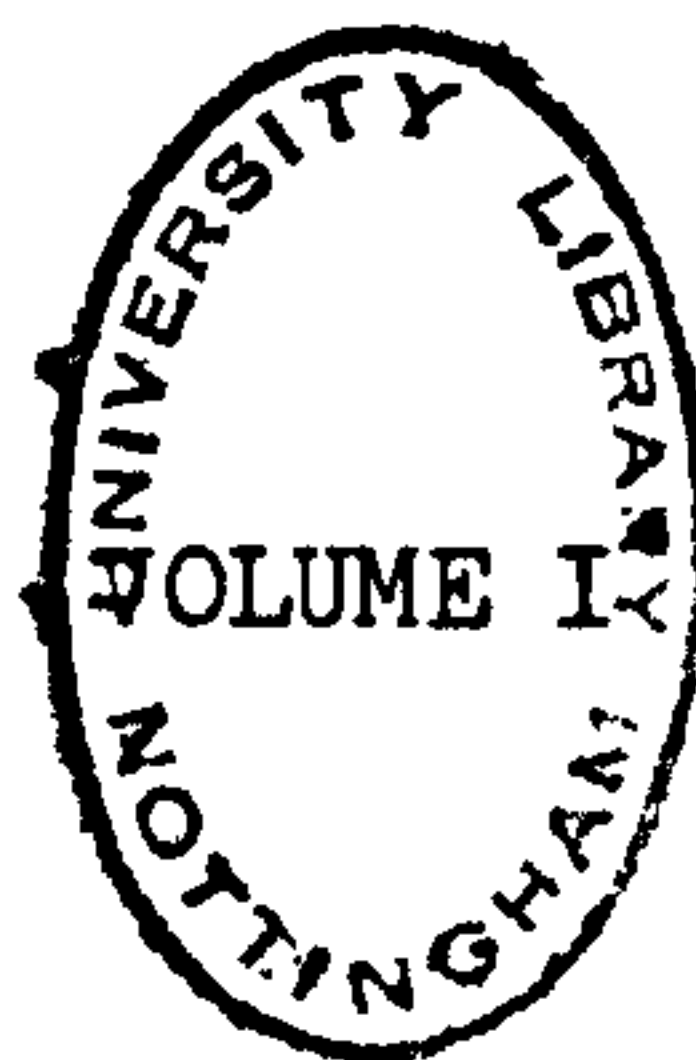


'AN ANALYSIS  
OF THE PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION  
TO THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT'S  
HANDLING OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL SITUATION  
NOVEMBER 1935 - MAY 1940'  
TWO VOLUMES  
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## ABSTRACT

The following pages are devoted to Members of Parliament - Labourites, Liberals, Nationals, Independents - who expressed dissent at the National Government's handling of foreign and defence affairs. Each of these groups was studied separately, but care was taken to view the Opposition in toto, so that similarities of view or approach were ascertained. Any efforts made to effect a united opposition were traced, as were the inter-party movements that originated in these years. Finally, research was undertaken to discover what factors - sociological, economic, electoral - differentiated dissidents from loyalists in the governing coalition or rival factions within the Opposition Parties.

It appeared that the Government's opponents, despite divergencies, began to move towards a common goal of limited collective security. Nevertheless, so divided were they by rival creeds and calculations that little co-operation was affected until the outbreak of war. Separately, however, the dissidents achieved little, primarily because each group was crippled by a lack of cohesiveness within its own ranks. The end result was that the Government had a freer hand than it would otherwise have had.

The counsel offered by the Opposition looked to the fortification of peace to deter the dictators, or to overawe them if aggression occurred. Although insufficient thought had been given to how the allies would have fared in the event of war, the grand alliance policy was - and was recognised by the public to be - an alternative to appeasement. As to the flimsy dividing line between both Coalition loyalists and dissidents and groupings within the Opposition Parties it would seem that the only significant difference was that



of aggregate experience. In effect, dissent or specialism in foreign or defence matters was found to be primarily connected with members being placed in close relations with overseas interests or serving either in the Forces or in a related department.

## INTRODUCTION

November 1935 to May 1940 were especially five momentous years in Britain's political life. Crisis followed crisis in rapid succession, so that in a brief span of time not only was the hope of the twenties - the maintenance of peace through disarmament and the establishment of the effective authority of the League of Nations - finally shattered, but Britain was committed to a total war that she could not win, and would not have done so, Churchill or no Churchill, save for the unforeseen intervention of Russia and the United States. In retrospect observers have found it hard to account for the short-sightedness of Britain's statesmanship, which might have used the country's strength in the struggle to maintain the rule of law without paying the terrible price ultimately exacted of her.

