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# THE FUTURE OF NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

*Reconstruction.* By Captain Harold MacMillan, M.P.  
(MacMillan & Co. 3s. 6d.)

*Britain's Political Future.* By Lord Allen of Hurtwood.  
(Longmans. 6s.)

*A Guide to Modern Politics.* By G. D. H. and M. I. Cole.  
(Gollancz. 6s.)

THE beginning of the National Government's fourth year of office affords a good opportunity of taking stock of its achievements and its failures. The economic crisis to meet which it was created has passed its acute phase, but there still seems little prospect of a return to normal conditions. The last three years have been, perhaps, the most anxious and disturbed of all the sixteen restless years since 1918. They have seen the collapse of parliamentary institutions in Central Europe, the German revolution, the advent of President Roosevelt in the United States and his far-reaching plans for economic reconstruction, the secession of Japan and Germany from the League of Nations, the failure of the World Economic Conference and the Disarmament Conference, and the assassination of the Austrian Chancellor and the King of Jugo-Slavia. In such a time it is no small achievement for a government not to have fallen, and a still greater achievement to have maintained the standard of living and to have preserved the economic and political stability of the nation. Above all, the policy of the National Government and the steadiness of the nation in the years of economic crisis have succeeded in restoring British prestige abroad which had been steadily declining during the previous twelve years. As Sir John Simon remarked last year, there may be doubts at home as to whether the National Government has been a good thing for the country, but there is no difference of opinion abroad upon the subject. President Roosevelt, M. Doumergue, and Signor Mussolini have all of them recently paid tributes to the British achievement in one way or another.

REVIEW

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Britain is, in fact, almost the only country in Europe which has met the world crisis successfully by constitutional means, and consequently it is the only great country in which the parliamentary system is still practically unchallenged.

Nevertheless, the position of the National Government is by no means so secure as it might appear to a foreign observer. The opposition which was reduced to impotence by the electoral catastrophe of 1931, has recovered its confidence and its strength. Its supporters hope that the next general election will be a sweeping victory for their cause, and the results of recent bye-elections show that these hopes are at least not entirely groundless. The very success of the National Government in securing a modest revival of prosperity has increased public dissatisfaction with the economic hardships that we still have to face. The paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty, of which we have heard so much during the last year, has made a real impression on people's minds. They feel that the increased productivity of the world due to science ought to make poverty out of date and raise the standard of living for everyone whether employed or unemployed. We live in an age of economic and social panaceas—the Five Years' Plan, Technocracy, Social Credit, Economic Autarchy, and the rest; and the most successful governments are not those that govern best, but those which are able to generate the most unbounded faith in their own particular nostrum.

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In this atmosphere of unlimited hopes and grandiose plans the economy and unimaginative caution of the National Government is apt to appear rather shabby and threadbare. The opposition, on the other hand, exempt from the responsibilities of office, is free to exploit all our current idealisms. The Labour Party, it is true, does not propose unilateral disarmament, but it can denounce the government as a government of warmongers; it does not believe in Social Credit, but it can denounce the wickedness of bankers and the corruption of international finance with the best of them; it is officially in a state of acute hostility with the Communist Party, but it can appeal to the same

Marxian ideology and can offer its supporters the same hope of a social millennium without the disagreeable concomitant of a bloody revolution.

Although these forces of social idealism may appear too weak and too inconsistent to be in themselves a serious danger to the present regime, they represent a very formidable force which no politician can afford to neglect, and any party, like the Socialist opposition, which can find some point of contact with all of them possesses a very considerable chance of success; when we add to this the normal turnover of votes due to the usual amount of dissatisfaction with a government that has been some years in office, the opposition has only to maintain its appeal to the forces of social idealism and political and economic discontent to be certain of ultimate victory.

Now if this simply involved a change of government according to the old rules of the game of party politics, no one would be much the worse, and the National Party could go into opposition with the feeling that they had accomplished the job that they had set out to do and had steered the country safely through four or five critical years. Unfortunately, the crisis of 1931 was a constitutional crisis as well as an economic one and it has left our political system seriously weakened. The same forces that have brought about the downfall of parliamentarism and Liberal democracy on the Continent are operating in this country, though here they are weaker, while the British constitution is tougher and more resilient.

