The Position of Parties and the Right of Dissolution

By

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Published and sold by the Fabian Society, 25 Tothill Street, Westminster, S.W. 1. March, 1924

PRICE TWOPENCE
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I. The New Political Situation.

The classic English constitutional doctrine has always envisaged a government ruling by reason of its majority in the House of Commons. Where, as with Pitt in 1763 and Disraeli in 1867, there has been government by a minority, a general election has always, within a brief space, regularised the position by placing a party with a majority in power. For it is the theory of our constitution that the Executive must force a stream of tendency through affairs. Its programme is embodied in Bills; and rejection of an important measure involves, as a necessary consequence, a fresh consultation of electoral opinion.

The position is radically different now. The parties returned in the general election of 1923 are, for the moment, distinct both in the principles they maintain, and the leaders to whom they profess allegiance. The Labour Party is in office; but its members are in number less than one-third of the House. The Conservatives are the largest party; but as against their opponents they are in a minority of nearly one hundred. The Liberals are barely one-fourth of the legislature. The situation we now occupy is, therefore, one in which the Government cannot pass its Bills save with the consent of one or other of the parties opposed to it. Even its time-table—the root of modern legislative procedure—can be carried only by the goodwill of a notable fragment of the Oppositions. It is at any moment liable to defeat. It cannot work out a programme in the unambiguous terms of its own principles. All that it can do is either to discover measures upon which consent is general, or else prepare a policy designed regularly to carry with it the more advanced of the Oppositions.

Threatened governments doubtless last longer than so difficult an atmosphere might seem to warrant. But threatened governments cannot, amid these hazards, ever hope to last the normal life of a modern Parliament. Opposition in debate always engenders, sooner or later, the temper of antagonism. Goodwill might breed co-operation, as the Liberal Unionists co-operated with Lord Salisbury; and co-operation might in its turn, result in absorption. But, in this instance, the conditions of co-operation are wanting. The Labour Government cannot admit the Liberals to prior consultation in the making of policy. It can only so design its measures as to seek to maximise Liberal support. From the Conservative
to refuse a dissolution has never in fact died; and that the resolution of the prospect before us is a matter for the unfettered judgment of the King. Others have occupied themselves in the examination of the precedents, and Victorian examples have been cited to prove that Prime Ministers have been well aware in the past of the limits under which their authority was exerted.

Mr. Asquith's argument is important and I shall discuss it later in this essay. The argument built upon precedent is, it must be insisted, an argument built upon sand. No dissolution has been refused within the memory of living man. The Crown may have objected as Queen Victoria raised doubts upon Mr. Gladstone's dissolution of 1874; (1) but, upon pressure by the Prime Minister, the Crown has always given way. The situation, in fact, in which the direct political influence of the sovereign has been replaced by the direct political influence of public opinion has shifted the whole perspective of events. Hearn's argument, which was based upon Lord Coke's analysis, is no longer adequate. It may be, as Sir Robert Peel said, (2) "a great instrument in the hands of the Crown," which would be "blunted if it were employed without grave necessity." But our situation is not like that of Sir Robert Peel, or of Lord Derby and Mr. Disraeli. We have become accustomed to a sovereign who acts upon the advice of his ministers. That advice may be unpalatable; we know that Edward VII. did not like the admission of an Indian to the Secretary of India's Council, (3) but he was forced, by constitutional convention, to accept that advice. If the King has the right to refuse a dissolution, he has the right, in effect, to dismiss the ministry; and that has not been attempted since the famous, but mistaken effort of William IV. in 1834. (4) Hearn assumed that a dismissal is justified if the incoming minister receives a majority at the general election which follows his accession to office. (5) But that is, in fact, to argue that the King may offer a dissolution to a Prime Minister he likes, and refuse it to one with whom he is dissatisfied. It is obvious that such an attitude would destroy that neutrality of the Crown which is the chief safeguard of its existence.

