

## CURRENT MAGAZINES

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**What Happened in 1931:**—Lord Passfield, in the *Political Quarterly*.

**The Cabinet Agreement to Differ:**—Lord Crewe in the *Contemporary*.

**Ebb and Flow:**—Mr. Stephen Gwynn, in the *Fortnightly*.

**A Hundred Years Old:**—Mr. W. Forbes Gray, in *Chambers's Journal*.

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IT is notorious that there are very different ways of telling the same story, and we have become so familiar with the account of "What happened in 1931" from the lips of National Government men that it is refreshing to get another version of it from Lord Passfield. We have scarcely even yet adapted ourselves to his title, and have to be reminded by editors of the journals in which he writes that "Lord Passfield" is just our old friend and economic instructor, Sidney Webb. But whatever else has changed, the old clarity and pungency of exposition are still there. Lord Passfield has a quite distinct theory of the sequence of events last autumn; and even though we may decline altogether to adopt it, we owe to this article by so keen a thinker the most respectful and attentive consideration.

It begins by propounding a problem. Why did Mr. Ramsay MacDonald suddenly decide, last August, to smash the Labour Party which he had laboured for thirty years to build up? He did so with the assistance of a couple of his principal Labour colleagues, and a handful of the rank and file. His venture succeeded beyond his wildest dream, and the electoral landslide was unprecedented. The critic attributes this extraordinary resolve, and the extraordinary result which followed, to a number of cooperating causes.

In the first place, he recalls the accumulating difficulties by which the Labour Cabinet in the years 1929-31 had been beset. Any Government would have been distracted by unemployment, by the industrial depression, by the crushing burden of the taxes it had to impose. But Labour had peculiar trials of its own. It had at no time an independent majority, but was forced to rely on uncertain and ungracious cooperation. The Cabinet was overworked, its achievements were consequently meagre, and discontent among the Labour members was acute. Lord Passfield here suggests that the premier became detached not only from his

party, but even from his ministerial colleagues, that he "tended to spend his scanty leisure in less disagreeable society," that towards some sections of his own followers he could not conceal his loathing, and that while he was very much aware of the faults of everyone else, he was "perhaps incessantly rather too conscious of his own superiority". One remembers here the famous cartoon in *Punch*, when Lord Balfour was deposed from the leadership of the Conservatives, for reasons not unlike those which Lord Passfield here enumerates. The cartoon showed the fallen leader in dress like that of Cardinal Wolsey, with a very rueful countenance, nursing a golf club, and soliloquising: "Had I addressed my friends with half the zeal with which I addressed my ball..."

So a change was highly attractive to Mr. MacDonald. But, says Lord Passfield, it was not from him that the first proposal of a National Government emanated. Early in 1931, this came from Mr. Garvin, of *The Observer*. Mr. Garvin's desire was to get a protective tariff enacted; and if one might judge by experience of two general elections (1906 and 1923) when the people had been asked to vote on this, it would be impossible to get it accepted, or even to get it proposed, as a party policy. But if a National Government could be called into being, on the plea of a national emergency, two or three groups might dare together what no group could propose alone. So the emergency had to be emphasised. Here, Lord Passfield points out, circumstances favoured the scheme, for the public finances were in a bad way, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his serious illness drew up a very faulty budget.

Lord Passfield next enumerates again the features of an economic situation which rapidly passed into a crisis. He recalls how the Hoover moratorium alone cost Great Britain eleven million pounds on the year's account, how unemployment and the slump in trade continued to intensify each other, how the drain of the so-called "Dole" grew more intolerable from day to day, and how the Economy Commission gave such advice about retrenchment as altogether suited the propagandism for a National Government. A newspaper campaign for reduction of expenditure on all sides was followed by the gravest warning from the Bank of England that the supply of gold was being exhausted. The effort to meet this by more borrowings abroad encountered a demand on the part of the foreign lender for such economic precautions as the Labour Cabinet declined to accept, and under the circumstances Mr. MacDonald could only resign. So far, Lord Passfield reproduces the familiar sequence of events. He adds that the King "is be-

lieved" to have made a strong appeal at this moment to leaders of all groups for a united National Government, and to have elicited the response which we know.