Down to 1931 English Socialism was able to adapt itself without much difficulty to the requirements of the party system. But the sudden and utter collapse of the Labour Party at the moment of crisis caused a sharp swing to the left among the faithful remnant of convinced Socialists. From their point of view the lesson of the crisis was the bankruptcy of the official policy and the need for a drastic return to first principles. Never again must Socialists experience such a deception. If the Labour Party was ever to return to office, it must return, not in obedience to the mechanism of the English party system, but as a genuinely Socialist Party pledged to carry out an immediate and integral socialization of the

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whole economic life of the nation. If this means revolution, then revolution let it be. But it will not be revolution by general strikes or armed insurrection, it will be a governmental revolution, based on an electoral majority and carried out by the ordinary machinery of the administration.

Such a policy obviously involves serious dangers. For it would bring England face to face with the same situation that has destroyed constitutional government on the Continent. As Lord Balfour pointed out years ago: "Our alternating cabinets, though belonging to different parties, have never differed about the foundations of society. And it is evident that our whole political machinery presupposes a people so fundamentally at one that they can afford to bicker, and so sure of their own moderation, that they are not dangerously disturbed by the never-ending din of political conflict." In the last resort our parliamentary system rests on the agreement to differ. But if there is an irreducible conflict of interests and principles such an agreement becomes impossible, and we are faced with the prospect of revolution whether disguised in constitutional forms or not. Nor could this revolutionary constitutionalism be much more than camouflage, for no country can afford to change its whole system of social and economic organization with every general election. If Socialists succeeded in carrying through their revolutionary scheme for the transformation of our whole economic system, they would certainly not allow it to be wrecked by the chance verdict of the next election.

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These dangers have not escaped the eyes of the leaders of the opposition, and consequently the extremist tendencies of the Left Wing have met with considerable opposition and discouragement from the leaders of the Party and of the Trade Union Movement. Nevertheless, they have on their side the brains of the Labour movement, leaders of the Socialist intelligentsia, such as Mr. Cole, Professor Lasky, and Mr. Mitchison, as well as some of the ablest of the younger politicians such as Sir Stafford Cripps. But above all they have on their side the essential nature of Socialism itself. For Socialism is not merely the

programme of a political party, it is a creed and a religion, and to the true Socialist the necessary compromises of party politics and constitutional methods seem a blasphemous sacrifice of principles to political convenience. To the orthodox Marxist, the British Constitution is itself the product of the bourgeois capitalist order which he is out to destroy. It is therefore the very height of absurdity to regard this political jiggery-pokery as a sacred order to which Socialism must conform itself. It is like asking a religious fanatic to postpone the millennium in the interests of the London Stock Exchange!

It is not easy for the leaders of the official Labour Party to meet these criticisms so long as they claim themselves to be orthodox Socialists. The fact is that the parliamentary system as we know it in this country and still more on the Continent, was the creation of the nineteenth century and is ultimately based on the philosophy of nineteenth century Liberalism. In fact, it has only been completely successful so long as Liberal ideas were dominant in every party, when Conservatives were really Liberal Unionists and the Labour Party was, at least, as much Liberal as Socialist. As soon as Liberalism is abandoned and the Right turns towards dictatorships and the Left to Marxism, the existence of the parliamentary system is in danger. This is what has happened on the Continent, and though it has not yet happened in England, we have already travelled a good way in the same direction, as may be seen in the failure of pure Liberalism (as distinct from Liberal-Conservatism and Liberal-Socialism) to maintain its traditional position in English public life.