A further point may here be noticed. The King, it may be argued, is not dismissing a ministry when he refuses a dissolution. What he is doing is exercising his right to believe that a combination is possible which will retain the confidence of the House of Commons. But in the new orientation of our politics any party in office is bound to be defeated in a short period; and this argument is merely the transference of a dissolution from one Prime Minister

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who has lost the confidence of the House to another in an identical position. This, again, is bound in a critical epoch to bring the neutrality of the Crown into the hinterland of suspicion, and no graver disservice could be rendered to it.

It has been argued that colonial precedents offer justification for the refusal of a dissolution. Such a view is built upon a misunderstanding of what is involved in the colonial position. The King is entitled to receive information of all acts and decisions contemplated by the Cabinet and to discuss them with the Prime Minister. The Governor of the colony is, as Professor Keith has pointed out, in a very different position. "The relations of a Governor with his ministers," writes Professor Keith, "are often merely ceremonial and social. There is not in many cases recognised, any general duty of informing the Governor of the affairs of the Dominion, and he is left to judge the policy of the government from the press."(4) That alone would make colonial precedent inapplicable. But the way in which the discretion of the Governor is exercised is surrounded by special circumstances absent from this country. Save for Canada and South Africa, the refusal of a dissolution has been of frequent occurrence down to the present time. It is an active power which has not yet fallen into abeyance. But it is also, as Professor Keith points out, evidence that the Dominions have, until very recently, been in a condition of comparative political immaturity. And it is vital to note that the exercise of the prerogative has always resulted in direct criticism of the Governor. There have been charges of sinister influence,(5) there has been a direct vote of censure,(6) there has been an appeal beyond the Governor to the Secretary of State for the Colonies.(4) Obviously either of the first two circumstances would be serious in the extreme; while the impossibility of the third makes it desirable to retain the Crown rather as a dignified emollient than as a reserve of power. The active agent in making governments must be the electorate of the modern state.

III. THE POSITION OF THE CROWN.

Mr. Asquith's theory is based upon other considerations. In his discussion of the right to ask for a dissolution, he merely emphasised his belief that it was in the province of the Crown to refuse. But he did not envisage the consequences of that refusal. Mr. Asquith did not explain the argument upon which his view was based. Possibly he feels that a Ministry without a majority in the House of Commons is not entitled to the same rights as a Ministry

(4) Imperial Unity and the Dominions. Chap. V. The whole of this valuable chapter is a final commentary of the theory of colonial precedents.
with a majority. Possibly he looks to the prospect of a series of general elections as one which the prerogative might reasonably be exerted to avoid.

Either view, I submit, rests upon dangerous ground. It is the argument that at the decisive point in the life of a government the King is entitled not to act upon the advice of his Ministers. Sooner or later such a view implies a differentiation of treatment between one government and another. If the Labour Government were defeated after a brief tenure of office and, asking for a dissolution, were refused it, the new government then formed, either by the Liberal leader or by the Tory leader, would find itself in a minority, and its defeat would be followed by a third brief tenure of power or by a dissolution. The latter event would be regarded by the supporters of Labour as an infraction of the neutrality between parties incumbent upon the Crown, especially if the original defeat had taken place upon a subject integral to Labour policy. A third tenure of office would, upon defeat, inevitably be followed by a dissolution, and the King would then be in the position of granting to one party—and that one, conceivably, the smallest—what he had refused to the other two. The King must act upon the advice of his Ministers whoever those Ministers may be, and to refuse to one party what was granted to another would inevitably, especially when a party occupies office for the first time in its history—lead to suspicions of a peculiarly undesirable kind.

