.



## **Unionist Party**

In April 1943, Harry Midgely was appointed the new Minister of Public Security and the first non-Unionist to enter the Northern Ireland Government. In September 1947 he tendered his resignation of the CLP and crossed the floor to join the ranks of the Unionists. He was also invited to join the Ulster Unionist Labour Association and became a member of the Orange Order and the Royal Black Preceptory. In the election of 1949 he was once again re-elected for the Willowfield Constituency. By doing so he performed a unique feat - he had been returned for the same constituency under three different party labels: Labour, Commonwealth Labour and Unionist. His success was rewarded in 1949 with his appointment as Minister for Labour and National Insurance and in 1950, when he was made Minister for Education. He held this post until his death on 29 April 1957, at the age of sixty four.



## The Papers

The collection includes much material reflecting Midgley's career in the Northern Ireland Labour Party and in the Stormont Government and his interests more generally. Included can be found detailed correspondence, 1929-1957, relating to his political career and from such figures as former Northern Ireland Prime Minister, Basil Brooke (1888-1973) and George Simpson, Secretary of the North Derry Labour Party. The correspondence also includes a strong sporting element reflecting Midgley's role as a member of the management committee of Linfield Football Club from the early 1930s (see also PRONI references D3852 and T3824) and later as Club Chairman, a position he held until his death in 1957. In addition, the archive also contains an important series of Midgley's diaries dating from 1928 to 1943 pertaining to issues such as the resignation of the Labour Government in Britain on 24 August 1931. There is also a wide range of Midgley's speeches in the collection, 1940-1956, covering many of the important issues of the day. Printed election material, 1923-1957, newspaper cuttings, 1929-1987, a small batch of photographs, 1917-1953, and 24 of his poems written between 1916 and 1954 are also to be found.