Now the intellectual leaders of British Socialism are fully alive to this fundamental change in the political situation and are prepared to accept it, even if it involves fundamental constitutional changes or even the supersession of the parliamentary system altogether. They argue that that system was only a means to an end and that it is the end alone that matters. For example, Mr. Cole, who is, perhaps, the most intelligent and far-sighted of our Socialist publicists, writes as follows:

"In the course of the nineteenth century there grew up in men's minds what was almost an identification of two very different things—parliamentarism and democracy. . . . 'Parliamentarism = representative government = democracy' epitomises in a phrase the predominant creed of the Liberalism of the last century. But in fact, no two of these things can be identified. Parliaments are not necessarily democratic nor are they always institutions of government. Representative government need not be either parliamentary or democratic. . . . Democracy need not take a parliamentary form or even base itself upon representative institutions in the ordinary sense of that term. In the nineteenth century the horizon of politics seemed to have been narrowed, leaving only parliamentarism above it. But to-day, the facile identification of the three things is no longer possible."\*

And he goes on to point out that in England we had a parliamentary system long before we had any democracy; that the United States has never been a parliamentary State in the full sense of the term; that French democracy has always been potentially "Bonapartist"; that pre-war Germany had manhood suffrage without either democracy or parliamentary control; and finally that Russia has achieved social democracy by following a totally different path. "It may turn out," he adds, "that the Soviet, or something like it, is the necessary form of political organization for the institution of a new social system. And it may be that out of the Soviet system through transformations and adaptations that it is impossible yet to foresee, mankind will develop new types of political organization going far beyond parliamentarism towards the achievement of real democracy.

"For democracy, if it is ever to become real, demands a far more flexible form of organization than the parliamentary system affords."†

None but Socialists are likely to accept Mr. Cole's assumptions regarding the democratic character of the Soviet system, which seems rather to be the creature of a bureaucracy as centralized and absolute as any that the world has known. But apart from this, what he says

\* *A Guide to Modern Politics*, pp. 524-5.

† *Ibid*, p. 532.

would meet with the approval of men of very different opinions. Mr. Belloc, for example, has always maintained this distinction between parliamentarism and democracy, and has argued that the success of the parliamentary system in this country has been due to the aristocratic character of the English social and political tradition.

The English political system has, in fact, always been based on the ideal of Liberty rather than on that of Democracy; on the rights of the subject rather than on the Sovereignty of the People. And hence it involves a certain division of powers and a balance of conflicting interests which are entirely alien to the Socialist mentality. In our parliamentary system the conflict of parties is only a relative one, and the parties themselves are not political ultimates. They are parts of a greater whole. It is not their function to destroy their political opponents, for if they did so they would destroy their own *raison d'être*.

Socialism, however, by importing the Marxian concept of class war into political life changes this limited constitutional contest into an absolute and unlimited one. It regards the other parties not as rivals and partners in the fulfilment of a common task, but as the tools of sinister economic interests which have no right to exist. There is no common unity which all parties unite in serving, for the conflict is not a mere political one, it is also economic and moral, and involves the transformation of the whole social structure.

Thus pure Socialism of the Marxian type is incompatible with the parliamentary system as it exists in this country, while constitutional Socialism which wholeheartedly accepts the parliamentary system is incompatible with the official creed and philosophy of modern Socialism. This is the dilemma of the Labour Party—a dilemma which it has never fully faced but which it attempts to meet by the traditional British method of compromise, the moderates continuing to affirm their belief in Socialism while the extremists still profess to adhere to constitutional methods. It is, however, absurd to maintain that the mere securing of an electoral majority is sufficient to justify revolutionary action and to make it constitu-

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tional. If this were so, Hitler himself would be a good constitutional democrat. To use the temporary and more or less accidental verdict of a general election in order to bring about an economic or social revolution is no less fatal to the parliamentary system than a direct recourse to violence. But though the force of these considerations is recognized more or less by the official leaders of the Labour Party, it can have little influence on the totalitarian Socialists who constitute the intellectual driving force of the movement. For they regard the destruction of the capitalist system as an absolute good which far outweighs all questions of constitutional procedure and parliamentary method.

Now this uncertainty regarding the aims and character of the Opposition places the Government in a somewhat false position. In theory the latter is a National Government, a coalition of the three constitutional parties who have agreed to sink their common differences in face of a national emergency. If this were really so, it would follow that the opposition was an anti-national faction which could no longer fulfil the functions of a constitutional opposition. And in that case the party system would have been superseded and a new type of coalition government would have taken its place. Actually, however, the Labour Party and the T.U.C. refused to follow the lead of Mr. Macdonald, and quickly rallied from their electoral defeat to play the traditional rôle of His Majesty's Opposition. Although the crisis had left a certain legacy of resentment and bitterness, it was not sufficiently serious to produce a fundamental change in our political system.

