

CURRENT MAGAZINES

Were We Wrong?:—Mr. Hilaire Belloc, in *G. K.'s Weekly*.

From Hoover to Roosevelt:—Mr. S. K. Ratcliffe, in the *Nineteenth Century*.

The Crisis of the Democratic Regime in Germany:—Dr. Arnold Wolfer, in *International Affairs*.

Mr. De Valera's Republic:—Mr. Hugh A. Law, in the *Fortnightly*.

SEVENTEEN or eighteen years ago, no figure in British journalism was more arresting than that of Mr. Hilaire Belloc. Which of us does not remember the anxiety with which, during dark days of the Great War, his estimates of the German man-power were followed, and how we waited always for next issue of *Land and Water* to see the probable number of "enemy effectives" still remaining? Some uncanny source of information, or some no less uncanny power of inference, seemed to be at Mr. Belloc's command, and his note of comparative certitude was delightfully reassuring. By degrees, no doubt, confidence became shaken. The German effectives which we had supposed to have been used up would reappear with disquieting vigour; and in some fashion for which our guide had not prepared us, the enemy seemed able to call spirits from the vasty deep. But which of the prophets, who in those years offered any concrete prediction, could now stand a scrutiny any better than Mr. Belloc? Apart, too, from his estimates and forecasts, there was a spirit in his writing that had a tonic effect in those depressed days. And if we think of the substantial literary achievement, to which these war articles were no more than incidental, a very high place among the writings of our generation must always belong to Mr. Belloc's French studies—especially to his *Danton*, his *Robespierre*, and his *Marie Antoinette*.

It is less generally realized that he was for a few years a member of parliament, one of a series of "ex-Presidents of the Oxford Union," whose skill in light ingenious repartee, such as undergraduates admire, was thought a presage of great success at Westminster. But though Mr. Belloc's books are very much better literature than the late Lord Birkenhead's, he never secured anything like the hold of F. E. Smith upon the ear of the House of Commons. Indeed his short period in parliament was known to have been disappointing to the Liberal party managers who brought him in, and their press agreed that this time they had made an unfortunate choice.

But when one has said this, one has left it still an open question whether the failure was to Mr. Belloc's credit or to his discredit. There are enterprises in which it is more creditable to fail than to succeed. In the three short papers he has contributed to *G. K.'s Weekly*, Mr. Belloc has explained how one of these is the career of a British member of parliament. There is thus a general theory underlying the personal reminiscences, and it is one well worth serious reflection.

The story carries us back to 1905, when Great Britain, after ten years of Conservative government, returned an anti-Conservative majority to the House of Commons about twice as large as the largest on previous record in her annals. It was a reaction indeed. Mr. Winston Churchill, at that particular time in a Liberal phase of his chameleon-like career, referred to the Conservative party not as "the party opposite" but as "the party in that corner"—a dash of characteristic impudence not unfitting from one who had recently left the group he so ridiculed, and was destined some years later to return to it.

IN that *annus mirabilis* of what Mr. Galsworthy has called "the social resurrection," perhaps the most effective election cry of the Liberals was against "Chinese Slavery on the Rand". This referred to the importation of indentured Chinese labourers into South Africa, and lurid posters depicting these Orientals in chains were to be seen on the walls of British cities. Mr. Belloc says the election turned largely on that issue, "the 'try-on' of the Jewish capitalists in South Africa to introduce slave labour on a large scale." One may perhaps doubt whether this was so very decisive, although certainly it played a great part on platforms. Anyone who knew especially the North of England in those days will remember how public rage with the Balfour Government was ready to fasten upon any pretext whatever, and how through the industrial centres every move of Conservative policy was looked on as Puritans looked on every act of an unbeliever: "The very ploughing of the wicked is sin."

In the search for suitable young men as candidates the Liberal organization discovered Mr. Belloc, then in his 34th year, making his livelihood, he tells us, with some difficulty as a lecturer and by his pen. Mr. Herbert Gladstone conveyed to him the wish of the party, and he agreed in order to add to his experience, though well aware that politics could bring him no money, as he was neither a lawyer nor a company promoter. With a certain prescience he

made it a condition that, if elected, he should not be asked by the party to repudiate any pledges he had given in the course of his campaign. What he apparently omitted to consider was the likelihood that those who were ready to break pledges to constituents would not be more faithful to the condition they had accepted from a candidate.

The narrative shows that on this point Mr. Belloc was soon undeceived. He writes as follows:

The first thing I found at Westminster after my election was that those who had won their elections on Chinese labour were expected to repudiate their pledges. I further learnt that there was to be no division allowed on Chinese labour. The South African capitalists had "arranged" that. One of the earliest things that happened to me, in what some of my friends with unconscious humour call my "career", was a message from the Deputy Speaker on a certain critical occasion that he would see me and I might speak, on condition that I did not introduce Chinese labour. A condition which I refused. I went down to my constituency and told them in those first days of the new parliament of this incident. The exposure made a great stir, the incident was officially denied, and the official denial of course was a lie.

