

CURRENT MAGAZINES

Mr. Bevin gives a Lead—Editorial, in *Time and Tide*.

Capitalism and Full Employment—Mr. I. F. Stone, in the *Nation*.

Britain and the Peace—Mr. A. L. Kennedy, in the *Quarterly*.

Politics, Problems and People—Miss Mary Seaton, in *Free World*.

WITHIN the three months which have elapsed since last issue of the REVIEW went to press, an event of great interest and of enormous possibilities for the future has happened in the political world. Not only has Great Britain acquired a Labour government, she has got such a government with an overwhelming independent majority. British Socialism has more than once before been in office, but never before was it really in power. What are the expectations, hopes or fears, which the event has stimulated? Naturally this has been the dominant topic in many current magazines.

I.

The result of the election was a great surprise. Anyone who read between the lines of forecast from those most competent to judge in London could not fail to notice, as the polling drew near, that there was deep apprehension among Mr. Churchill's press friends. The bold front of confidence, like Shakespeare's native hue of resolution, was being more and more visibly sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought. Not an overwhelming majority, but a "comfortable" majority was the promise of even the most sanguine in those late June days. When Mr. Churchill himself, after the experience so singular for him of inability to obtain a hearing, told his Labour interrupters they were about to get the worst thrashing Labour had ever known at the polls, his friends at Conservative editorial headquarters could but feel that such was the correct fighting spirit—like that of the German High Command at its eleventh hour. But neither in the most sanguine of Labour nor in the most sombre of Conservative circles was it expected that the change would be on anything like such a scale as the result of the poll revealed. In many well-informed quarters at home, and predominantly abroad, it was the expectation that the government would be sustained, but by a substantially, perhaps a heavily, reduced majority. Our sufficient evidence of this was in the despatches sent from London by the exceedingly careful and well-informed correspondent of the *New York Times*. That Labour would be returned

to power with almost two hundred seats in the House more than those which fell to all other groups combined, was far indeed from the dream of any responsible observer.

When one asks what led to such a result, what forces of quite unrealized strength so operated as to confound the prophets, the answer—after much competitive analysis in the two months which followed—has become tolerably clear. Conspicuous among the causes was a mood of fierce resentment against what was judged unscrupulous strategy in the government action. Why, people asked, was it needful to dissolve parliament at such a time, with a war still raging? The answer at once suggested itself that Mr. Churchill was calculating on effective use of the German surrender, and that the use he had in mind was for party advantage. In a word, warned by the case of Lloyd George whose war record so soon ceased to exercise its first effect, he would make his bay while the political sun shone. He would exploit the national victory for the purpose of rivetting upon Great Britain the yoke of Conservative rule for another five-year period. The victory had been no special achievement of Conservatives: it had been national, as the Prime Minister had himself so often set forth in one of his "purple patches" of eloquence. But while it was still incomplete, while Japan was still far from the mood of surrender, and while Labour representatives in the Coalition Cabinet were still straining every nerve to keep Labour at utmost tension for national service, the Coalition Leader addressed a Conservative Convention in just the old party mood. He spoke of coming peace policies, and indicated his firm resolve to frustrate any such "Socialist" plans for the country's future as those to which he knew that his Labour colleagues had long been pledged.

It was one conjecture that Mr. Churchill did this by deliberate design to break the Coalition, at the time he judged most propitious for his success at the polls. He cannot surely have doubted that the Socialist leaders to whom he threw out such challenge would take it up, but he thought the circumstances such as to provide the maximum probability that, taking it up then, they would lose. So, on the old principle that one is accountable for the consequences of one's actions so far as those consequences can be foreseen, he must be regarded as accountable for precipitating the election.