The whole strength of the Crown, in fact, lies in the avoidance even of the appearance of discrimination. The King, who acts upon the advice of Ministers, throws the burden of responsibility upon their shoulders. The fate that overtakes them is—whatever its nature—a fate of their own making. If they have what Lord Derby called “the moral conviction” that their policy would command the confidence of the country if submitted to it, they are entitled to the proof of that judgment. And few governments will fail to have that moral conviction. If they are defeated by merely factious opposition, they will consider that the country will punish their destroyers for their faction. If they are defeated upon an issue which, as they think, is likely to arouse popular approval, they will demand its submission to the country. Even if they are defeated by reason of sheer ineptitude they will tend to think that the absence of a majority deprived them of a full opportunity, and they will desire the chance to win that majority. To suggest that the Crown should resist that desire is to place it in an impossible position. It is to ask men contending for great issues to see their rivals placed in office upon the hazardous judgment of a single man. That is bound to exacerbate party feeling. It is bound to raise doubts of monopolial impartiality. And it is an especially dangerous
cred at a period when new views of social organisation are finding for the first time their position in the state.

It would be the more dangerous for another reason. No monarch in such a situation would be satisfied to act upon his unaided judgment. He would be bound to ask advice. He would be bound, that is, to go outside the ministerial advisers with whom Parliament has provided him to other persons. What other persons would he consult? Sir Sidney Low has suggested(1) that he might consult a political Committee of the Privy Council in the same way as, technically, the Judicial Committee offers advice upon cases which come upon appeal from the Dominions; and he suggests that the Prime Minister might be chairman of this committee as he is chairman of the Committee on Imperial Defence. It is difficult to see what real help there is in such a view. If the Political Committee were composed of the leaders of the different parties, it could not, in the nature of things, proffer unanimous advice; its counsel would then, in any case, force the Crown to a partisan attitude. If it were composed of Law Lords only, it would be submitting to judicial analysis questions which from their very nature again, are not susceptible to judicial enquiry. And it would force the Law Lords into a political position from which it is at all costs desirable that they be kept free.

Nor is advice sought by the King of his own part desirable. That is, in effect, the building of a non-ministerial executive. Those from whom the King sought counsel would sooner or later be known, and it would then become a capital function of the Cabinet either to appease or to destroy them. The great virtue of what Bagehot calls "the unroyal species of Cabinet government" is that it prevents the creation of a Court. If there are men to whom the King may turn when his constitutional advisers are defeated, upon any representation except their own, men to whom he will turn for advice upon the future of minister, the delicate equilibrium of our system is bound to suffer serious disturbance. The perplexity of Parliament and the confusion of parties is the very moment when Tadpole and Taper become significant. It is when no single alternative exists that the door is open to intrigue. The King, in that position, could not long maintain the prestige of impartiality. He would be regarded by some as their friend, and by others as their enemy. There would be the kind of rumours about him that we hear of the President of the French Republic. But the latter is an elected official who cannot hope for a second term. The King is a permanent official who cannot be legally changed save by his abdication. It would be the height of folly to make that permanence a problem instead of a guarantee.

In these suggestions there seems no protection for the neutrality of the Crown. It has been suggested by Hearn(1) that the requisite safeguard is to be found in a resolution from Parliament against a dissolution. That argument has recently been reaffirmed by Professor Pollard. The Commons, he points out, have the immemorial privilege of access to the Crown through the Speaker. Such an address enables Parliament to dismiss the judges and its permanent officials; such an address might be presented asking for the dismissal of ministers. "Supposing," writes Professor Pollard,(2) "such an address were presented to the Crown when a Prime Minister was advising a dissolution, are we to say that the Crown is constitutionally bound to accept the advice of a Prime Minister to dismiss the Commons, and to reject the advice of the Commons to dismiss the Minister?" Undoubtedly, Parliament has the right to advise the Crown in the use of the prerogative of dissolution. Parliament has before prayed that the King would dissolve Parliament, and in 1783 the Fox-North coalition urged the King not to grant dissolution to the younger Pitt who was in office with a minority government.(3) But of these precedents there are two things to be said. The last occasion of their attempted application was over ninety years ago,(4) when the personal authority of the sovereign was still an agency of direct intervention. In the case of 1783, two parties of antagonistic views were prepared to sink their differences in order to become a majority government. We do not confront that situation.