Thus, according to his own account, began Mr. Belloc's unpopularity with the official Liberals. It did not improve his relation with that order when he shifted his interest from the broken pledge about "Chinese Slavery" to the general question of the need for an audit of the secret party funds. Here he roused the wrath of both sides of the House, for on such a delicate matter as that of dealing with party funds they follow Franklin's advice to the signatories of the American Declaration of Independence; "Let us hang together; if we don't, we have an excellent chance of hanging separately."

The lurid tale goes on, describing how Mr. Belloc was pressed and threatened by leading spirits whom his persistent inquisitiveness annoyed. We hear of the technicalities of procedure which Front Bench men on both sides can so manipulate as to make the private member's chance a negligible one. Next we are told of millionaire pressure within the ranks of Mr. Belloc's own party to stop his next candidature at the polls, and of the official groans at the National Liberal Club when his independent campaign was crowned with success. But that second candidature was his last. He tells us how he wanted to win a victory over the forces of corruption at the polls, and then to get clear for ever—"feeling like a man who gets out of a fish-manure factory into the fresh air." It is a simile more striking than elegant, to describe renunciation of British parliamentary life.

So from the House of Commons Mr. Belloc passed into freelance journalism, resolved to expose a system of corruption which he had come to know from the inside. In alliance with Mr. Cecil Chesterton he started *The Eye-Witness*, and before long the crusaders had a great opportunity in the so-called "Marconi Scandal", about which—though under frequent threat of prosecution for criminal libel, they wrote with a freedom which Mr. Belloc likes to think of as suggesting the hammer blows of Cobbett. But the immediate purpose of these articles in *G. K.'s Weekly*, under the title "Were we Wrong?" is to raise and discuss the question whether this last move was altogether in vain. Plainly corruption continued to flourish—so at least the pessimistic critic acknowledges. But was not such work as that of *The Eye-Witness* nevertheless worth while?

Mr. Belloc's answer to this query is the saddest part of a sad and disquieting article. He apparently thinks that he and Mr. Cecil Chesterton did a good job, though they could not stop the scandalous parliamentary intrigues, in that they helped to destroy respect for parliament. Ultimately in England, as already in France, in Spain, in the United States, "politics" and "politician" will be terms of abuse and contempt. But this, in Mr. Belloc's estimate, will be the issue of a decadence which began within his own memory. "The long line which had Walpole at its origin had Asquith at its close." He is prepared to admit that many, perhaps most, of the English professional politicians are not even yet "corrupt". But they tolerate their colleagues who are. The sale of legislative power, of contracts, of peerages, became an orgy on a scale never before dreamt of, and not so much as a word was said by any of the parliamentarians.

I have summarized this violent diatribe, out of the respect which seems due to a man of Mr. Belloc's high repute and distinction. It appears like one of those scorching paragraphs in Tacitus or withering lines in Juvenal which one instinctively feels to be less than fair to the victim. Not at all events until the accused have had a chance to reply, can we agree that so terrific an indictment against the Mother of Parliaments is well grounded. We may console ourselves with the recollection that the House has in the past somehow regained its character after similarly sweeping arraignments—all of them, no doubt, in a measure both true and timely. Did not Dickens explain that as often as a premier got into power, on the plea of something as necessary to be done, he forthwith began to search for means "how not to do it"? And what does Pepys record, two hundred years earlier, of the gossip his cousin

gave him? "He tells me that he thanks God that he never knew what it was to be tempted to be a knave in his life till he did come into the House of Commons, where there is nothing done but by passion and faction and private interest." (*Pepys's Diary*, 31st Oct. 1667). So it seems as if in parliamentary corruption, as elsewhere, there is nothing new under the sun.

IF so dire a tale has to be told of politics in Great Britain, what is the picture in other popularly governed countries? Mr. S. K. Ratcliffe has written in the *Nineteenth Century* about the presidential election in the United States, and the cause he assigns for the swing from Hoover to Roosevelt is more illuminating than comforting. The whole thing turned, it seems, on the depression, not in the sense that the electors felt the Democratic was better qualified than the Republican candidate to bring back good times, but in the sense that Mr. Hoover had undertaken what no man could possibly accomplish in furthering industrial prosperity, and that an enraged electorate had its revenge for having been misled. The Republican Acceptance Speech of 1928 has been quoted, times without number. Mr. Hoover then said:

In America to-day we are nearer a final triumph over poverty than in any land. The poorhouse has vanished from among us. We have not yet reached the goal; but, given a chance to go forward with the policies of the last eight years, we shall, with the help of God, soon be within sight of the day when poverty will be banished from this nation.

