

## THAT ILLUSIVE SOCIALISM

THE general election (conducted with a solemnity and decorum unknown to our forefathers of Eatanswill, the high spirits of age kept in check by the gravity of youth, now for the first time invited to decide the fate of parties and the choice of rulers), having brought the Labour Party into power and given us its leader, Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, for prime minister, we are assured, with sorrowful shaking of head or with open rejoicing—it all depends on the point of view—that Socialism has triumphed at the polls, and that with a Socialist government responsible for England, the Empire, and things in general, we may expect the worst, or the best, to happen.

So far the ballots cast on Corpus Christi day have neither disturbed the money-changers of the world nor shaken the confidence of the multitude that went to Epsom the following week. The prime minister has chosen his cabinet and formed his government—a ministry of many talents. Socialists of the left, and of the right, veterans of the Fabian Society and the old S.D.F. and I.L.P.; responsible trade union leaders; distinguished university graduates; converts from Liberalism—all are included. Socialists are in office and hold the destinies of Empire in their hands.

But what is this Socialism, which, for better or worse, is the avowed belief, political and economic, of our Labour Government? What in these days does it signify to be called a Socialist? Happily, we may find an answer to these conundrums in the new edition of Mr. Beer's *History of British Socialism*,<sup>1</sup> with its

<sup>1</sup> *A History of British Socialism.* By M. Beer. New and cheaper edition. Two vols. (London: Bell & Sons; 7/6 net each.)

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complementary chapter bringing the story down to 1928. For the author, an Austrian, long resident in England and an old pupil of the London School of Economics under Professor Hewins, pursued his quest of this illusive British Socialism with conspicuous thoroughness, and his book is of the very greatest value in its interpretation of the facts so carefully set out.

Of course in this History we are taken back to 'Primitive Christian Influences' and the discussions of English schoolmen of the middle ages—William of Ockham in especial—for the beginnings of British Socialism. And if it be asked what have these things to do with Socialism?—which is, after all, 'a modern thing, dependent almost wholly on modern conditions, an economic theory evolved under pressure of circumstances admittedly of no very long standing'—well, Father Bede Jarrett faced the same question in his book on *Mediaeval Socialism* (1913). Deciding that Socialism 'suggests chiefly the transference of ownership in land and capital from private hands into their possession in some form or other by the society,' so that we may take it for granted 'that in this lies the germ of the socialistic theory of the State,' and find it 'undeniable that Socialism in itself need mean no more than the central principle of state-ownership of capital and land'; why, then, Father Jarrett concludes, 'we may fairly call those theories socialistic which are covered by this central doctrine'; and by socialistic theories of the middle ages we 'mean no more than those theories which from time to time came to the surface of political and social speculation in the form of Communism, or of some other way of bringing about the transference which we have just indicated.'

Mr. R. H. Tawney, in his introduction to this *History of British Socialism*, also makes a contribution.

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Noting Socialism as 'a word the connotation of which varies not only from generation to generation, but from decade to decade,' he discerns that the object of Socialist effort throughout the centuries is 'to substitute for the direction of industry by the motive of personal profit and the method of unrestricted competition some principle of organisation more compatible with social solidarity, and economic freedom.'

There it is—the quest of social solidarity and economic freedom; that, in short, is the history of the Socialist movement in Great Britain. And the said solidarity and freedom to be enjoyed under state-ownership of land and capital are Socialism.

Strong objection no doubt may be taken to the phrase 'state-ownership,' unless we are clear that the 'state' is not to be identified with bureaucracy. We may be led also into discussion of 'ownership,' if we are not careful. Such diversions will withdraw us far from the pursuit of the meaning of 'Socialism,' and must be shunned.

The blessed word 'Socialism' itself does not crop up before 1827, and belongs to Robert Owen's propaganda for a New Moral World; a co-operative world based on fraternity and not on competition, with 'production for use and not for profit' as its motto. The instrument for bringing in this New Moral World was the self-supporting home colony—an old idea, popular with Diggers of the inner light in the sixteenth century, adopted by Chartists, and in more recent years by Tolstoyans.

To Karl Marx this socialism of Owen's was utopian; and a scientific socialism, the goal of a class-conscious proletariat was pronounced the genuine article. This was the social democracy that Hyndman and William Morris preached when the modern Socialist movement started in Great Britain, and Sidney Webb, from the first, would have none

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of it. Anglican Christian Socialists accepted the economics but denied the fundamental atheism of the Marxist.

Marx, in fact, by identifying an economic theory with the current philosophy of the nineteenth century and cumbering it with new ethical sanctions, was naturally to be warned off intrusion on the faith and morals of the Catholic Church. Hence on the continent Catholics and Socialists are in opposite camps. Even to-day, when the Socialists throughout Europe are social reformers, their programmes no longer revolutionary, the old antagonism, rooted in opposing ethics, survives.