Professor Pollard, in fact, is asking a House of Commons which offers no prospect of continuous support to any government to vote for the perpetuation of its own existence; and, seemingly, he is asking the Crown to accept its verdict. For, otherwise, the Crown becomes arbiter between the Ministry and the Commons, which would be an intolerable position. Those who sought to prevent the dissolution would not take office if the Crown accepted their advice. They would constitute a coalition to defeat, not a coalition to govern. The new Ministry would, sooner or later, either be in the same position as its predecessor, or else receive a power denied to it. Obviously, the sense would be widespread that the machinery of Parliament was being used to the detriment of one party only among several.

To be effective, therefore, Professor Pollard's scheme ought to be applied to each party in turn until all have had an opportunity to govern. That would reduce the advice of the Commons to the point of ridicule. It would bring into our system something

akin to the rotativism of Spain, of which the outcome is dictatorship. It would make Ministers sacrifice principle to the constant search for a majority. The Crown would cease to act, at times of final crisis, upon the advice of Ministers, and accept mechanically the advice of the House of Commons. The certainty that office would be shared in turn by each party would lead to the multiplication of stratagems that the reward might come quickly. The responsibility of Parliament would be greatly hampered. The centre of the struggle would be transferred from the substance of measures to the technique of procedure. The knowledge that the King could always find a government would make it certain that Parliament would be careless of the consequences of defeating a Ministry. No method would be more likely to destroy confidence in Parliamentary institutions. The way out of our present difficulties does not lie in the refurbishing of ancient weapons.

"I should on no account," writes Mr. Ramsay MacDonalld, (1) "leave to the Monarch the dangerous and invidious task of safeguarding the nation against too frequent dissolutions." They render, indeed, small service to the Monarchy who are urgent to that end. The strength of the Crown in the last two generations has been its insistence upon neutrality. Ministers have never insisted in vain upon their policy. We have grown unaccustomed to a King who, like George III., sought himself actively to influence the course of affairs. We have even grown unaccustomed to that atmosphere with which Baron Stockmar sought to invest our institutions. The right of the Crown is an advisory right only; the centre of power is the leader of the party in office. It is his duty to consult, and, obviously, where he is dealing with a monarch who has been long at the centre of affairs, who has come to have, by virtue of experience, almost an intuitive sense of the impact of policy, he will be wise to weigh the advice he receives with greater care than any other to which he has access. But there is no moral obligation upon him to accept that advice when weighed. Suppose, for example, that the King is a young man with no experience of affairs, instead of a King to whom every variation of the constitutional theme has become known: obviously, to make the Prime Minister the servant of that inexperience would be a grave and hazardous experiment. For the error of Prime Ministers can be punished by the electorate, but the errors of Kings do not admit of so simple a remedy. And since no monarch who is asked to dissolve Parliament can fail to desire advice, the admission of a right to refuse a dissolution will always mean the existence of a ministry external to the Cabinet which may well, in a crisis, be the real depository of power.

(1) New Leader, January 4th, 1924.
Our generation is fighting for great issues; and if the Crown exerted this authority, access to its mind would be a privilege of immense importance. The use of dissolutions in political tactics is fraught with much significance; and to make them dependent upon the Crown is to make men fight for that access. We should not only bring the King directly into the political arena, we should bring into existence factions at the Court whose policies would, sooner or later, bring the Crown into grave disrepute. The salvation of monarchy is its irresponsibility. Its irresponsibility is built upon the assurance that it has surrendered control. To attempt even a contingent resumption of authority would be fatal to the modern equilibrium of constitutional practice.