With a following in the House of about two hundred members, he has assumed the responsibilities of Leader of Opposition

as all who knew him were sure that he would. The great decoration of the Garter, which his Sovereign pressed upon him, he begged leave with all respect to decline. His plans, no doubt, were for continuing to mingle in the strife and dust of the political arena after a manner which would be thought unseemly for the insignia of that select Order. He will be a most formidable critic, as he was a far-seeing minister. One can count upon the same intrepidity, the same dialectic skill, the same felicitous eloquence as he rises from the front bench on Mr. Speaker's left. But his country can count also on qualities still more precious than the talent which long ago placed him and has steadily kept him in the succession of great parliamentary leaders. To Mr. Churchill in Opposition as in Power, the paramount concern will be for his country, and no party advantage will be permitted to divert his purpose (though, subject to the common human fallibility, his judgment may thus be misled) from serving what he believes the highest interest of Great Britain. Already he has exemplified this by his enthusiastic support of his successful competitor's policy in the dispute with the Soviet Union.

II

Announcement of the election result alarmed many an "Imperialist" of the old school in Great Britain, and when Mr. Ernest Bevin was chosen as Foreign Secretary, the remembrance of 1926—when he played such a part in the General Strike—came back to not a few with a touch of dismay. The Conservative press had been strewn during the election campaign with details of the resistance Labour had offered to rearmament at times of critical decision: how it had derided "jitters" about a possible war, talked of munition makers and their propaganda for orders, or advised acceptance of more and more risks on collective security, League of Nations, Kellogg Pact and other fatuous guarantees. There was indeed a good deal that could be quoted to shake confidence in the wisdom shown by Labour men on national defence policies during the half-dozen years immediately preceding September, 1939. How did this bear on the installation of Mr. Bevin at the Foreign Office? The reassurance proffered in certain quarters—forecast of more cordial cooperation with Soviet Russia—was not merely ineffective. For the group I have in mind, it deepened their darkest fears. The Soviet Union, they predicted, would get its own way in everything with a British Socialist Cabinet.

But such is precisely what has *not* happened. At this time of writing, Mr. Bevin has presented such inflexible resistance to the demands of Mr. Molotov that the Left-Wing of British Labour is exhausting its satiric wit on his change, calling him a Tory in disguise, an Anthony Eden suddenly become corpulent, a reproduction of Mr. Churchill without the lisp or the chiselled phrase. But what of the possibility that he is just obeying the behests of fairness, of good faith, of British patriotism in the highest sense—a patriotism not monopolized by any single party at Westminster? On the appropriate occasion, when issues are at stake regarding which they really differ, Mr. Bevin will again confront Mr. Churchill or Mr. Eden as vigorously and incisively as ever. But what sort of account is this to give of British Labour, that it must bring automatic support to the demands of the Soviet Union in foreign affairs, even as—according to prevalent “Leftist” insinuations—such a group as that led by the late Neville Chamberlain automatically acted “against Moscow”? Is it an inverse Munich Pact that the Left Wing of Labour desires to cement?

For those who hoped that Mr. Bevin would play Neville Chamberlain to Mr. Molotov’s Hitler, there has been a sudden and a startling disillusionment. “I never heard a more Hitlerian statement than that”, exclaimed the British Foreign Secretary at the London Conference, regarding what his Russian colleague had just said. Mr. Molotov immediately (on having the apt retort translated to him) demanded that such language be withdrawn, threatening as an alternative his own withdrawal from the Conference. Of course he was conciliated, verbally. But the conviction and the temper which had prompted the Bevin retort remained. Before long the Conference broke up, with nothing to report, nothing achieved. So it stands as these lines are being written. Perhaps before they appear in print there may be a wholesome change. There simply must be a settlement of peace treaties with the Balkan countries before long. That “cauldron of Europe” cannot be allowed to simmer indefinitely. From just that spot too often has a blaze been started that swept over Europe. But not even the pressure of such urgency must be exploited to extort concessions both laden with peril for the Middle East and intrinsically an outrage on the principles of democracy for which the war was fought. In Mr. Bevin the Labour leader’s enthusiasm for social justice and the British patriot’s concern for Britain have combined to prompt

the sort of answer to Mr. Molotov whose roughness more conventional diplomatists would have smoothed. But they would have meant the same—no matter who had been the Foreign Office spokesmen in such a matter. And I suspect that Mr. Bevin's realistic abruptness may have been the more quickly and easily intelligible to realistic Moscow.