Our British Labour Party, not being Marxist, and being quite without the traditional anti-clericalism of the continental Socialist—for the makers and leaders of our trade unions are mainly of nonconformist stock, while the later unionism of dockers and riverside labourers brought in a large contingent of Catholic Irish—has never invited the suspicion, nor incurred censures, of ecclesiastical authority. No British trade union would be allowed to demand professions of ethics, philosophy, or religion in its rules. Therefore, while the Labour Party may profess a Socialist ideal, the individual trade unionist is not required to swear his allegiance to that ideal. His politics are his own affair.

And this Socialist ideal of the Labour Party—what does it amount to? Mr. MacDonald is hailed by the author of the *History of British Socialism*, and justly, as a 'social reformer.' 'The watchword of Socialism is not class consciousness, but community consciousness,' wrote Mr. Ramsay MacDonald more than twenty-five years ago, in *Socialism and Society*. In his later work, *Socialism and Government*, Socialism is to be defined as 'that stage of social organisation when the State organises for society an adequate nutritive

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system.' Illusive it may be, this Socialism of the prime minister's ideals, a Socialism that will arrive as human society moves from lower to higher stages of organisation, but at least it cannot be mistaken for the Marxian Socialism of the Russian Communist Party and its adherents of the Third International—all fatally committed to atheism. The peasants of Russia have withstood the establishment of Communism, for the peasant and small-holder in every land is commonly anti-socialist; but in Great Britain the peasant does not exist, and while our millionaires increase the small-holders are driven off the land.

It is the Labour Party with its programme of a Socialism in Great Britain, the good time coming, that stands in the way of a Communist revolt, or blunts the edge of Communist propaganda; and it is against the Labour Party the Communists rage. For the Communists in Great Britain, as elsewhere, do still believe that Socialism can be set up—as Hyndman believed, as Keir Hardie believed, but as Sidney Webb never believed. 'There will never come a morning when we shall awake and say now Socialism is here,' wrote Sidney Webb at the very beginning of the Fabian work.

Yet if the Labour Party will not guarantee 'Socialism in our time,' it does at least bring some message of hope to men and women of good will. Pledged by its own programme 'Generally to promote the political, social, and economic emancipation of the people, and more particularly of those who depend directly upon their own exertions by hand or by brain for the means of life,' the Labour Party makes an appeal to all classes.

It marches hopefully, the Labour Party, and, therefore, rallies Catholic citizens to its support. It is the one political party in Great Britain that really does hold to the doctrine of a living wage. Hence it is

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appropriate that one member at least of the Labour government, Sir J. B. Melville, K.C., solicitor-general, is a Catholic; and it is significant that of twenty-three Catholic members in the new House of Commons fifteen are of the Labour Party.

Many Liberals and Conservatives, too, more in earnest for social reform than for party victory, range themselves under the Labour banner. The illusiveness of the ideal of the Labour Party is no discouragement; there is an ideal—that is the great thing; and the future, however distant, presents no hindrance to immediate reforms. (It was different in the nineteenth century, when the ideal was liberty; personal liberty, political liberty, liberty of nations—who cares for these things to-day? And the Liberals themselves, with their vast industrial combines, international finance, and anti-clericalism, have chiefly destroyed the old enthusiasm for freedom.)

Of course, it will illude us, this Socialism of the idealist prime minister and his colleagues; it will illude us, also, the completely efficient state desired by Mr. Sidney Webb (and some will say, 'Thank God for that, anyhow'). But if the hope of the common ownership of land and capital, the vision of a co-operative commonwealth persuades men and women of good will to strive for justice, and incites us to the service of our neighbours, why, then, it may be urged that the illusion is not in vain.

If we cannot clear the road from Jericho to Jerusalem of the dangerous characters that infest it, nor utterly remove all robbers from the highway, we may at least help to provide oil and wine for the wounded, and to ensure that the necessary twopence is forthcoming when the injured are placed in safe keeping at the nearest inn.

Socialism may ever illude us; but it is the Socialists who are striving for industrial peace, and great

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schemes are on foot between leaders of the Labour Party and the heads of big business for bringing the forces of capital and labour together and 'rationalising' industry. So that it may well seem the conflicting interests of the wage earner and the dividend receiver are somehow to be reconciled. Socialism, illusive Socialism, has aroused the social conscience.

'And if, on due and honest thought over these things, it seems that the kind of existence to which men are now summoned by every plea of pity and claim of right, may, for some time at least, not be a luxurious one; consider whether, even supposing it guiltless, luxury would be desired by any of us, if we saw clearly at our sides the suffering which accompanies it in the world. Luxury is indeed possible in future—innocent and exquisite; luxury for all, and by the help of all; but luxury at present can only be enjoyed by the ignorant; the cruellest man living could not sit at his feast, unless he sat blindfold.'

There we are! Still learning our illusive Socialism from John Ruskin.

JOSEPH CLAYTON.