The main burden of responsibility for Britain's inability to put up effective resistance to successive aggressions must undoubtedly lie upon the National Governments, which held sway during these years. The original National administration had been formed by Ramsay MacDonald in 1931, and drew support from Conservatives, Liberals and but a few Labour Members. MacDonald handed over to Stanley Baldwin, the Conservative leader, in June 1935, who in turn was succeeded by Neville Chamberlain, in May 1937. Formed to take the country out of crisis, albeit financial, it was to plunge the British Empire into the most formidable struggle it ever had to meet.

The foreign policy of the National Government has been chronicled by many writers from many different points of view. Indeed the students of the National Government's policy have been legion. The origins of that policy have been much debated; the attempts of British statesmen to implement the policy have been recorded in minute detail. The validity

of the total policy, particularly Chamberlain's share in it, is still passionately discussed. In all that has been written, however, there has been little attempt to trace the activities of the group of members who expressed dissent over the Government's foreign policy. In fact it is misleading to speak of them as a group at all, but rather heterogeneous elements. They included the Labour Party, Liberal Party and men independent of all political affiliations. Furthermore, as Duff Cooper commented, foreign policy "cut clean across existing party lines", and there were a number of dissident Conservatives and National Government supporters that can be added to the list of opposition elements.<sup>1</sup>

These opposition elements have been relatively ignored until of late, when a number of historians, particularly American ones, have made contributions in this field. John F. Naylor's book Labour's International Policy has given us an admirable account of that party's outlook and activities on foreign affairs in the thirties. The Liberal Party has not been so fortunate, for the only recent works on the party, those of Trevor Wilson and Roy Douglas, largely skate over the period.<sup>2</sup> Excepting Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan, the supporters of the National Government who protested at the country's foreign policy were virtually ignored until the publication of Neville Thompson's The Anti-Appeasers, a sharply critical account - perhaps too critical - of their endeavours. Moreover, there has been no real attempt to examine the opposition in toto, viewing the respective criticisms of Government policies, alternative

<sup>1</sup> Duff Cooper continued: "It (division of opinion over foreign affairs) produces strange phenomena, such as the majority of the Tory Party vociferously cheering the ultra-pacifism of Lansbury while regarding the Duchess of Atholl as a dangerous revolutionary." The Second World War, p.67.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, The Downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914-35; Douglas, The History of the Liberal Party, 1895-1970.

policies and activities as a whole. The nearest to this is W R Rock's Appeasement on Trial, which is merely concerned with February 1938 - September 1939, and is much in need of revision. The only other major works touching the opposition as a whole are K W Watkins' Britain Divided, the Effect of the Spanish Civil War on British Political Parties, which concentrates on Churchill and the Labour Party, completely ignoring the Liberals and other National dissidents, and M Cowling's Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British History, 1933-40 which is similarly concerned with leading political figures, concentrating heavily on Chamberlain's peace-time premiership. Another serious omission in work on this period is the lack of a general study of the inter-party movements that originated in the later '30s and the various efforts to effect a united opposition from the dissident groupings.

This thesis is a further step in filling that void, without following, I trust, too much, in recently made footsteps. To prevent this I have tended to concentrate on dramatic highlights - such as the Munich Debate - rather than, as in the other works, a detailed examination of events as they occurred. Furthermore, in the examination of Labour, I shall restrict myself to the parliamentary party, ignoring almost wholly, unlike Naylor's work, the movement outside Westminster. The evolution of Labour's foreign policy will be traced, its makers, in as far as possible, ascertained, and the effects of the international scene on the notorious divisions within the party will be studied in some detail as will other factors relevant to Labour's approach to foreign or defence matters. In the process I hope to resurrect the opinions and activities of as many Labour MPs as possible, including hitherto obscure backbenchers, too often neglected by historians in favour of the more celebrated few.

A similar approach has been adopted for the National dissidents, concentrating on areas, for example the lesser-known critics, glossed over by Neville Thompson. His work appeared at a somewhat late stage in



the writing of this thesis and consequently some revision was necessary in order to avoid it being too much an approximation of his study of the dissenters. Despite similarities, I beg to differ, on occasions, with some of his conclusions.