But what happened next? The Labour peer, who is also an eminent economist, here becomes sportive in his narration. He tells how an arrangement declared essential to prevent the "terrible calamity" of going off the gold standard was followed within four weeks by that very event; and how the moment it took place, the press acclaimed it as a marvellous blessing! For the general election shortly afterwards, it seems, the most skilful array of agencies was set to work in producing a "fear complex" especially among the women voters, who on this occasion for the first time voted heavily in a different interest from the men. So well had the broadcasting of panic by the Government radio service and other instrumentalities been carried out, that the polls were besieged by queues of women with the thought in their minds that there was no use in re-electing Labour "to save the Dole", because if Labour got in, there would soon be no money for Dole or for anything else; that the pound would drop in value to ten shillings, to a shilling, to a penny; and that a raid on the Post Office Savings Bank would confiscate the whole tiny reserve which their industry had laid up for contingencies!

It is a picturesque story that Lord Passfield tells, so that the whole scene comes before one, at this long distance, in imagination. He pays a glowing though ironic compliment to the skill with which the anti-Socialist group contrived the machinery for their purpose, and he adjures Labour to put its house in order, learning from the enemy, so that it may be able to meet such an attack again. Encouragement is offered with the reflection that, after all, 7 millions of electors still voted Socialist, as compared with 16 millions anti-Socialist—a marvellous result for so comparatively short a period of Labour education. A peculiarly suggestive sentence in the narrative is that in which the writer speaks of the power which parliament gave to ministers to effect economies in their own departments "*with such arbitrary modifications of existing contracts as were required*, merely by ministerial fiat"—(italics are Lord Passfield's). Here is his comment:

Such a device, adopted to avoid parliamentary debate, or even specific submission to the House of Commons of the proposed changes, may one day be made use of for a much greater revolution "in due course of law".

Now, what does that ominous suggestion mean?

This is a very lively article, on many interesting aspects of "what happened in 1931", but disappointing in that it neglects to tell us the one thing we have long wanted to hear from Lord Passfield. We have wanted from him, as an eminent economist and not simply a Labour politician, some coherent account of how Labour could possibly have met last autumn's crisis if Mr. Henderson had been returned. The article has told us a great deal about the fantastic sides of the National Government campaign,—and all political campaigns have fantastic sides. What most of us have in mind is not so much the way in which Labour was misrepresented by its opponents, as the policy it outlined for itself. As the campaign wore on, the Opposition was promising not only to restore the Dole, but to increase it! The pledges would probably, if fulfilled, have added a billion sterling to the budget. And if they were not going, immediately, to raid the Post Office Savings accounts, they did beyond doubt undertake spoliation of the holders of Government bonds. On Labour's concrete proposals this article is suggestively silent, and the reader must draw his own conclusion. These women voters had, no doubt, many a groundless terror; but there was a terror that was all too well grounded.

As to the grosser sides of an election campaign, those who recall the successive slogans in Great Britain during contests of the last thirty years will be glad to increase their memoranda from this list. After the South African War, and before the settlement, we heard that "Every seat given to the Liberals is a seat sold to the Boers". Six years later, the air was thick with tales of "Chinese Slavery on the Rand". Only a dozen years ago we had the promise that the Kaiser should be hanged, and the whole cost of the war on both sides be collected from Germany! Is this kind of thing essential in a contest under popular institutions? That leaders of every party are ashamed of it, though they continue to use it, is a sad reflection. It recalls what Lecky has said about war, that no matter how noble the purpose, if you are going to win, hideous methods must be not only accepted and condoned, but stimulated, encouraged and applauded. That is a good reason for abolishing war. Is it also a good reason for abolishing democracy? So says, apparently, Mussolini. It is for democracy to prove him wrong.

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**A**PART from what one may conjecture of his attitude to the prime minister, Lord Passfield does not show in his article any sharp hostility to his Labour colleagues who differed from him and who accepted office in the coalition. One might gather that

he was simply awaiting the spectacle of the fate they had invited, and was unwilling to add to the inevitable misfortune of old friends. Lord Crewe, in the *Contemporary*, takes up the situation a stage further on, when differences within the Cabinet had developed into open strife, and when British constitutional practice had to be transformed in order to avoid a collapse of the National Government within a few months of its formation.