IV. THE EXECUTIVE AND THE LEGISLATURE.

The remedy for our difficulties must, therefore, be sought in other directions than the revivification of the prerogative. But properly to seize the perspective of that remedy, it is important to realise what the three party system, with each government in a minority, in fact implies. It is obvious, in the first place, that it means an increased deference to the House of Commons on the part of the government. The Prime Minister can threaten to dissolve; but no Prime Minister will dissolve unless he has a substantial issue or some solid achievement upon which to go to the country. The first effect, therefore, of the present situation will be the enhanced importance of the private member. Measures will no longer be carried by the inertia of majorities; they will be much more dependent upon the debating power that is behind them. There will be a much less rigorous use of closure and guillotine and kangaroo to enforce silence when the Minister is weary of discussion. The private member will be much more tenacious of his rights because he is much more likely to realise them; and governments will be more tender of his desires for the simple reason that inattention to the private member is, in the absence of the majority, exactly the kind of atmosphere that provokes defeat. No minority government, it must be added, can afford to provoke defeat save upon issues which it is tolerably sure are inviting ground for electoral approval. And such issues are not merely rare, but they seldom spring into view in the early days of a new government. If they do, it is because the new government has broken completely with the traditions of its predecessor and, in that event, the Prime Minister may well think himself entitled to consult the electorate upon the verdict of the House of Commons.

That is not likely to be the usual course of events. A wise Prime Minister will never inaugurate his tenure of office by searching the occasion of defeat. For him the real rocks ahead will be the sudden vote sprung on him in the tactic of party manœuvre, or the event outside which dislocates altogether the programme he has
Cabinet may agree that, for example, the nationalisation of the mines is, at the moment, undesirable; and a miners' strike may, even as it takes the decision, force nationalisation upon it. It may come into office when the foreign outlook is dark; and a series of successes abroad may convince it that it could win a majority for the domestic policy it has not the power to carry out. Obviously it is urgent to retain unimpaired the power to consult the electorate when a refreshment of authority is deemed desirable. The two elections of 1910 are proof of the advantage implicit in that power. In each case the authority of the country was sought for a policy that was not in discussion at the previous election. In each case the change effected was momentous enough to warrant going beyond Parliament to the source of ultimate decision. It would have been disastrous if a rigid constitution had deprived the executive of access to the electorate. Nor is it an answer to say that the executive commanded a majority in the House of Commons, for it was precisely the plea that the majority did not voice the opinion of the country which made necessary the reaffirmation of power.

It seems clear, therefore, that such a statutory limitation as Mr. MacDonalhas suggested is on every count undesirable. The Government, under the new dispensation, will be compelled to a new deference to the House of Commons. The ties of party will be drawn more loosely; and the private member who has something to say will be more likely than in the past to secure attention for what he says. But there lurks in this situation a danger not less formidable than the old. It was a misfortune that party development made the legislature the creature of the executive, but it will be still more unfortunate if the new system makes the executive the creature of the legislature. The success of our Parliamentary system has been built upon the ability of the Cabinet to drive a programme through the House of Commons. We have escaped both the fatal division of power between President and Congress in America—a division well illustrated by the position of President Coolidge—and, on the other, that subordination which makes the Swiss Executive simply a body of pre-eminent civil servants. The maintenance of Cabinet direction is essential to the working of our institutions.

For the ambit which is covered by the modern state is too wide to permit of legislative control. The House of Commons can decide principles; it can voice grievance and secure information; it still serves as an admirable assembly in which political talent is tested. But 615 members cannot usefully act as a supernumerary executive. The things to be decided upon must still be selected from without. The focal points of legislation must be submitted to the House of Commons, not created by it. To leave to so numerous a body the task of fitting measures to events is to destroy its
our debate to-day needs to be of the highest quality if its results and substance are to affect the judgment of an electorate of the modern size. 

In such a view as this, it appears essential to vest the ultimate right of dissolution in the Prime Minister. Its exercise must be within the limits of his discretion. He must be able to appeal to the Crown for the power to dissolve in the certainty that the Crown will grant his appeal. That, in a situation such as ours, is the only way in which the Executive may combine with the legislature to the service of the state. Such a power is, of course, a tremendous one. The consultation of the electorate is always, and even at the best, a dark and perilous adventure. The issues upon which it is fought can rarely be disentangled. The results that it implies are seldom so clear as to be unmistakable.

