

The Coming Labor Government in England

By W. P. CROZIER

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THE signs accumulate that Labor will shortly have its day in England. The municipal polls have confirmed the verdict of the recent Parliamentary by-elections. In London the Labor party has won sweeping victories in the elections to the borough councils. They have won many hundred seats and are now the masters in a round dozen of boroughs which were formerly in the hands of their opponents. All through the country they have gained heavily in the big industrial towns. They are, what they were not before, a recognized "force."

There are many reasons for the change. The Coalition Government is not in good odor. The Liberal party is in a state of suspended animation and lacks a lively, sincere, and aggressive leadership. Neither Mr. Lloyd George nor Mr. Asquith satisfies the masses of the rank and file. In public the critics observe a discreet reticence but in private they say that Mr. George represents action without principles and Mr. Asquith principles without action.

Trouble Everywhere

The Russian war is so unpopular with the working classes that the government has had to bring away the British troops from North Russia and Mr. George has been compelled to announce that during the coming winter an effort will be made to obtain a peace by negotiation. The financial condition of the country is such that the Chancellor of the Exchequer recently warned us that we are heading for national bankruptcy. The burden of armaments is still oppressive. The cost of living grows. There is no sign of peace in Ireland. Housing, the most urgent of our needs, hangs fire intolerably. The government is accused on every hand of living from hand to mouth with expediency for its only guide.

The view that Labor may form a British Government after the next general election has been strengthened by the skill and moderation with which the Labor leaders settled the railway strike and averted a great catastrophe. They showed a statesmanlike patience and ingenuity which astonished many members of the "middle classes," both Liberal and Conservative, who are foolishly afraid of all Labor movements and men as something dangerous and revolutionary. And so it comes that more widely than ever before the question is being asked, what sort of a government would the Labor party give the country if the country gave them a majority?

Old Time Labor Leaders Defeated

The Labor party has cut no great figure in Parliament. It did not do so during the war and it has not done so since. The ablest men, with the exception of Mr. J. R. Clynes and Mr. J. H. Thomas, are not in the House of Commons. The electorate (that is to say, Labor itself) rejected them with great vigor at the election last December. Ramsay Macdonald, Philip Snowden, Arthur Henderson—all were defeated. Sidney Webb and R. H. Tawney, both of them Labor "intellectuals," were candidates, but the electors would not have them. The consequence is that the Labor members have not shone in debate. Scarcely one of them has made his mark, although never has a Labor party had greater opportunities to shine. Nor have they been more conspicuous in the country at large or on the platform.

There are good reasons for this. It is a time for criticism—on finance, on economics, on foreign policy. But most of the Labor members are staid and rather conservative representatives of the old trade unionism. They have been immersed for the greater part of their official lives in detailed questions of wages, hours and bread and butter. On these they are expert enough. They have too much the purely "class" outlook. They have neither the knowledge nor the confidence to meet the practised debaters of a bourgeois government in the field of foreign affairs, or the country's finances or even the deeper economic problems which lie below the surface controversies over hours and wages. The most formidable critics of the government on these subjects are the independent Radicals, or an occasional independent Conservative like Lord Robert Cecil, in whom many see a future Prime Minister.

The failure of the Labor members to frame and insist on a thorough-going industrial and commercial policy is the most surprising of all their weaknesses. But the British Labor members are not theorists nor interested in theory. (Lenine once expressed his satisfaction that Ramsay Macdonald was reported to be about to visit Russia, because "he at least is interested in theory.") So far as they have an opinion about the reorganization of our industrial system it is being pushed on them from below.

Aspire to Gain Control

Underneath all the strikes that have taken place in England since the armistice over the details of conditions of labor lies the aspiration of the great masses of labor—an aspiration which is only half consciously realized by many of them—to obtain a large share in the control of their own labor and either to substitute national for private ownership or at least, if private ownership remains, to limit private profits.

The miners' demand for the nationalization of the industry is the first open movement toward this end;

shortly it will spread to the railways, to other means of transport and to the greater industries. But the Parliamentary Labor party has not initiated this program. It has been put forward from without, and at the present moment the Parliamentary members have no national program on the most searching and important questions of the day. The whole history of the months since the armistice shows how little the Labor party in the House of Commons has counted. The great industrial issues which by patriotic agreement were shelved during the war were certain to press forward for decision as soon as the war came to an end. But they were not put forward in Parliament. The Labor members had not considered them nor framed a policy. The Labor M. P.'s, therefore, were ignored by Labor in the country. The miners made their demands and the Prime Minister appointed a commission. When other disputes threatened, he called a national conference of employers and employed and this in turn appointed a joint committee which met and recommended to the government certain far-reaching reforms—a maximum 48-hour week and the fixing of a minimum wage in every industry. When the campaign against Russia and the continuance of conscription grew increasingly unpopular, it was the Triple Alliance of the miners and the great transport unions which threatened to call a general strike and so, in effect, to set up a revolutionary and extra-Parliamentary form of government.

Thus at every turn the Parliamentary Labor party has been ignored. Neither the workmen nor the government expect or demand much of it. The advanced wing of the Labor movement despises it. The shop-stewards' organization arose during the war precisely because the Labor M. P.'s were thought to be impotent. Labor, in fact, in England as elsewhere in Europe, is showing some disposition to turn away from Parliamentary government, which does not give it what it wants or gives it only piecemeal and very slowly, and to take the direction of affairs into its own hands.

