

THE TURMOIL OF BRITISH PARTIES

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A GENERATION ago the British two-party system held unquestioned sway over the minds of the electors. Theorists and practical men alike commended it. The system had an instinctive basis in contrasted temperaments; it gave an ideal opportunity for argument *pro et contra*, and it enabled the State to respond easily and promptly to alternating phases of political interest. It was a representative system, though not in the sense of recording in the legislature the exact weight in the community of the multiplicity of political groups. It favoured masses of emphatic opinion, and it recorded the great shifts of opinion. What the system lost in the statistical accuracy of the reflection of the nation's mind, each successive government gained in unhampered authority. By enabling the electorate to range itself for or against a policy or a party, the system guaranteed the periodical discharge of the nation's will, be it wilfulness or wisdom. Under the two-party system, politics was a *Katharsis*.

A generation ago the Labour party, of small size but considerable influence, formed a wing of Liberalism. To-day it has 190 seats in the new parliament, or 40 more than the Liberals, whereas in 1910 the Labour party in parliament numbered only 40. It is natural to ask whether so rapid and so deep a division of the progressive forces need have occurred, and whether this division need be permanent. Both questions are very difficult to answer. If the Liberal party had itself from 1895 onwards been well-knit and harmonious, it might have essayed with better hopes to keep its Labour wing, a growing and not unfriendly if somewhat insistent body. But only office and responsibility can truly unify Liberals; and in the ten years of Conservative rule from 1895 to 1905 they were deeply divided. Nor were the Liberal governments that followed under Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman and Mr. Asquith shining examples of concord. The radical ideas of Mr. Lloyd George and his followers were distasteful to many highly placed Liberals. Yet those were the years when the effects of successive widenings of the franchise and of compulsory education of the

masses began to be felt in politics. The popular awakening which the last third of the nineteenth century had prepared gathered force steadily in the new century. Millions of working men, educated under the new system, armed with votes, and organized in trade-unions, surveyed the realm of politics with the first stirrings of instinctive ambition. The election of 1906, which had been preparing ever since Mr. Chamberlain set out a few years before to reconquer Britain for protection and preference, touched the masses powerfully by its long-continued stimulus and by the character of the issues. During the years of Liberal government from 1906 onwards much working-class support began to be alienated from the Liberal party. In the struggle with the House of Lords the Liberals had the masses behind them, but without enthusiasm. A half-conscious feeling was abroad that the reform of constitutional machinery was less important than constructive effort towards improving the condition of the people. Mr. Lloyd George's insurance policy for sickness and unemployment was more in tune with the feeling of the masses than the Parliament Act or the weary and fruitless fight for Home Rule which preceded the war.

The rift between the Liberals and the Labour party widened in the first decade of this century, and widened beneath the surface more than above it. Even if the Liberals had realized better what was happening, and had shaped their course more responsively, the rift would most probably have developed towards the same result. For the working-class movement, which was the creation of half a century of popular education, of trade-unionism, of friendly societies, of co-operative commercialism, of a score of pervasive class-agencies and influences, had become a power and must needs tread the paths of politics. The Labour party, indeed, was already a party of protest: here and there its aspirations and, even more, its discontent found utterance in Socialist views and revolutionary theory. Thus at the outbreak of the war Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, a far stronger internationalist than most of his followers, sharply opposed the mood of the nation, and throughout the war certain Labour elements cultivated a tenacious spirit of protest. Those years of stress reinforced the fanatical traits which were evidenced in anti-war feeling, in wholesale condemnation of the treaties of peace, in the frenzied crusade against capitalism, in nervous impatience of other political parties. The working-class movement as a whole must be distinguished, however, from the nerve-ridden behaviour of its would-be-leaders. It was upon the movement itself and not upon the leaders that the war had its greatest and its decisive influence.

How great this influence was, will be realized at once by those who weigh the circumstances of the time.