But it is exactly in that hinterland of doubt that we have the guarantees for its proper exercise. No Prime Minister will wantonly thrust an election upon the country if he can avoid it with honour; above all, no Prime Minister is likely to consult the electorate within a brief space of the assumption of office. He will have dubious colleagues to persuade. He will have to weigh the displeasure of the indifferent voter who decides, not upon the issues in dispute, but upon the hostility he feels at the disturbance of his peace. He will remember that every section of the community offended by his policy will vote against him not upon the general merits of his case, but upon what it considers the special demerit of some particular act. Dockers who are dissatisfied with the index number of the Ministry of Labour, teachers who resent the invasion of the Burnham Scales; Southern Irish Unionists who consider that the loyalists have been deserted; eager advocates of unity with France who have clamoured for support of the Ruhr adventure; it is special groups like these whose numbers he must seek to weigh. He will remember that defeat is a serious menace to his own prestige. He will realise that only real victory will give him improved control, and that partial success may prevent a repetition of his effort. The power to dissolve carries with it, in short, its own effective limitations. It needs a fairly united Cabinet. It requires strong evidence that the tide of public opinion is flowing with the party and not against it. Above all, it needs to be successful in its results if it is not to deprive the government of the main source of its authority.

These limitations have been well summarised by Mr. MacDonald. "The idea," he writes, "that a Prime Minister can go to the King just when it suits himself and, within a short time after an election, asks for a dissolution, is absurd. Mr. Baldwin's experience ought

(1) The italics are Mr. MacDonald's. The remark is from the article in the New Leader, cited above.
to have settled that. If, to the best of his beliefs, supported by the
evidence, say, that bye-elections afford, the Minister thinks that
an election is necessary, and that the country would accept it, it
belongs to his responsibility to have his advice in that request
taken, just as if he advises that another party leader should be
sent for, his advice in that respect should also be taken.” The
prerogative of dissolution, in fact, is a discretionary one, and the
only problem in dispute is where the discretion should be. I have
argued here that to revive the authority of the Crown would have
serious and, in the long run, disastrous results. To limit the dis-
cretion either by the statutory creation of a minimum life for
Parliament, or by asking the Crown to accept the judgment of the
House of Commons is equally undesirable. The one would destroy
the invaluable flexibility of our political system; the other would
impair the character of the Executive by making it the mere creature
of concerted opposition. There remains the Prime Minister. Our
safeguard against this abuse of his authority is that he cannot
guarantee success, and that it is within the power of the electorate
to punish him for that abuse. That is where, as a depositary of
this power, he remains superior to the Crown. For the latter
cannot answer at the bar of public opinion; but public opinion
is the maker of Ministries, and as it makes, so can it destroy them.

V. Conclusion.

Nothing of all this implies that the concentration of this power
in the Prime Minister’s hands will do more than mitigate the com-
plexities of a complex situation. Over any lengthy period minority
government is impossible in a democracy. It deprives authority
of the prestige of numbers. It invites unreasoned opposition
by the absence of a wide foundation of consent. Nothing, it may
be urged, so certainly accounts for the rise of dictatorships upon
the Continent as the presence in the legislative assemblies there of a
multiplicity of groups whose power has rested solely upon their
ability to manoeuvre and to compromise. They have represented
the apotheosis of intrigue; and the people have seen, not without
relief, the emergence of a straightforward will which could be dis-
liked, but was at least intelligible. A democracy, to be successful,
must be presented with the choice between distinct alternatives.
The business of parties is so to frame issues for electoral acceptance
that their substance may be simply affirmed or simply denied.
To multiply issues by multiplying parties is always ultimately to
confuse them; and the confusion of issues in a democratic state is
in general the prelude to Caesarism.