Last January the ancient rule that ministers must stand together, advocating a single Government program, was eliminated from British constitutional practice, so that within a few weeks the House of Commons witnessed the amazing sight of the Chancellor of the Exchequer proposing certain large financial changes and being immediately attacked by the Home Secretary. Immemorial tradition has held that the Cabinet, being in truth an executive committee of parliament, is made up of men whose agreement on principle is assured, and who consult together only on ways and means. Thus a decision has, normally, bound every member. Even if he has disagreed on some point with his colleagues in conference, and has fought hard enough there for his own view, he must either advocate the corporate decision outside or else resign his portfolio. So strongly has this been felt that the innovations made by Mr. Lloyd George in introducing what was called a "Cabinet Secretariat" were watched with suspicion. They seemed to suggest a debate! Even such a practice as keeping minutes of a Cabinet meeting had been unknown, and those who had been colleagues of Gladstone could recall how sharply he had called a colleague to order for taking notes in a pocket-book. The theory was that the prime minister alone should keep a record; that the result having been reached, it was best to forget all about conflicts of opinion which had preceded; that, barring resignations, the united declaration was also that of each individual member; and that the premier's memorandum was simply to enable him to communicate to the sovereign accurately what the Cabinet had decided. The establishment of a Secretariat dates from those war years in which many an ancient custom was dropped, and came from a premier who—though of the legal profession—had but scant regard for "red tape". Mr. Lloyd George desired to have a permanent record of the line which each minister had favoured in council. Was this, one wonders, with a view to coming "memoirs"? One is tempted to exclaim that it was surely the business way of doing things, especially at a time when decisions were on such grave issues, and it was not unreasonable to keep some reliable evidence of the advice which each minister had given. But

the reply was that preparation of data for memoir books was unimportant when compared with efficiency in waging the war, and that the war Cabinet's decision was like that of a war council in the field, where—one may guess—there was neither time nor need for a Secretariat.

It has been said that there is precedent for a Cabinet containing members who agree to differ on some grave feature of policy; for example, the Cabinets of over a century ago, which were by no means unanimous on Parliamentary Reform or Catholic Emancipation. There was the strange grouping, too, of a far later time, which included Lord Hartington, Mr. W. H. Smith, Mr. Joseph Chamberlain and Lord Randolph Churchill. But Lord Crewe will not regard these as real parallels, for there is a great difference between an irregularity which is tolerated or winked at, and a deliberate constitutional change. The real defence of what has been done lies, this critic thinks, in the frank acknowledgment that the whole situation was unique, and that the methods of the past had been definitely discarded. Was the National Government worth preserving or was it not? If Sir Herbert Samuel, Sir Donald MacLean, Sir Archibald Sinclair and Lord Snowden had resigned, it would have been plain that the experiment had failed. Could it be allowed to fail?

Observe the consequences which would have followed. Think of the great problems for whose settlement it was held so essential that the party system should be suspended—the condition of India, affairs in the Far East, disarmament, reparations, war debts, the gold question. On all these issues the dissentient ministers were in harmony with their colleagues; it was of vital importance that they should contribute to a solution from their stores of political experience and skill; and though in Opposition they might, no doubt, support the Government policy in such foreign affairs, it made a great difference whether they had an initial desire to approve wherever possible or an initial desire to emphasise all the discoverable faults. Lord Crewe asks—Was the "principle" at stake in the matter of free trade a principle of such transcendent importance that it alone must outweigh all the rest, and especially at such a time as the present? Especially, too, when no embargo was placed on the free expression of individual opinions even where the policy of the Cabinet was altogether disapproved? The question, then, resolved itself into this:—Was the free trade policy such that all—or nearly all—other policies had to be transformed in the light of it? One would not think so, from the fact that even the dissentient ministers were able to concur in the Abnormal Importations Act and the Horticulture Products Act.



Moreover, even from the point of view of a very determined free trader, it might be argued that it was much better to join a protectionist Cabinet with the prospect of restraining the extent of its ravages from within, rather than remain outside in doctrinaire and futile opposition. This 10 per cent tax is very far from the limit of what real protectionists desire. Wheat and meat are still on the free list. A glance at the duties so far imposed is enough to show how the wishes of the thorough-going tariff men have been bridled, and it is impossible to doubt from what quarter the restraint came. Lord Crewe asks—

Does anybody believe that the Government Bill fore-shadowed in the debate of the 4th of February would have been presented in its existing form had a Conservative Government been in power? The reception given to it by the right-wing Conservatives in that debate shows the sort of pressure that they would have applied to their own Front Bench—and who can say that it would have failed?