Naturally enough I shall give considerable attention to the neglected Liberal Party, but the difficulty here is the comparative shortage of material. With an acute lack of funds the party headquarters have moved more than once in recent years, discarding valuable, at least to the historian, material in the process. Nevertheless it is possible - by gleaning here and there - to piece together an account that does some justice to the Liberal Party's endeavours and difficulties during this period.

A further aim of this thesis is to examine the Opposition elements in toto, viewing as a whole their criticisms of Government, suggested alternative policies and general activities to ascertain whether any similarities of view, approach or action existed. There is good reason to do this. In dealing with the history of any one Government one has constantly to bear in mind the political forces on the other side. A government's fortunes for good or ill can depend to a considerable extent on the activities of its opponents as upon its own exertions. For example, Stanley Baldwin maintained in his famous reply to Churchill's statement that "the responsibility of Ministers for the public safety is absolute and requires no mandate", that part of the responsibility for Britain's slow start in rearmament rested on the Opposition. In evidence he brought forward certain facts to the attention of the House. He blamed the Labour Party for exploiting the pacifist feeling that had existed in the country, in 1933-4, in order to defeat the National Government candidates at by-elections, and went on to declare that he had not seen any prospect, after the East Fulham by-election, of getting a

rearmament mandate but rather, if an election were held, of the likelihood of a large majority opposed to rearmament. And so, the Prime Minister claimed, it had been necessary to hold on until the mood of the country had changed in favour of rearming and then seek his mandate. This he did but not without losing much valuable time.<sup>1</sup> Seen in this light, the question within a democracy such as Britain is to what extent the responsibility for the pursuit of particular defence and foreign policies or, as is largely the case here, the failure to follow others, rests on the opposition, official or otherwise, and not merely on the existing Government.

Another avenue that will be explored is the inter-party movements, groupings and contacts that existed in the later 30s and the various efforts made to link those of all parties and of none, that dissented at the Government's course, into a united opposition. Inspiration for this phenomenon - the like of which we have not seen before or since - came largely from the foreign situation, and such a study of movements like the Hundred Thousand Group or Arms and the Covenant can teach valuable lessons for those who today argue for a fundamental realignment of political forces outside the established party structure.

In a further respect this work breaks with previous tradition in that it has a socio-economic flavour, reflecting the fact that, as originally envisaged, it was a joint venture of the History and Political Departments of Nottingham University. After consultation the idea was conceived of systematically analysing those members who protested against the National Government's course in international affairs. This has been done in a variety of ways. Included is an analysis of the Labour, Liberal and

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, November 12th, 1936. Col.589.

Conservative Parties as they stood following the General Election of 1935. To this continual reference and comparison is made when the opposition elements are again analysed during the various dramatic highlights of these years. A similar process has been applied to other occasions worthy of note, including the creation of inter-party movements, such as the All Party Parliamentary Action Group, or the emergence of a body of members expressing dissent at the course their parties were taking on the vital issues of the day, as in the cases of Labour's rearmlers or pacifists.

To this end biographical data on the M.Ps concerned numbering approximately 300 was compiled. The information assembled was reduced to meaningful and comprehensible lines by using filing cards on which were recorded antecedents, age, education, religion, occupation and other relevant details. The pictures that finally took shape were incomplete in some details. Unfortunately this could not be rectified by securing permission to use the autobiographical material which Josiah Wedgwood, one of the M.Ps we shall be studying, persuaded several hundred of his contemporary M.Ps to prepare and entrust to him, and which now is in the possession of the History of Parliament Trust. Consequently when the officially sponsored History of Parliament appears, analysis and synthesis on a far grander scale will become possible. Yet this exhaustive treatment of the M.Ps involved will not reach fruition until the distant future. There was need, therefore, to cover this ground, albeit on an interim basis only, and with sufficient material to make the research worthwhile some interesting conclusions took shape.

It is not necessary for me to testify to the efficacy of the biographical approach to history. Recent research has shown that biographical studies can be a very effective means for examining the House of Commons. Through the work of scholars like Sir John Neale and Sir Lewis Namier our knowledge of Parliament has been greatly



enlarged.<sup>1</sup> There is sufficient reason therefore to embark on the laborious task of compiling biographical data on M.Ps, many of whom were not very important or interesting as individuals, for only in this way can one meaningfully evaluate such statements as the appeasers were middle class businessmen while the anti-appeasers were descended from the pre-nineteenth century aristocracy. Moreover, as the thesis will illustrate, an examination of a member's or group of members' background can reveal why he or they arrived at a particular view or took a certain course of action.