III.

The dispute has been on issues simple indeed to formulate, and surely lending themselves to quick determination by anyone in earnest for the San Francisco Charter.

It was primarily to complete the peace treaties with Bulgaria, Rumania and Hungary that the London Conference of Foreign Ministers was summoned. The "point of procedure" (to quote an optimistic bulletin) upon which conflict arose was whether France and China should be admitted to share in consideration of those treaties. Taking his stand upon the words of the Potsdam Agreement, Mr. Molotov demanded that no Power except those which had shared the fighting in the Balkan States should have anything to do with the ultimate settlement there. A strange demand made by a Power that so short a time previously had joined in creating an international Security Council in which France and China should hold permanent seats, with not only the right but the obligation to offer advice at any crisis threatening world peace! Was not the still unsettled war in the Balkan countries a potential danger of this kind? And had not those two Powers, which the Soviet Union insisted on excluding from that Peace Table, contributed at least indirectly on a great scale to the general triumph, of which the surrender of the Balkan States had been but an incident? True, the Three at Potsdam had agreed that they themselves alone should decide the terms of final peace for Hungary, Rumania and Bulgaria. But there was nothing in this pledge to forbid the admission of China and France to a consultative part, and in view of the place these Powers held in the Security Council, the situation seemed to require that their advice at least should be solicited.

The fierce resistance of the Soviet Union to a proposal so plainly reasonable was justified by constant reiteration of the text of the Potsdam Agreement. But Mr. Bevin had a reply even more decisive than the plea that nothing in this text forbade the presence (without right to vote) of Chinese and French representatives. Foreseeing a possible dispute of the sort which

actually developed, he had taken the precaution at the outset of the Conference to obtain Russian approval for the very procedure which Mr. Molotov, after ten days of cordial participation in it, suddenly condemned. Whence, then, the change in Russian attitude? What had prompted the Soviet representative to start a quarrel on a pretext not only unreasonable in itself, but involving censure of his own considered decision taken ten days before?

Mr. Bevin's account of the affair in his speech to the House of Commons suggested that the source of irritation lay in the refusal of Great Britain and the United States to recognize as legitimate or authoritative the governments promoted by the Soviet Union in Bulgaria and Rumania. The reason for this refusal, the Foreign Secretary said, was lack of evidence that these governments were in any true sense representative of the will of the Bulgarian and Rumanian peoples. They had not been chosen by the exercise of any recognizable free vote. Not unless and until an opportunity had been given for the peoples of those countries to express their mind in democratic manner, could the British and American democracies acknowledge the title of a regime at Sofia and Bucharest. The regime at the moment in operation appeared to be of totalitarian or dictatorial character, and mere substitution of one *Fuehrer* or *Duce* for another would be a lamentable outcome of the war effort in South-East Europe.

To this the Soviet representative offered no effective answer, and the answer in the Moscow press consisted for the most part of the familiar complaint that the capitalist States were still seeking to frustrate or encircle the Soviet Union. It was even maintained that the precautions of surveillance by which the British proposed to ensure freedom of vote or referendum in the Balkan countries would be foreign meddling and control. This despite the known fact that the "choice" lately made at Bucharest had been made while a million Russian troops were still on Rumanian soil, and notoriously after insistent "recommendations" by the representative of the Soviet Union!

IV.

The situation has become at once easier to understand and more difficult to handle through the development of the Soviet Union's demands upon Turkey. Great Britain's refusal to acknowledge the Bulgarian government set up under Russian auspices gets a new significance when one observes the present dangerous strain in relations between Russia and Bulgaria's eastern neighbour.