The sentiment that vivifies British Socialism to-day is the sentiment of the State. Internationalism is scarcely as yet its keynote. The war enabled the mass of the nation to discover the State. This was a stupendous discovery for millions whose contact with the State had been slight, and who knew it only as a remote power, slow to act and restricted in its range. In the four years of war the State assumed almost entire control and direction of life in Britain. It imposed work and suffering and sacrifice on all alike, dignifying humble lives and toil by the consciousness that all was done and endured for a noble end. The State used men and women, used them up and threw them aside, worn out, diseased or dead. But the travail of war gave life a richer meaning; it touched new springs of activity; it raised the level of motives. The sense of the whole, of corporateness, which the war gave was new and welcome ballast for human nature. In spite of tears and blood the awakening nation realized instinctively the goodness of the new momentum.

The sense of the State, that awoke then in thousands of hearts, hungers now. After four years of vivid wakefulness the nation now sinks again into slumber. The controlling hand of the State being withdrawn, personal issues and interests resume their sway. The practical Socialism of the war declines into a reminiscence. Fighting against fate, the Socialist party demands to have the State brought back as the State was in the war, and to have it thus in perpetuity. It would satisfy the sense of wholeness and corporateness by the nationalizing of all the means of production, distribution and exchange. Was ever a noble lesson worse applied? Old and strong as the nation is, it could not have borne indefinitely the burden of the war, nor will it bear in peace the vast apparatus of a searching control which the State devised for war effort. Its inability and its reluctance may seem to some to be faults. Others will hold them, with more justice, to be a consequence of its love of liberty, and liberty to be among the essentials of life. The war taught the lessons of brotherhood and sacrifice more sharply than any other sign from heaven in the nation's long history. Socialists finger lovingly and superstitiously the outward framework of conditions whereby those great lessons were driven home. The machinery of the war must pass away. The spiritual lessons may also pass, and pass all too quickly. But perpetuation of the machinery will not save the lessons from decay. Those lessons consist in a new or renewed sense of the State, and a vision of citizen-

ship. The sense of the State needs to be satisfied by adequate expression, which cannot be done without more knowledge and freer ideas than the Socialist movement offers to the nation.

In the supreme hour of awakening the working-class movement was dominated by narrow ideas of foreign origin—by Marxian prejudice against private enterprise and by an almost Prussian feeling for the State. The movement, at first so free from selfconsciousness, fell all too soon into the hands of Socialist spokesmen. When the great chance came for enlarging and illuminating the nation's political instincts and imagination, those spokesmen had nothing better to say than "the State is God, and private enterprise is of the Devil." Liberalism teaches that the State is as likely to be tyranny or corruption as to be God, and that freedom needs continual defence. Conservatism teaches that the State, standing aloft as guardian of peace, order and justice, deserves devotion and respect. Socialism is the very antithesis of Liberalism, since it would enlarge the State's power vastly and undo the hard won emancipation of centuries. It reacts equally against the best instincts of Conservatism: for if the State were as Socialists would have it be, its citizens could neither look up to it nor endure it. The merits and the failings of the State are after all no new matter. The two historic principles, Liberalism and Conservatism, indicate the two main needs, that neither the liberty of the citizen nor his respect for the State must be impaired. It is not so very difficult to make of the State a thing that can neither be respected nor be endured; and this is what our Socialists, by giving a crude expression to an old sentiment, would do.

Most politicians and most electors realize that the pre-war view of the State and its activities was somewhat narrow. Thus, even in the Conservative ranks there is a readiness for the development of the State's functions. The Liberal party is prepared in principle for a development of the functions of the central government and of the local authorities, but it scarcely knows how to begin. It realizes that the State within its own ample province can and must serve the community more richly than in the past, while private enterprise too has its province, and its own service to render. But the Liberal party stands mainly on the defensive in support of private enterprise; and, although education and industrial relations and social insurance and the machinery of local government offer tempting opportunities for constructive statesmanship, Liberals ponder ineffectually, or discuss their projects academically, or stand silent and somewhat aloof, while the Labour party, drunk with the idea of the State, seeks for it a gigantic usurpation of all that now lies within the sphere of private enterprise. Now the welfare

of the community rests on two things, on the State's assuming the right functions and performing them well, and on private enterprise turning its opportunities to advantage. Between the State and private enterprise there must be forbearance, good will, and a sincere acceptance of co-operation, since a spirit of usurpation or tyranny, if either should harbour it, must harm or ruin both. Britain is still far from ruin. The Labour party polled in December last less than one-third of the votes cast. In the present parliament it can pass no measures which the Liberal party may oppose. But in the constituencies, and especially in dense urban divisions, Labour still enjoys prestige as the mouth-piece of the newly awakened sentiment of the State, and it will probably continue to grow. There is no clear evidence that the momentum of Labour is exhausted. It forges ahead, despite its Germanized ideals, its headiness, its crudity, and its Marx-and-water revolutionism. It may be doubted if its march can be arrested by anything but its own failure or misfortune in office.