The consequence of this was that the claims of the National Government could not be taken at their full face value. Instead of being accepted as a union of all the constitutional forces of the nation, it was regarded, with some reason, as a Conservative Government which had gained the support of some new elements from the other parties; in fact, as another example of the same process that led to the fusion of the Tories and the old Whigs in 1794 and to the rise of the Liberal Unionists in 1886.

Actually, the National Party is not a success even when regarded from this point of view, for owing to the constitution of the Labour Party and the preponderant influence of the T.U.C. there was no real schism in the party, and the leaders who joined the National Government found themselves in the position of generals without an army. If it is a coalition, it is a coalition of a very one-sided kind, and its Labour element, owing to its numerical inferiority, is hardly in a position to carry much weight in the counsels of the party. Thus it would seem that the most obvious solution of the present situation is a return to the old political system. If the Conservatives could absorb their Labour and Liberal allies, and the official Labour Party could control the Left Wing and abandon the revolutionary and Marxian elements in its programme, we should recover the traditional two-party system and the parliamentary machine would function as it did in the nineteenth century.

Men, however, seldom follow the most obvious course in matters which involve their passions and their convictions. As Mr. Cole remarks: "The simple view of Jeremy Bentham that every man acts according to a rational calculation of his own advantage is most patently not true; in fact, a study of the political events of recent years would suggest that idealistic motives, particularly if they lead to obviously impossible ends by obviously revolting means, have far more power than rational considerations of personal advantage to influence men's actions."\* The return to the party system has obvious advantages, but it is not a cause for which men will sacrifice their deeper convictions, and as I have already pointed out, the Socialist creed and philosophy are opposed by their very nature to the spirit of compromise and give-and-take without which such a return is impossible.

Nor is the intransigence of the extreme Socialists the only obstacle. The whole spirit of the age is unfavourable to so facile a solution. If the restoration of the party system would bring with it a return to Free Trade and *laissez faire* and economic individualism, the case would be different. But so long as the present tendency

\* *Op. cit.*, p. 518.

towards economic nationalism exists, so long as people expect the State to take control of the economic situation, to safeguard the national standard of life and to regulate trade in the interests of the home producer, so long will there be a corresponding tendency towards a concentration of the political forces of the nation, whether by way of dictatorship or by that of coalition.

This is the true explanation of the German revolution. The economic crisis forced the government to assume a progressive control of the national economic life. The Brüning government found itself compelled to adopt an economic policy which practically amounted to a form of national Socialism, and in order to make this system function, it was forced to suspend the normal working of the party system by special legislation and the use of the presidential prerogative. And this naturally paved the way for the coming of a government which openly professed the creed of National Socialism and based its claims not on an unstable party coalition, but on a direct national mandate.

Thus the Socialist may fairly claim that the party system is irreconcilable, not only with pure Collectivism but with the tendency towards state planning and state control, which is common ground to Socialists and Nationalists.

Every Five Years' Plan demands a second Five Years' Plan to follow. For if the economic policy and direction of the nation can be completely changed every few years, the whole idea of scientific planning is stultified.

This is a perfectly sound criticism, so far as it goes, and it helps to clarify the issue and bring us face to face with the fundamental problems of modern politics. The real fault of the Socialists is not their rejection of the party system, but their substitution of the principle of class war; just as the real fault of the Fascists is not their appeal to national unity, but their appeal to violence. We are faced with a situation infinitely more dangerous and more complicated than any which the nineteenth century knew, and it may well be that the traditional political mechanism of the past is inadequate to meet it. But is no other solution possible? Is the belief that the