One last introductory note is necessary. This study ends on the 10th May, 1940, rather than 3rd September, 1939, because it was the formation of Churchill's Government, not the outbreak of war, that ended a political era which had opened with the formation of the National Government in 1931. Although Churchill and Eden joined the Cabinet when the war began, political control remained largely in the hands of those who had managed the country's affairs for the best part of a decade. Nor did criticism of the administration cease with the beginning of the war. After a short truce following the initial shock of hostilities, opposition was renewed on both sides of the House of Commons. Many of those who had previously challenged the Government's handling of foreign affairs now took issue with its conduct of the war. Neville Chamberlain's resignation finally ended the political fueds and criticism which had originated in the domestic, imperial, and foreign events of the early 1930s.

<sup>1</sup> Neale, The Elizabethan House of Commons; Namier, The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III.



## C H A P T E R   I

### THE 1935 GENERAL ELECTION

#### The Campaign

The House of Commons which was elected in 1931 was dissolved on October 25, 1935, and polling in the general election was fixed for November 14. Nominations took place on November 4, when 38 members were returned unopposed to the new Parliament, a group that included 22 Conservatives and 3 Liberal National men on the one side, and 12 Labour and an Independent on the other. For the remaining seats a total of 1,310 prospective MPs entered the field: 493 Conservatives, 20 National Labourites, 41 Liberal Nationals, 6 National Candidates as Government supporters; 157 Liberals (of the Samuelite variety), 4 Independent Liberals (Lloyd George family party), 540 Labourites and 49 Independent Candidates who opposed the Baldwin Ministry.<sup>1</sup>

The question of the League of Nations was to figure in the contest.<sup>2</sup> All the parties - Conservative, Liberal and Labour alike - were for the League; each of their manifestoes expressed support for a system of collective security administered from Geneva. It is not surprising, therefore, that the electors felt that there was little to choose between the parties on this issue, and were somewhat bewildered by the hostility between rival candidates who used the same League of

<sup>1</sup> Figures recorded in Dod's Parliamentary Companion, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> The election is dealt with somewhat briefly here but further comment can be found elsewhere, when subject matter requires reference to aspects of the campaign.

Nations slogans.<sup>1</sup> Baldwin's tactics, in effect, had left the Liberal and Labour Parties at a distinct disadvantage. Both went to the hustings with roughly the same apparent position on the League of Nations as that held by the Government. C L Mowat aptly commented that the Conservatives had stolen their clothes and the Opposition parties could only protest that Baldwin would never wear them.<sup>2</sup>

Participants in these years, particularly Labour ones, and some historians, have considered that the League was the "main issue" at the election.<sup>3</sup> Neville Thompson wrote that the National Government won "the 1935 election on a platform of supporting the League and collective security", while Michael Foot has put that "Labour's pleadings to the Government to stand by their obligations (to the League), merely played into the hands of Stanley Baldwin who won an election on the promise that he would do just that".<sup>4</sup> These views rest on the assumption that "much of the election campaign was devoted to international affairs".<sup>5</sup> It was not. With roughly the same apparent position on the League as that held by the Government, the Liberal and Labour Parties were forced to turn their electoral attention elsewhere to unemployment, depression, the misery still overshadowing parts of the land, and these became as

<sup>1</sup> The League of Nations Union asked candidates to indicate publicly their attitude to the League and the use of sanctions. From information relating to 567 constituencies reaching the Union's Head Office it was apparent either from the speeches or election addresses that 550 MPs of the new Parliament were in favour of maintaining the League's collective pressure upon Italy until her war of aggression in Africa was stopped. Only 52 of these declared their desire to avoid or their opposition to the use of armed force by the League. League of Nations Union Handbook, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Britain Between The Wars, p.554.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.553.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson, The Anti-Appeasers, p.38; Foot, Aneurin Bevan, p.211. See also Attlee's As It Happened, p.80.