The Labour group will probably continue to expand chiefly at the expense of the Liberal party, until that party, abandoning its defensive attitude, offers to the masses a better vision of constructive statesmanship, and proves itself unmistakably the true instrument of progress. But it is one thing to present such a vision, and another to win recognition and acceptance for it from the masses. While the task of counter-education is proceeding, or even before it can begin effectually, the Liberal party may suffer martyrdom. For the problem of party-government in Britain is in reality the problem of re-establishing the two-party system: and the fury of the Labour attack on Liberalism proves that the new party is aware that the instinct of the nation condemns the group system. The present problem is really a domestic problem of the Left, or rather the chronic problem of the Left. It is an old problem in a very acute phase. The party or the parties of the Left cannot be held together so easily or securely as the elements of the Right. A generation ago the internal difficulties of the Liberal party helped to provide the initial impulsion of the Labour party. The state of Liberalism during the war and afterwards contributed largely to Labour's second great opportunity. From the beginning of the war until the first coalition in 1915 Mr. Asquith headed what was virtually a national government. After more than a year of complete coalition Mr. Lloyd George's accession to the premiership split the Liberal party, and the dissentient Liberals survived in diminished numbers into the parliaments of 1918 to 1922, and 1922 to 1923. But for the emergence

of the free trade issue Mr. Asquith and Mr. Lloyd George would now, most probably, be leading each his own faction. A party torn by strife and swayed this way and that by personal predilections cannot hope for power, or even for the electors' respect. The strain of dissension, moreover, is fatal to the creative and sympathetic moods, whether in a man or in a group. While quarrels numbed the heart and darkened the imagination of the Liberal party, Labour easily effected mass-conversions in the great industrial centres. The Liberal party has struggled for a century past to widen the franchise, and has naturally filled the rôle of mentor to the new generations of electors. Its greatest service, perhaps, has been the education of the electors, a service which may lose as well as gain by tenure of office, and must suffer grievously by party dissension. For nearly twenty years the Liberal party has been immersed in the responsibilities of administration, and for the last seven years it has been distracted by divisions. It has thus been doubly handicapped as an educator.

A few months ago the Left was in shreds. Three Kings ruled there, or none ruled. Three parties and three complete organizations opposed the Conservative government. The double feud within the Left bade fair to ensure the continuance of Conservative rule,—unless the Conservatives should play themselves false, or misfortune unhorse them. Mr. Baldwin's sudden campaign for protection has united the Liberal factions and transferred the burdens of government to the Left. The internal condition of the Left and the character of the election robbed the electors' verdict in advance of clearness and decisiveness. The two panaceas of protectionism and Socialism were beaten; but the Liberals, who opposed both cries, are the smallest party in the House; and though they may justly claim the moral victory at the polls, their rôle—whether in support of some other party or in office—must necessarily be difficult. Since the nation's strategy in the election was negative and defensive, the political initiative of the new parliament—if such is to emerge—must be developed within parliament, and there the scene appears to be set for party tactics rather than for strategy. Mr. Baldwin's attempt to free himself from Mr. Bonar Law's pledge not to raise the fiscal question has called down a veto on any and all initiatives, and confirmed the justness of Mr. Bonar Law's view that tranquillity was the nation's chief need. It is safest, perhaps, to regard the nation as in a double reaction from its vast war-effort, and from the reforming zeal and constructive energies of the 1918 to 1922 parliament. Those were the years of large hopes and far-reaching schemes. These are the days of adversity

and small things, and the nation will be satisfied if the new parliament, its tripartite forces working of necessity as a form of coalition, passes ameliorative measures by agreement on familiar lines. Mr. Baldwin's championship of a comprehensive scheme of social insurance for the wage-earning classes shows in what directions the new parliament might work, and it shows too how far his party has moved from its attitude towards insurance when Mr. Lloyd George's pioneer Act was passed in 1911.