Moreover, was there any certainty that the Labour men would resist a strong protectionist measure, drawn with adequate skill to suit their special taste? Nothing could be more consonant than a high-tariff policy with the views of men who would like to see finance, domestic production and the sale of commodities all under Government control. From two directions, then, the free trade cause was endangered, and the extraordinary situation called for extraordinary measures:

Liberals may find, one of these days, that they are fighting on two fronts; and they will not forget to thank the staunch leaders of the party who have been content to deal with facts as they have had to face them.

The weakness of this argument by Lord Crewe seems to be that it proves immensely too much. Once you have reconciled yourself, casuistically, to joining a Government with which you are in profound disagreement, on the plea that it is better for you to keep some shreds of influence by a partial support than to reduce yourself to powerlessness by complete opposition, is there any limit to the party manoeuvring you can justify? A passage from George Eliot comes back to my mind:

There is a terrible coercion in our deeds, which may first turn the honest man into a deceiver and then reconcile him to the change; for this reason—that the second wrong presents itself to him in the guise of the only practicable right. The action which, before commission, has been seen with that blended common

sense and fresh untarnished feeling which is the healthy eye of the soul, is looked at afterwards with the lens of apologetic ingenuity, through which all things that men call beautiful and ugly are seen to be made up of features very much alike. Europe adjusts itself to a *fait accompli*, and so does an individual character,—until the placid adjustment is disturbed by a convulsive retribution.<sup>1</sup>

Lord Crewe's plea that the extremists on both sides are against the retention of office by these dissentient ministers is one whose significance is perhaps other than he supposes. Mr. Amery and Sir Henry Page Croft on the one side are impatient, it seems, for a thoroughly protectionist administration; while "some Liberals of note" are no less impatient of the sacrifice of "principle". Does this show that the judicious middle course has been adopted? It is at least arguable that either of the extremes has more to be said for it, and that the mediators—like the pessimist of old—are men who "of two evils choose both".

The constitutional point is indeed one of deep and far-reaching interest. As soon as it seemed that the old rule must be violated in a special emergency, numerous considerations were of course put forward to show that the rule had never been a good one. It was said that no group of intelligent men could be expected to agree on all subjects; that, notoriously, Cabinets had often been divided in opinion in the past, and that it is plainly better for the members to state their differences openly than to resort to concealment and pretence. If a majority rules in the House, why not in the Cabinet? Had there not, under the old arrangement, been a great sacrifice of efficiency? The nation's business has need of all its ablest men, but could secure only that particular group of them which chanced to be able to agree on every possible detail; hence in the most urgent situations it has had to dispense with the wisdom of some of those best fitted to guide it, and to be satisfied with second class brains, which—probably just *because* they were second class—were capable of exact coincidence. Some of the newspapers last January urged that this change would restore prestige to parliament. Once the Cabinet itself was permitted to have internal differences and to express them, the House would similarly divide in accordance with individual conviction, and not—as previously—in slavish obedience to the party whip. Nor would this mean sheer discord and instability. Private members, like these dissentient ministers, would never imperil the fate of a Government in whose general policy they believed, merely on account of difference about a matter of detail.

1. *Adam Bede*, chapter xxix



On the other side of the argument, the situation was summed up rather neatly by one publicist in a single sentence: "In order to maintain the front line, the battalions will be allowed to fire upon each other". It is surely plain that an Executive Committee whose members are not only engaged in disputes privately, but ridiculing one another's policies on the public platform must lose in effectiveness. And can anyone really look forward with contentment to what would follow if the ancient party system should break down in the House? Instead of two or three parties, there might be as many as there are different combinations of opinion, the Cabinet setting the pattern of selective variety! Ministers, too, are only human, and we can well imagine the satisfaction with which one of them will watch a policy he opposed in Cabinet coming to grief in the execution. It can hardly be other than disastrous that the member of any Executive should hope for the failure of one of the Executive's major enterprises. Do we want to see the continental system of groups, changing with kaleidoscopic capriciousness? Imagine, too, the confusion of the voter at an election, and how hard it will be to fix real responsibility for any disastrous project.