<sup>5</sup> Miliband, Parliamentary Socialism, p.229.

important in the campaign as the Italian aggression. This was noted by the Daily Herald on 15 October:

"The General Election will be fought on domestic issues and not exclusively on foreign policy. Six months ago it looked as if foreign policy would dominate the election. Between Labour and the Tories there was a gulf that seemed unbridgeable on foreign policy. Now, incredible as it would have seemed six months ago, the Government is supporting the League."

Consequently Labour devoted fourteen of the sixteen pages of its pamphlet, The Case Against the National Government, to domestic matters. Similarly the weight of the Government's manifesto was directed to the home front, making much of the improvement in conditions since 1931 - economic recovery, the boom in housing - and promised more efforts to assist the distressed areas, extension of old age pensions, and the raising of the school leaving age to fifteen. In surveying the campaign, therefore, The Times handbook, The General Election of 1935, argued that it was "generally agreed that the international situation played a very small part in the campaign".<sup>1</sup> Thus it is quite possible that the League was not such a key issue in the election as has been assumed, and that the combination of Labour apologists, eager for an explanation that distracted attention from their party's shortcomings, and historians too mindful of subsequent events, have given the role of the League a greater retrospective importance in the campaign than it in fact warrants.

Another of the issues at the campaign was that of rearmament, which the Government tended to keep out of the lime-light except as

<sup>1</sup> Page 19.

far as it could be treated as part of Britain's contribution to the League system:

"The fact is that the actual condition of our defence forces is not satisfactory. We have made it clear that we must in the course of the next few years do what is necessary to repair the gaps in our defences, which have accumulated over the last decade . . . . The defence programme will be strictly confined to what is required to make the country and the Empire safe and to fulfil our obligations towards the League."<sup>1</sup>

In fact had they chosen to, the Government by campaigning more vigorously for rearmament could well have drawn a sharp distinction between the policies of the two major parties. This was indicated by the statements of the Labour leaders: Clement Attlee ridiculed the need for a "tremendous and costly programme"; Arthur Greenwood denounced Neville Chamberlain as "the merest scaremonger"; Herbert Morrison called Chamberlain, Churchill and Amery "fire-eaters and militarists . . . (Chamberlain) would spend on the means of death, but not on the means of life".<sup>2</sup> Baldwin, however, apparently on the advice of party agents and officials, decided not to stress the rearmament issue, and although mentioned in many Conservative speeches, was rather played down as the campaign progressed.<sup>3</sup> Tom Jones confided to a friend:

"He (Baldwin) has only very slowly, and with obvious reluctance proclaimed the need for more armaments; he has avoided all trace of the Daily Mail's lust to arm the Nation

<sup>1</sup> From the National Government's Election Manifesto found in The General Election of 1935, p.22.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Iain Macleod's Neville Chamberlain, p.186.

<sup>3</sup> See Feiling's The Life of Neville Chamberlain, pp.266-69.



to the teeth and has also kept clear of Winston's enthusiasm for ships and guns."<sup>1</sup>

When the election dust cleared it became apparent that 431 supporters of the Government were returned to the new Parliament. Of the Ministerialists elected, 387 were Conservatives, 33 Liberal National, 8 National Labour, and 3 Nationals. The Opposition consisted of 154 Socialists, 21 Independent Liberals,<sup>2</sup> 4 members of the Independent Labour Party and 1 Communist. There were also 4 Independent members: 2 Irish Nationalists, Patrick Cunningham and Anthony Mulvey, members for Fermanagh and Tyrone, who did not take their seats; Eleanor Rathbone, member for English Universities; Alan Patrick Herbert, member for Oxford University.

#### The Governing Coalition

Once again the national parties had an impregnable majority, for less than one hundred seats of the unique total of 1931 were lost. Over 70% voted and the Government achieved a higher percentage (53.6%) of the popular vote than any other of the twentieth century with, again, the exception of 1931.<sup>3</sup> The decisive support given the administration could not be gainsaid. It was back in office for a further five years, while the Liberal and Labour Parties - the latter recovering somewhat from its 1931 knockdown but significantly failing to wholly erase the stigma of its last performance in government - were

<sup>1</sup> Jones, letter dated November 17, A Diary With Letters, p.155. Jones was Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet (1916-30) and an intimate friend of Baldwin. His diaries are a valuable source of information on the politics of the inter-war years.

<sup>2</sup> The 21 includes 17 Samuelites and 4 Lloyd George MPs. Several books give the figure as 20, eg Butler and Freeman's British Political Facts 1900-1960. This is probably because R H Bernays, MP for Bristol North, left the Independent Liberals for the Liberal Nationals a few months after the election.