Of the three parties, the Conservatives appear to have the least speculative future. Various elements in the nation's life gravitate naturally to Conservatism,—certain strains of patriotism, of individualism, of social order, as well as the instincts of sport and of property. What the party's attitude to protection will be in the future is uncertain. The three weeks' electoral campaign was long enough to show how deep-rooted is the belief in free trade, but not long enough to permit Mr. Baldwin to detach much Socialist and trade-union support from Labour. A party familiar with Socialist ideas and with the expedients of current Labour policy may well appear to outside observers to be ready and ripe for protectionism. The Labour party, moreover, has drawn its members from Conservatism as well as from Liberalism. In the course of his electioneering Mr. Baldwin expressed his natural hope of dividing the Labour forces; and what he hoped for, others feared. The behaviour of the Labour leaders themselves suggested that they were not sure of the loyalty of their followers on this crucial question. They depreciated the free trade issue; neither free trade nor protection, they urged, could cure or prevent unemployment. Nationalization and a large capital levy offered far better hopes. A sincere belief in the project of a levy is not incompatible with dexterous use of it as an electoral red herring. But the event disappointed the hopes and falsified the fears. Mr. Baldwin allowed himself far too little time for driving his wedge into the Labour party: and, like many others, he underrated the force of party discipline in the Labour ranks. It is not easy to provoke divisions promptly in a party which assumes to itself a Messianic mission. What Mr. Baldwin failed to do in three weeks he and his following might try more hopefully to accomplish in three years. The Conservative party has suffered no such defeat, either morally or numerically, as befell it in 1906: and its deep instinctive sympathy for protection may tempt it, under circumstances very different from those of 1906, to risk another throw on the old issue. If the Conservatives keep protection and preference in the forefront of their policy, the parties of the Left may be driven to co-operate

closely, and under certain rather improbable circumstances to coalesce. Such an orientation of the Left would be more to the advantage of Liberalism than of Labour. But Mr. Baldwin's maladroit challenge and his panic campaign have handicapped his party seriously for raising the fiscal issue again in the immediate future, not to say for keeping it alive. It may be doubted on the whole if protectionist aspirations will be strong enough in the new parliament to revive the fortunes of Liberalism or to disintegrate the Labour mass.

The domestic problem of the Left is not amenable in reality to the influence or the action of the Conservatives. It is for the Left elements in the electorate to impose harmony and unity on the rival factions, if these elements desire to see them united: but if the Left electorate is split for good, the wranglings and the jealousies and the vicissitudes of the Left factions in parliament will be neither to the advantage nor to the credit of the country, though the electoral chances of the Right will be improved. And it is not easy to see how the *intransigence* of the Left factions can be cured. The fact that many Radicals and social workers and ministers of religion and some rich men have passed over readily from Liberalism to Labour might seem to suggest that a congenial basis underlies both parties and that the accretion of new elements must modify the attitude of Labour. But the migrants from Liberalism have been mostly the extremists and the intractables, and some considerable time may pass before these heterogeneous accretions become influential in their new camp. The Labour party descends from the Radical wing of the old united Liberal party, but it is no longer that wing.

What it is, what it is coming to be, is a matter of prophecy, or at best of precarious interpretation. Among its plainest features are its crusading spirit, its tireless proselytising, its *camaraderie*, and its belief in its mission—though its mission, plainly, is not that of Moscow. It is a class-party, by instinct and organization. Its temper is suspicious, and at times fanatical. Pride of class pushes it on, and the Socialist mirage beckons it forward. It feels the allurements of power at least as strongly as either of the other parties. It has the inclination to *over-govern*, and it is therefore *pro tanto* unfit to govern. It is not free from headiness and inflated sentiment and class partizanship, but neither is it enslaved to any of these. The acute and widespread fears of what Labour might be in office are traceable to the extravagance of its leadership in past years, rather than to political grossness or mischief in Labour itself.