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British people can act freely without being driven by class interest and party spirit merely an impracticable ideal? That is the question on which the whole future of England rests. We have to find a solution for the problem of unemployment, the problem of world trade, the problem of European peace, and the problem of imperial relations. There is no hope of solving any of them without national unity. Obviously, we cannot find a basis for such unity in the doctrines of Marxian Socialism which would split the nation into two warring factions, and our whole national tradition is opposed to any attempt to find a solution by a recourse to dictatorship and the sacrifice of our political liberties. Now this ideal of a union of all parties and all classes for national ends is precisely the ideal for which the National Government professes to stand. Why then has it failed so completely to rouse the enthusiasm and fire the imagination of the nation? Is it because the cause of unity has lost its appeal? Or is it rather because the National Government itself has failed to rise to the height of its mission?

I have already suggested the answer to these questions. The party system is not strong enough to function normally, but it is still strong enough to reassert its influence as soon as the moment of crisis has passed. Thus the National Party rapidly lost its national character and became a party like other parties, so that to-day the old firm seems once more to be carrying on the old business with very little change save for the new brass plate on the door.

A true national party needs ideas and ideals, it needs inspired leadership with the driving force of corporate enthusiasm behind it. The Conservative Party, even in its enlarged and improved edition, possesses none of these things. It is still controlled by the rusty mechanism of party caucuses, which naturally tend to take a narrow and shortsighted view of political questions, while even the party caucus is enlightened and far-sighted in comparison with the party conference which often seems the embodiment of political ineptitude and intellectual nullity. There is no common body of political principles, while the very mention of any need for a philosophy

of action would be enough to ruin the reputation of any politician. The consequence is that political propaganda is feeble, vague and venal; in fact, the only effective propaganda is that of the newspaper proprietors who more often than not use their power in order to criticize and discredit the National Government. It is true that something is being done at the present moment to remedy this particular weakness. But it is not sufficient for the party to vote a large sum of money and appoint a committee to do something about it. Artificial propaganda is worse than useless; it can only inspire conviction when it has genuine faith and enthusiasm behind it.

We may sneer at the parrot-like slogans of the Communists, and the exotic gestures and coloured shirts of the Fascists, but we must recognize that party membership at least means something vital and personal to them, whereas to the average Conservative or National Liberal it means just nothing at all. It seems as though it were the effect of modern democracy to lower the value of political privileges in proportion to their extension. When every man and every woman have a vote, citizenship is no longer regarded as a privilege but as a tiresome duty. In fact, the tendency in democratic countries is for politics to be treated either as a bore or as a dirty and corrupt business in which there is no place for an honest man. On the other hand, as soon as a country abandons parliamentary democracy, politics once more become the centre of public interest, politicians take the place of film stars or athletes as popular idols, and party membership is treated as an honour and a privilege.

If constitutional government is to survive, it is clear that something must be done to restore the prestige of citizenship. A party of national union need not imitate the rigid discipline and the intolerant fanaticism of the anti-constitutional parties, but it must attempt to widen the popular basis of its membership and to give the ordinary party member a sense of his personal responsibility and a true corporate spirit. Above all, it must give a real place in its organization and its counsels to the forces of Labour. No doubt the attitude of the T.U.C. makes this ex-

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tremely difficult at the present time, but Labour in the past has had good reason to separate itself from the older parties. If the National Party could develop itself on genuinely national lines, if it could demonstrate that its policy was not dictated by capitalist interests and that the party caucus was not dependent on the subscriptions of its rich supporters, National Labour might become a real force and attract all the elements in the Trade Union Movement that were not indissolubly wedded to the Marxian creed.

None of these things, however, are possible without a new ideal of political leadership. Under our present system the political leader has practically no freedom of action. He is fettered, on the one hand, by the party machine, and on the other by the still more elaborate mechanism of departmental bureaucracy. As Mr. Amery remarked in the House of Commons recently, the pressure of departmental business gives the Cabinet no chance to consider questions of high policy, and any minister who attempts to initiate such a discussion is regarded as Public Enemy No. 1 by the ministers who are only intent on pressing the claims of their own departments.