<sup>3</sup> Figures obtained from Baldwin by Keith Middlemas and John Barnes, p.869.

condemned to the continued frustration of opposition.

It is doubtful if the label 'National' contributed much to the Government's success in the election, Baldwin, for one, dismissing it as a "facade".<sup>1</sup> The National character of the Government was dependent on the National Labour and Liberal National Members returned. The former group had been originally formed of those Labour Ministers and their supporters who helped in 1931 to establish the National Government. Its avowed policy was to strengthen the Government and to ensure that it received the support of Labour views and traditions, and to make certain that Labour ideals played their part in the councils of Government and of Parliament. No one took the group seriously, especially after Ramsay MacDonald gave way to Baldwin in June 1935 and when the election of that year resulted in only eight National Labourites in the new House.<sup>2</sup>

The other party to the coalition, the Liberal Nationals, originated from a group of MPs led by Sir John Simon and Sir Walter Runciman, who in June 1931 rejected the Liberal Whip over Free Trade policy. In the election of October 41 candidates stood as Liberal Nationals, 35 successfully. The following year when the Samuelite Liberals left the Government over the Ottawa agreements, the Simonite Liberal Nationals remained, arguing that the National Government should have complete freedom in approaching national problems without restraint of party views. Three years later they fought the 1935 election in alliance with the Conservatives and 33 of the 44 candidates were returned.

<sup>1</sup> Letter dated May 12, A Diary with Letters, p.145.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Nicolson's record reveals how far the group had strayed. Having offered himself as a Conservative candidate for Sevenoaks he stood as a National Labourite for West Leicester. His inclinations, however, tended towards the Liberal Party. Diaries and Letters, 1930-39, p.215.

These two small groups, which together had put up 64 candidates, polled 1,200,000 votes, although it must be remembered that a tidy proportion of these votes were Conservative. It is unlikely that many Liberal National or National Labour candidates would have been returned but for the help and support of local Conservative associations. Few of their seats could be categorized as 'safe' if Conservative support was withdrawn, something which doubtless affected their independent standing as MPs and made them less liable to criticise the National Government than their once cherished views warranted. It is interesting to note that only one of this group consistently opposed the Government's foreign policy, and it is to Harold Nicolson's lasting credit that he was willing to go against Government and party on a majority of 87.

The overwhelming Conservative nature of the victory can be seen by the fact that the National Liberals and Labourites were outnumbered by ten to one on the Government benches. As in previous Parliaments, the contrast between this fact and the distribution of offices in the ministry - where non-Conservatives had a wholly disproportionate number of places - was surprising. There were four Liberal National Cabinet Ministers, Simon, Runciman, Sir Godfrey Collins and Ernest Brown, as well as 5 junior Ministers outside the Cabinet. From the National Labourites, both MacDonalds and J H Thomas sat in the Cabinet, while a further two held ministerial posts.<sup>1</sup> This surprisingly high number of Liberal Nationals and National Labourites is quite simple to explain: it was essentially the cost of the national label which was attached

<sup>1</sup> This effectively explains Nicolson's greeting on first entering the House: Winston rose tubbily and stretched out great arms. "Welcome! Welcome!" he yelled. You know how overwhelming his charm can be, but I would rather it had occurred in greater privacy. "Well", he shouted, "when I saw your result on the tape, I said to myself, "that means he goes straight into the Cabinet", and then I remembered that all of your Party were already in the Cabinet and that they must have at least one follower on the back benches. So I realised that you would be chosen as the single follower." Letter dated December 4, 1935, Diaries and Letters, p.229.

to the Government. According to Duff Cooper there was much ill-feeling, if not envy, on the Tory benches over this number of 'allies' on the Government pay roll.<sup>1</sup>

### The Liberal Party

While the forces of the Right were in the ascendant those of the Left were in disarray. This was particularly true of the Liberal Party, whose recent history was complicated by the bitter disunity which existed within its ranks. During the Parliament of 1929-31 the party had split assunder; one section had grudgingly assisted the Labour Government while the other, which included Simon, aided the Conservative Opposition. The financial crisis of 1931 and the formation of the National Government saw the party temporarily united. Within a few months, however, controversy broke out afresh. David Lloyd George had endorsed the new Government as long as it abstained from an election, and he expected Sir Herbert Samuel and his colleagues to resign should the Conservative elements insist on going to the hustings in order to make party capital of a national emergency. Samuel's failure to do so was regarded by Lloyd George as a gross betrayal and led him and his 'family party' to sever all connection with the Liberal machine.