Nine years ago, Turkey applied to the Powers for leave to fortify the Dardanelles, and to close the Straits (normally open to ships of all countries for business in time of peace) if war should threaten. It was noted at the time as a wholesome and unfortunately an exceptional proceeding, that formal leave should be asked rather than taken for granted by a Power which found a treaty commitment embarrassing and desired to be free of it. Germany, Japan, Italy had been creating a new international atmosphere, and Turkey was complimented upon her adherence to the decent tradition of an older time. The leave she asked was granted, at the Montreaux Convention, where Russia was one of the Powers to acknowledge it as but fair, in view of the necessities of Turkish national defence, that the government at Ankara should have such discretionary privilege. This is the privilege which Russia now calls upon Turkey to abandon, and her demand made at the Potsdam meeting naturally met the reply that the Powers which granted it should be asked to decide whether any circumstances had arisen to render it no longer reasonable. President Truman was understood to suggest as a mediating plan that the Straits should be "internationalized." But so far as disclosed at this time of writing, the Russian demand and the Turkish objection are still confronting each other.

A still further dispute has been brewing between the same Powers. The Soviet Union asks for an adjustment of the Russo-Turkish frontier, where the republics of Armenia and Georgia touch the northeast corner of Turkey. Three districts which ever since 1921, when the present boundary was set, have lain on the Turkish side of it would be transferred by the change to the Russian side, and if one asks for the reason, there is none apparent except that it would notably improve the strategic position of Russia in the event of war. A like reason at once suggests itself for the change on the Dardanelles, which would so conspicuously strengthen the Soviet Union at Turkey's expense in the Eastern Mediterranean. While these disturbing reports were in the news, and the press at Ankara was indicating a heightened Turkish temperature, it was announced that Russian "military manoeuvres", involving forces estimated at 200,000 men with tanks and artillery equipment, were beginning in Southern Bulgaria, near to the Turkish frontier. It is usual to carry on a country's military manoeuvres within its own territorial limits. Why should Bulgaria be thus hospitable? And is it merely a coincidence that at the same time a government which neither Great Britain nor the United States will recognize

as authorized by the Bulgarian people, but which is known to be intensely cooperative with the Soviet Union, has been installed under Russian auspices at Sofia, and that Russian resentment at British or American objections to it has broken out into open quarrel?

Such are some of the difficulties with which the British Labour Administration has had to cope before three months had passed since it came to power. They are just such difficulties as those who fought so fiercely against "Socialism" at the polls last summer would have declared it unfit to tackle. Predictions were copious that the national interests and the national honour abroad would be sacrificed by a group for which "improvement of the lot of the common man" was the ideal everywhere emphasized. What, the electors were asked, would such men as had organized the General Strike of 1926 care about "the British Life-Line", so dependent on a proper balance in the Near East, when their thought was absorbed by schemes for nationalizing mines and banks and insurance companies and land? It has not turned out that any such fears were justified.

Who would have expected that Mr. Bevin, of all men, would reveal in Foreign Office negotiations abroad a resoluteness of British temper for defence of British rights reminiscent of a Palmerston? Not because he has become forgetful or negligent of the social reform which was the main topic of the Labour Party's election campaign: rather because the same sense of justice, as he understood it, which guided him in the problems which he had so far chiefly studied, became his guide in the new problems to which his new office had called him. He was accustomed to answer with a defiant negative the demands of selfish privilege and the pleas of imposture in domestic affairs. When he confronted the like in foreign policy, he proved equal to the occasion. It is fair also to suppose that as he co-operated in the Coalition War Government with Mr. Churchill, he came to appreciate, as he had never fully appreciated in his work at Transport House, how in defence of the British Life-Line the real interests of democracy all over the world are served.

The first three months may be judged far too short a trial to provide ground for estimating the qualities of a new government. But so far, on the witness of those whom it has amazed (whether by delighting them or by disappointing them) the firm temper of the Labour Administration abroad makes one feel that the era of "appeasement" has now passed into a mere hateful memory.

H. L. S.