We gain nothing by the argument that the referendum will
modify the position. No referendum is ever real. A Tory who
votes against the recognition of Russia may well do so because he
hopes thereby to prevent the advent of a capital levy. It is rarely possible to discover any problem that is genuinely susceptible of the analysis a referendum implies. Schemes of Home Rule for Ireland, for instance, may well vary from Mr. Joseph Chamberlain’s extension of local government to the principles of the Act of 1922. If the electorate votes in favour of Home Rule we do not know what scheme it favours; and it does not possess the competence to decide upon the details of a given scheme. Nor must we forget that the referendum impairs the responsibility of the Executive, on the one hand, and of the legislator upon the other. As an index to the drift of public opinion it is inferior to bye-elections; as a method of penalising the conscientious member of Parliament, it would prove unsurpassable. For it would bring into being a race of politicians whose sole desire was to calculate the probable nature of sudden electoral judgment without regard to its competence or its value. The referendum has not been a failure in Switzerland; but it has not been a success, and the problems of Switzerland are not comparable with our own. In the United States its record is at all points dubious. We shall not stabilise our institutions by an attempt at direct government with an electorate of the modern size. (*)

It is, however, probable that we could do much to mitigate our present position by experiment with Parliamentary methods. For the moment, Cabinet omnipotence has gone; and the private member is in a new position of power. It is eminently desirable that he should be given the opportunity to exercise that power in a creative way. I have elsewhere argued that the election of committee members to act with the Minister as an advisory council of his Department would be attended with beneficent results. (*) It would bring the Civil Servant into a human relation with the House of Commons. It would train a body of members to genuine knowledge of the problems of administration. It would enable the Minister to consult authoritative persons about the probable impact of his policy on public opinion. It would prevent that complete separatism between Government and Opposition, which destroys whatever there is of suggestiveness and knowledge in the House outside the Treasury bench. It would enable the Ministry to use goodwill in a direct way and prevent the policy of wrecking, which is inherent in minority systems. There is no incompatibility between such committees and the classic principle of ministerial responsibility. It needs, of course, the presence of strong Ministers at the head of departments. But it is tolerably clear that minority governments will not survive if they are peopled with weak ministers.

(*) On the referendum much the best discussion will be found in President Lowell’s Public Opinion and Popular Government. For a favourable view see J. St. Loe Strachey, The Referendum.

(*) The Development of the Civil Service, Chap. 11.
Such a system, indeed, need not be confined to a period, like the present, of party confusion; and, in any case, it will only help to minimise the degree of confusion. The real need, in the end, is a return within the shortest possible period to the two-party system. Parliamentary institutions depend for their success upon the direct choice of the government by the electorate. To make that direct choice difficult, if not impossible, is to bewilder the opinion of the public. Sooner or later, public bewilderment is public distrust, and institutions which derive their strength from popular support cannot long flourish in that atmosphere. The need for such a return is the more urgent in a period of social unrest. We have embarked upon the great adventure of entrusting ultimate political power to the mass of the population. We must mould our institutions so that the will of that mass may be given a genuine and emphatic expression.

At the moment, it may be admitted, it is not easy to forecast either the ways or the persons through which we may return to more simple conditions. Parties which are rooted in historic traditions and bear loyalty to honoured leaders are not unnaturally prone to emphasise their separate identity and peculiar principles. Yet it may be argued with some confidence that circumstances are building the bridge over which we may return to directness of choice. The real issue of our period is rapidly coming to be the issue of the rights of property. Exactly as the last generations were mainly concerned with debate upon the character and extent of political privilege, so our own time is likely to be occupied with debate upon the character and extent of economic privilege. Just as men supported the Reform Bill of 1832 less because they approved the Bill itself than because they saw the need for reform; just as, in that co-operation, they gave birth to a unified political party, so, it may be suggested, the desire to modify the present economic régime will group men again into the forces of partial amelioration and the forces of radical change. No one can foresee when exactly that day will come, though, obviously enough, its coming shadows the horizon. Certainly no more important task confronts the party in office than to prepare for its emergence. Certainly, also, no other way lies open to the consolidation and improvement of the Parliamentary system.

(1) I do not discuss here the problem of electoral methods, which is obviously important in this connection.
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