Consequently the 1931 General Election witnessed the Liberal Party offering three distinct positions: the semi-Conservative position of Simon; the semi-Labour position of Lloyd George; the non-Conservative, anti-Labour position of the official party under Samuel. Seventy-two Liberals were elected, which was a better result than 1929, but this was deceptive. Whereas in 1929 the Party had won seats on its own

<sup>1</sup> Cooper, The Second World War, p.111.



strength, in 1931 it secured many of them through the help of the traditional enemy, the Conservative Party. In fact, of its 72 seats only 10 were contested by Conservative candidates.

The Liberal rift was to move one stage further when it became evident that the prevailing tendency of the National administration was to favour protection. The issue came to a head in September 1932, when Samuel, Isaac Foot, Archibald Sinclair and Sir Robert Hamilton resigned, while others, like Simon, and Runciman, constituting themselves as 'National' Liberals, remained in the Government. It was not until a year later, however, that Samuel and his followers, who at first had seen their role as criticism and support of the Government from an independent and friendly position, finally moved into full opposition.<sup>1</sup> The Samuelite remnants then attempted to recover their bearings and their traditional position, but the events of recent years had destroyed the Liberal Party's sense of direction.

In 1935, with the prospect of a general election, the Liberal leaders took stock of the situation. Their major concern was that although they still viewed themselves as a national party concerned with national issues, it seemed increasingly unlikely that there was any valid future for the Liberals as an independent force.<sup>2</sup> After all they had not been in office effectively since 1916, which meant that a new electorate was growing up not accustomed to thinking of the party in terms of political power. For the new voter the essential dividing line and electoral choice was between the two major parties, and in such a contest a vote for a Liberal increasingly seemed a vote thrown away. H L Nathan, the Liberal Member for N. E. Bethnal Green,

<sup>1</sup> The Samuelites had remained seated on the Government benches.

<sup>2</sup> Lloyd George for one did not think so. He announced: "I see no future except a dishonourable grave for Liberalism as it is. Liberalism is in an advanced state of creeping paralysis." News Chronicle, January 16, 1933.

echoed this diagnosis:<sup>1</sup>

"The Liberal Party is split beyond repair on important issues, its voice is weak and ineffective in the House of Commons and even if it succeeded in overcoming these obstacles it has fallen so low in numbers and prestige that it cannot again present itself to the country as a party capable of forming a Government . . . . The drive that was the life of the Liberal Party has gone. It has no effective message for our times . . . . The mantle of the standard bearers of Liberty has fallen on the Labour Party."<sup>2</sup>

Sinclair wrote to Samuel informing him that the "time has come for a big effort to arrest public attention and to arouse the fighting support of Liberals in the country by dramatic announcements and skilful publicity".<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately the public up and down the country was only impressed by the dissensions between Samuelites, Simonites, and Lloyd Georgites, so much so that they had become the subject of jokes and sneers.<sup>4</sup> The rift with the Simonites was now complete; the Liberal Nationals - however Liberal the opinions which some of them still held - had become Conservatives for all practical purposes. Nor could the Samuelite Liberals count on collaboration with Lloyd George. As late as May 1935 Sinclair was to admit that he had just shaken hands and spoken to Lloyd George for the first time since the 1931 General Election. Following this chance encounter Sinclair was enraged to hear

<sup>1</sup> MP N. E. Bethnal Green, 1929-35; Central Wandsworth (Labour) 1937-40.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Lloyd George July 1934, Lloyd George Papers.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Samuel, Samuel Papers, May 4, 1935.

<sup>4</sup> This was particularly so in the House of Commons. In the course of an attack upon the Liberals, a Conservative MP, Marjoribanks had said: "In the Liberal Party are many mansions!". His equilibrium was somewhat shaken by Lloyd George's quick retort: "And in the Conservative Party there are many flats." Frances Lloyd George, The Years That Are Past, p.233.

that Lloyd George had, the same day, declared that there was no future for the Liberals as an independent force and that they must co-operate with one or other of the major parties!<sup>1</sup> Whatever animosity felt for Lloyd George was equalled if not surpassed on his side, adding weight to the claim that the Liberals were "suffering today from a similar conflict which started 18 years ago. That the schism has never been healed, and that the bitterness is, if anything, worse than ever."<sup>2</sup> Although several attempts were made to bring Samuel and Lloyd George together, the Liberals still went to the hustings presenting an appearance of hopeless disunity. Indeed Lloyd George, instead of devoting himself to a party campaign, spent most of his still considerable energy establishing the non-party Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction, which pressed candidates to support the dual policy of a new deal at home and peace through the League of Nations abroad.