Was it, then, worth while, for the sake of retaining these four ministers, with the extremely dubious support they now give, to run such risks with the ancient fabric of the British parliamentary constitution? Does any reasonable man doubt that their patriotism, even if they had crossed the floor, might have been relied upon at critical times? Mr. Lloyd George's ferocious attacks upon his former colleagues, with his recent epigram about the National Government as pretending to supply an "emergency exit" when it was really contriving a "trap", may be more entertaining than convincing. But with the fullest belief not only in the need for a National Government, but in the need for a protective tariff, one may well argue that these four ministers, so radically differing from their colleagues, would have consulted not only their own fame but the public good by withdrawing into the ranks of "His Majesty's loyal Opposition".

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IT was the proud boast of the founders of *Chambers's Journal* that theirs was the first publication in which "original and respectable literature was conveyed at the minimum of price for the use of the public at large". This claim, quoted by Mr. Gray in this centenary year, stirs one to curious reflection. It recalls the purpose of *The Tatler*, avowed in the famous advertisement of a century before:—"to offer something whereby worthy and well-

affected members of the commonwealth may be instructed, after their reading, what to think". By the time of the founding of *Chambers's Journal* the didactic note had become less obtrusive in the periodical press, and an editor's plan of edification was more cunningly disguised. It does not seem to have been a single merit, but a remarkable blend of merits, by which this particular journal was supposed to be distinguished. One remembers the *Edinburgh*, the *Quarterly*, *Blackwood's*, the *Westminster*, all prior to *Chambers's*, and one wonders in which of the four qualities enumerated above they respectively fell short, so that none was at the same time so original, so respectable, so wide in its appeal, and so unexacting in its cost. But the difference becomes plain when the publications are viewed side by side, and it was plainer at their inception than it is now. *Chambers's Journal* was intended from the first to serve a much more general and more popular clientèle. It began neither as a quarterly nor as a monthly, but as a weekly, and at a price designed to make it accessible to all. Moreover, it instructed without unduly shocking its readers. One remembers the lament over Andrew Pringle, in *The Ayrshire Legatees*:

infected with the blue and yellow calamity of the *Edinburgh Review*, in which, I am credibly told, it is set forth that women have nae souls, but only gut and a gaw and a gizzard, like a pigeon-dove or a raven-crow, or any other outcast and abominated quadruped.<sup>1</sup>

John Galt had no such popular alarm to recount over the impiety of *Chambers's Journal*.

A centenary is a time for reminiscence, and for imaginative reconstruction of the past. Mr. Gray fitly reminds us how 1832 was the year of the passage of the Reform Bill, how the Reform era was marked by a wave of intellectual curiosity among the masses, and how William Chambers was able to appeal to "the universal appetite for instruction which now exists." That he did not appeal in vain was made clear by the rapid acquisition of 200,000 readers, and by the discovery that this weekly magazine was using a great deal more paper each year than all the existing Scottish newspapers combined.

True to its moral purpose, it tried from the first to meet special needs. Mr. Gray supplies us here with a curious list from the early pages of the *Journal*. For those whom old age and bad weather prevented from going to church, it provided "excellent pithy passages from the works of the great British moralists". Minds given to enquiry into the constitution of man were promised extracts

1. Galt, *The Ayrshire Legatees*, p. 205.

from Newton and Bacon, from the learned Encyclopaedists, "and other English luminaries of the present and preceding ages". An artisan would get "little paragraphs from the best writers" about his own industry; the poor man who thought of emigrating would be supplied with "valuable and correct information". For boys there would be "lots of nice little stories about travellers in Asia and Africa", while ladies and gentlemen of the old school might depend on the editor for "innumerable amusing traditional anecdotes".

At the end of a century (and such a century, with such an ending!) it is a great thing for a magazine to be still alive, and the life of *Chambers's Journal* is of the most vigorous kind. It now reflects with satisfaction on the long list of brilliant writers who have made its pages their channel—from Miss Mitford and James Hogg, Hugh Miller and Maria Edgeworth and Mrs. Gaskell of long ago, to George Meredith and Thomas Hardy, Conan Doyle and Walter Besant of recent times. And even better than the attraction of so many notable writers is this central achievement:

If there is one thing more than another that the *Journal* has demonstrated beyond cavil, it is that there is a large section of the reading public which has no relish for snippets, gossip, crude jokes, and blood-curdling or sex-obsessed fiction, but which welcomes matter that quickens and enlarges the understanding as well as entertains and amuses.

What can be said at such a time, to the proprietors of such a magazine, except that they open their second century with all good men's cordial felicitations on the past and best wishes for the future?

H. L. S.