This Leviathan, naive, selfish and short-sighted as he may be, is a steadier and wiser and more natural creature than his keepers—the parliamentary Labour party. A short spell of office has already inclined the party to observance of its master. Leviathan liking beer and the navy and busy dockyards, the government withheld its support from the recent Welsh local option bill, despite binding professions in the past, and it is building the cruisers which it forswore at the election. And Leviathan, who has the due wisdom of his desires and emotions and sentiments, has other springs and motions in him besides. He has thoughts entirely his own on politics; reactionary as some, futurist as others may think them. He despises the political game as it has been played for two or three generations by the historic parties. A shallow and hypocritical method, degraded too often into rhetoric and partizanship, yielded—he holds—small and tardy results.

Amateurishness, intermittency, and sheer pusillanimity were its chief faults, and its chief features as well. If the nation's rapid growth excused the procession of half-measures and the patchwork of compromise that made up nineteenth century politics, the excuse holds no longer. A sound nation ought not to live from hand to mouth in its politics; a maturely developed nation ought to face its problems of constitution-building, and of domestic legislation, and of administration, in their systematic entirety. Thus Labour, suspected by other parties of revolutionism, thinks that itself alone of the parties has the courage of the Constitution, because it is eager to round off the system of our central and local organs of government in a scientific manner. Copious information, with bold and thorough theorizing, would accomplish more in a few years—Labour thinks—than the dilettanteism and the cultivated contentiousness of party politics in a century. It would remove political problems, as many as possible and in as many respects as possible, from the plane of emotion and histrionics to that of specialist and technical solutions. It would substitute the study for the hustings, and the expert for the caucus.

Labour's contemptuous outlook on the past is easy to criticize. Neither historic party, to be sure, has ever dared to be thorough. It was enough for them if they could keep the peace at home and hold enemies abroad at arm's length, preserving the vast and encumbered heritage of the race, with little touches of improvement and embellishment. Labour has forgotten, or never realized, the immense growth of the nation in wealth, population, and work during the last century, and its development *pari passu* in home and imperial politics. It may be doubted if any other nation during any century

ever advanced so far, or upon so broad a front. It is the accumulated results of the past that have provoked the petulant political perfectionism of Labour, which has entered without effort upon a very luxury of chances won for it by others. Only in a prepared nation and in an exceptional atmosphere of harmony, only in a period of reasonably uniform convictions, can political problems be turned into technical problems.

The groping of Labour after a technical basis and a technical method is proof of the unifying work of Liberalism in the last century; for the eclipse of the Liberal party coincides with the penetration of all parties, and of the public that belongs to no party, by Liberal sentiment. Liberalism, which thus affords to Labour its opportunity and its cue, has set it also an example. The suspension of party strife during Mr. Lloyd George's premiership, 1916-1922, a period of confidence and creativeness, facilitated—nay, provoked—the very supersession of political wrangling by technical methods and ideas which Leviathan and his servants in office yearn for now.

Such are some of the less obvious relations between Labour and Liberalism. The tension between the two is not without its indecencies. While Liberals insist on fair play for Labour—a fair play very near to favour—and themselves support Labour honourably in parliament and elsewhere, the Labour onslaught on Liberalism continues merrily in the constituencies, Mr. MacDonald and his whips being unable to control their local workers and organizations. But a new movement, cradled in protest, fed very largely by its feelings, and trained in vehemence, is certain to be anarchic. Even its ministers get out of bounds, as when Mr. Wheatley—who last November was busily “cleansing the Clyde of Liberalism”—took a dangerous decision on the Borough of Poplar Poor Law expenditure without consulting the Cabinet, or when Mr. Ponsonby's unwitting reply to a question in the House about Jubaland provoked indignation in Italy, or when Mr. Henderson—electioneering at Burnley—declared for a thorough revision of the Treaty of Versailles in the middle of Mr. MacDonald's laborious effort to improve our relations with France. Cabinet and party discipline will doubtless grow more correct, and rapidly. The campaign against Liberalism in the constituencies will go on less obtrusively.

In parliament the Labour party may be expected to become more and more representative of Leviathan, and therefore more and more like the Liberal and Conservative parties. How far these processes of adjustment and approximation may be compatible with realizing the beatific vision of the technical method in politics, which is Labour's chief and perhaps its sole distinguishing mark,

only the future can show. It may be that the slayers of the Liberal party must needs don the mantle of Liberalism, lest their nakedness and their paradoxical conformation should appear. Until the Messiahship of Labour has been put to the test, the future of the Left in British politics must remain a puzzle.