Ignore Their Own Officials

One of our great troubles of recent years has been that the rank and file of the trade union world has constantly refused to pay attention to their own officials. They distrust most of these officials as too slow and conservative, too much subservient to the employers and the government. But the officials who have thus lost caste and authority are the same men who represent in Parliament the hopes and ambitions of awakened Labor and in their Parliamentary capacity also they are depreciated. Yet they have immense power in their hands could they but use it and the municipal elections show that by constitutional means they are gaining the same power also in local government if they will but make up their minds there, too, to use it.

What is true of finance and economics is true also of foreign policy and, since it is policy which decides the size and character of a nation's army and navy, of our military and naval problems. Labor members, too much concerned with the details of the daily round of life, have had neither the time nor the knowledge to study and influence foreign politics. They are like the French peasant who goes on plowing till the shells fall all around him, who retires from his fields only when the tide of invasion sweeps over them and then returns to them, unmoved and unconcerned, at the first possible moment. The Labor party in Parliament and in the country exercises no influence on the conduct of foreign affairs or on the settlement of armaments. True, the withdrawal of British troops from North Russia has been forced on the government but it was not the Labor party that did that, but the discontent in the country and the threats of the most powerful trade unions to take "direct action" of their own.

Look at Public Opinion!

All this would seem to lead to a very unfavorable verdict on the qualifications of Labor to form a government. It is not really so unfavorable as it seems. In the first place it is not only the Labor party in the House of Commons that is impotent to influence the government's policy in respect of finance or economics or foreign affairs. All parties are almost equally impotent. For many years the trend of constitutional development in England has been to establish the executive in a dictatorship. The House of Commons has the power but it does not exercise it. It has become very largely a machine for registering the decrees of an all-powerful government. The only effectual opposition is to be found in the press, to whose outcries far more than to any Parliamentary criticism the government is responsive. Mr. Bullitt says that when he returned to Paris from his mission in Russia, Mr. Lloyd George admitted that he would like to act on his report, "but," said he, holding up a well-known London newspaper which was violently anti-Bolshevik, "look at public opinion!" It is an accurate picture, nonetheless, of the way that things are done in England nowadays.

It by no means follows that a Labor Government would be a failure. Its prospects must not be judged by the present Labor men in the House of Commons.

They do not fairly represent the life and vigor that is stirring in the Labor world. They are out of touch with the most lively and progressive elements in the country. They certainly do not represent the "brains" of Labor. By the time that Labor is in a position to command a majority in the House of Commons and to form a ministry, it will have at its disposal the "intellectuals" of the party like Mr. and Mrs. Webb, Snowden, Macdonald, G. D. H. Cole, and half a dozen other gifted men and women who at present serve it only in the press or in the Labor organizations; it will have in its ministry men of ripe experience, sober judgment and knowledge of international questions like Mr. Arthur Henderson; men of will and driving power like Smillie, the miners' leader, Hodges and Herbert Smith, his lieutenants, and Robert Williams, the leader of the transport workers. On the side of personnel one could name a Labor ministry today which would compare very favorably with any that the older parties could produce. Moreover, such a ministry would carry no "passengers." It would have no stately but inefficient personages to provide with jobs. There would be no family parties in the ministry like that which earned for the Balfour-Salisbury régime of 1895-1905 the title of the Hotel Cecil Unlimited.

Not "Spoon-fed" Leaders

Some people say that Labor ministers would be too much under the thumb of their permanent officials. So are all ministers, from whatever party they are drawn. Few and far between are the men who direct and are not directed by the bureaucracy. Churchills are rare in British public life. Submission to officials does not depend on origin but on the possession of energy and ideas. Mr. Walter Long is not a Labor man but a leader of the Tory, landed and capitalist party, but of no one might one more confidently say that he will be a good boy when his officials give him his instructions. But no one can imagine the passionate Smillie or the dour Yorkshire miner, Herbert Smith, or the industrious and irrepressible Sidney Webb kept in leading strings and spoon-fed by the officials of departments.

Foreign policy, again, is a great bogey with those who fear a Labor ministry. But it is no more than a bogey. The time is past when diplomacy can be kept, as it is still kept in England, as the preserve of the aristocracy. The word is, or soon will be, with the peoples. Labor could not carry on the old diplomacy, but heaven forbid that it should. We want a new diplomacy, with plain speaking between honest peoples and tolerance of each other's rights. We do not get these things from the bourgeois democracies of Western Europe, which in working practice, whatever be their theory, are not truly democratic. But Labor may give them to us. For Labor, we have confidence, will be both national and international. It will not neglect the security of England but it will remember, in a famous phrase, that "patriotism is not enough."

Above all, the popular Labor movement has ideas and faith in its ideas. It is attacking and, in politics as in war, the advantage always lies with the attack.

It has passion and vitality. If it can transfer these qualities to the government benches in Parliament it will make good.



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Doman Dmowski is looked to by friends of Poland as the one available leader to compose the confusion that still hampers Poland. His whole life has been devoted to his country's liberation. Jail and persecution have been often his reward, but they have never deterred him. He held many secret conferences in the heart of Russia. He is now at the Peace Conference handling Polish matters. It is expected that he will be President or Prime Minister of his country, providing public opinion does not change.