The chief weakness of democratic government is that it allows the mechanical element, as represented by the party machine and the bureaucratic system, to overpower the personal element as represented by the political leader on the one hand and the ordinary party member on the other. And it is one of the main appeals of Fascism ~~that it has attempted to overcome this mechanizing tendency by establishing a direct relation of personal loyalty between the leader and the man in the street.~~ But this appeal is not peculiar to Fascism, for we find the same thing in America, where President Roosevelt has established the prestige of his personal leadership without resorting to violence or unconstitutional means. Consequently there seems to be no essential contradiction between democracy and leadership. On the contrary, it is only by personal leadership that democratic institutions can be vivified and raised from the level of political machinery to become the organism of a truly free

society. Left to themselves, modern democratic institutions are apt to become the tools of sordid and selfish interests. In fact, the more elaborate is the machinery designed to safeguard the rights of the electorate, the more opportunities are offered to the astute and unscrupulous party manager to manipulate the system for his own ends. This is what has done so much to discredit parliamentary government on the Continent, while in the United States the absence of political leadership has been responsible for the reign of the political boss and the immunity of the professional criminal.

But it is no use waiting for the appearance of some political Messiah who will solve all our difficulties by the magic of his personality. A nation usually gets the leaders that it deserves, and so long as it is dominated by party spirit and class interests it must expect to be governed by professional politicians or demagogues. As Burke said, a people will only find worthy leaders when they recognize that political authority is "not a pitiful job, but a holy function". Consequently, politics must be based on something higher than purely "political" interests. No doubt a government must be judged by its practical achievements, but these achievements must be judged not in a crudely practical spirit, but in the light of political principles which themselves involve a social philosophy. The power and appeal of Socialism are largely due to the fact that they have such a philosophy. They can afford to look beyond the next general election, and to feel independent of the shifting tide of popular opinion, because they believe that their policy is not a mere temporary makeshift designed to catch the largest number of votes, but the logical application of principles which are absolutely just and true. And it is in these principles rather than in the temporary political manoeuvres of their leaders that they put their faith.

In the past, when Liberalism was great, it also had its philosophy, and so had the Conservatives, though they often behaved as though they were ashamed of it. But to-day the non-Socialist parties have no philosophy. The main force of their appeal is a purely sentimental

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one, the Conservatives appealing to the sentiment of patriotism and the Liberals to a vague humanitarian and social idealism.

We may say that the Socialist philosophy is a bad one, resting on a false view of human nature and a narrow and one-sided interpretation of history. But so long as we have nothing better to oppose to it than sentiments and prejudices, our criticisms will not carry much weight. It is difficult to understand the attitude of those who recognize the success of the Socialist propaganda and who yet regard any attempt to unite the national forces on the basis of a common political philosophy as Utopian and unpractical. If the only principle of national union among non-Socialists is to be the defence of the status quo, we had better resign ourselves to the coming of State Socialism. But must we really assume that Marxism is the only extant social philosophy that affords any basis for common political action? Are the people of this country, apart from the Socialists, merely a mass of individuals who are inaccessible to any appeal except to their material interests and prejudices? I believe, on the contrary, that the vital factor in modern politics is the strength of popular idealism. Undoubtedly this has its dangers, since it is a force which may explode with destructive violence if it is denied its proper outlet. But at the same time it has immense possibilities, for it is a creative force which is capable of great things if only it is properly directed. We are on the eve of great events. Our civilization is passing blindly and painfully through a crisis which may destroy or renew it. Every nation is being put to the test, and we who are more deeply implicated in the world situation than any other nation cannot afford to remain as an island of nineteenth century institutions and ideas in a new world.

Liberal Capitalism and Marxian Socialism, both in their own way typical products of the nineteenth century, are neither of them really suited to the altered conditions of the new age. Both of them were serious attempts to face the economic problems of an industrial society, the one from the point of view of the bourgeoisie, the other from that of the proletariat; but both were vitiated

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by a bias towards materialism, which rendered them unbalanced and morally unsatisfying. We need a political philosophy that is more catholic and more humane—one which does not exclude or depreciate the non-economic functions and values, but which treats man as a free personality, the creature of God and the maker of his own destiny.

CHRISTOPHER DAWSON.

January 1, 1935.

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