It is needless to describe the effect upon a 1932 American electorate of recalling that passage now. Mr. Hoover had taught the elector to believe that American prosperity was due to the Government: they drew their own inference as to the quarter to be blamed when prosperity vanished. Naturally, then, his final appeal fell on deaf ears. It was a burst of ironic laughter which greeted Mr. Hoover's assurance that if the Democrats gained control, the grass would grow on the streets of a hundred cities and a thousand towns, while ruin would sweep over millions of farms. Everyone knew what was coming. So close were the "straw votes" on this occasion to the ultimate result, that Mr. Ratcliffe suggests the cost of a United States election might in future be avoided by leaving it to that enterprising weekly, *The Literary Digest*.

FROM Germany, too, comes a piece of reflective thinking on government which may be placed in the same suggestive series. Dr. Arnold Wolfers has contributed to *International Affairs* an

analysis of the crisis in his own country, but it is fortunately more cheerful than either of those studies already mentioned in that it combines a fundamental distrust of democratic political systems with a fundamental confidence in the ability of at least one European people to rise superior to them. For Mr. Belloc the British parliamentary regime is sound in theory, but has been degraded in practice. For Dr. Wolfers the Constitution of Weimar was thoroughly unsound, but the German people have not permitted its faults to be the national undoing. The story of their amazing vacillations to and fro, of the extraordinary exercise of presidential autocracy in which the public seems to be not only acquiescent but approving, as well as the meteoric rise of Hitlerism, should be understood from this point of view.

YET another sample of the working of the parliamentary machine is that supplied by Mr. Hugh A. Law's picture of the Irish Free State. Mr. Law is particularly well qualified to examine this and to suggest general inferences, because he himself entered the Dail after a very considerable experience at Westminster, so that parallels and comparisons come readily to his mind.

His article in the *Fortnightly* is entitled "Mr. De Valera's Republic", and the name suggests what, under the thin disguise of a Dominion, the Free State to all intents and purposes now is. Nine months have elapsed since the Cosgrave Cabinet was overturned, and it cannot be said that Mr. De Valera has been hampered by any effective opposition, because—though his majority has been small—the leaders of the party he ousted have been anxious to give him scope to show what a Republican-Labour coalition in Dublin must really mean. Mr. Law recalls the promises which, less than a year ago, secured the transfer of power. They were promises, in general, of "better times", and in particular of four achievements by which the better times would be secured: (1) Putting an end to emigration; (2) Finding work for all the unemployed; (3) Reducing taxation, to the amount of £2,000,000 a year, by economies; (4) Retaining the Land Annuities for the benefit of the farmers. It may, perhaps, be objected that a period of nine months is altogether too short to show whether promises on this scale are going to be kept. But it is at least long enough to reveal certain significant tendencies.

The "better times" are still hard to discover, and the orators of the Free State Government do not venture to ask confirmation of their presence from any audience in the country. Mr. Law

agrees that there is no longer a stream of emigration, but points out that this had been stopped before the present Government came into power by the United States quota, and those who think it a boast that certain earlier emigrants have come back are reminded that the constraining cause was not prosperity at home but unemployment abroad. Taxation, instead of being reduced by £2,000,000, has been increased by double that amount. The Labour Exchange records show that the unemployment which was to be abolished is worse than ever, and very naturally, for not only have the Dublin dock labourers suffered from the stoppage of exports, but of the two great firms of Jacob and Guinness the former has transferred a considerable part of its business across the Channel, while the latter has curtailed its activities. Moreover, the Great Southern Railway Company—the largest single employer of labour in the Free State—is not far from the point at which its existence as a working concern must be in peril.”

When one turns to that part of the national revenue derived from rates on agricultural land, one finds—in Mr. Law’s picture—the darkest elements of all. Only a fraction of the amount due is being found collectable, and there is a touch of poetic justice in the reason:

In some measure this is probably an indirect consequence of the Land Annuities campaign, with its atmosphere of debt-repudiation; the Irish countryman making as a rule no very clear distinction between the various demands of official persons, whether the ultimate recipient of the money be the holder of land stock, the Irish Treasury, or the County Council.

Since Mr. Law’s article appeared, Mr. De Valera has taken the plunge of an appeal to the people. On 24th January, the great assize is to be held, and if the *Fortnightly* critic is even approximately right in his estimate of the gap between promises and fulfilment, the public answer to request for a renewed mandate should be sharp. But it is precarious work guessing an election—especially in that country where, as an Irish wit has put it, the unexpected always happens, and the inevitable has never yet taken place.

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