When the nominations closed on November 4 only 157 Independent Liberals were in the fight. Obviously the party stood no chance of forming an alternative government and the most they could ask was that Liberalism should be strengthened "to safeguard the country against the complacent Toryism and reckless Socialism".<sup>3</sup> It was hoped that the election would return the two main parties to the equilibrium of 1929 so that the new Government would be at the mercy of the Liberals. The election far from justifying such hopes, proved to be a catastrophe.

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Samuel, May 4, 1935, Samuel Papers.

<sup>2</sup> Notes for Mr Waterhouse February 15, 1934. Lloyd George Papers. In a letter to Baron Mottistone, Lloyd George described Samuel as "always has been, and ever will be, until he gets to the bosom of Abraham, a swine of the swiniest". October 9, 1939. Lloyd George Papers.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, The Downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914-35, p.377.

Years later Sir Percy Harris, the Liberal Chief Whip after 1935, wrote that "the election played havoc with the Liberal Party".<sup>1</sup> Their voting strength fell, and not only was their representation virtually halved but their leader, Samuel, and such prominent figures as Sir Walter Rea, Sir Robert Hamilton and Isaac Foot, were defeated. Fourteen only of the thirty-one seats secured by Samuel's followers in 1931 were retained, while three were captured from Conservatives, by narrow majorities, in remote rural constituencies, with a strong radical tradition, and which Labour did not contest. Of the fourteen retained only six candidates had successfully withstood the combined challenge from Labour and National Government candidates, and three of the six came from rural parts of Wales. What representation the Liberals had achieved, therefore, was confined to certain Welsh and Celtic fringes, and in a few isolated spots scattered over the country, seemingly without rhyme or reason, but probably due to local circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

On one matter the General Election marked an improvement in Liberal relationships. Whereas in the previous Parliament the Lloyd George family group had been aloof from the ordinary activities of the party they now took the party whip, bringing the total number of Liberals to 21.<sup>3</sup> Lloyd George was persuaded by Harris to preside over the first meeting of the Members, although he was unwilling to stand for the chairmanship of the parliamentary party. On his proposal, Sinclair was elected. Although Sinclair had been Chief Whip in 1930-1, and had held office in the National Government, he was not well known in the country as a whole. Four years later, at the outbreak of war, he

<sup>1</sup> Harris, Forty Years In and Out of Parliament, p.124.

<sup>2</sup> 'Ariel', in the Congregationalist Christian World commented: "It used to be said of Charles James Fox's party that it could drive to the House in a Cab; the leaderless remnant of the Samuelites might go in a small charabanc, and still have room to spare." November 20, 1935.

<sup>3</sup> David, Gwilym, Megan and Goronwy Owen.



was held in wide respect far outside the range of his own party.

The results of the General Election gave the Liberals cause for serious reflection on their future prospects. The small number of candidates; the number of deposits lost (42); the failure, outside the West Country, to come even second in the poll in the vast majority of cases; the probability that where there was no Liberal candidate their usual supporters voted for the Government, all boded ill for the future. Geoffrey Mander, the Member for Wolverhampton East, concluded that the "Left goodwill has definitely gone Labour . . . it is very difficult to see how the Liberal Party can again secure its dominating position in national affairs".<sup>1</sup> A H Henderson Livesey, Lloyd George's political agent, was more gloomy: "At the next election, except for a few individuals scattered about the country, there will be no Independent Liberal candidates".<sup>2</sup>

Even though it seemed increasingly unlikely that there was any valid future for the Liberals as an independent force, the immediate reaction of party to the election setback was to reject any further party entanglements. In recent years they had constituted one of the great parties of the state; and they continued to view themselves as a national party concerned with national issues rather than a minor party representing some regional interest, dependent for office on the goodwill of the Labour or Conservative parties. When, therefore, on December 4, a joint meeting took place in London between the Executive Council of the National Liberal Federation, the Women's National Liberal Federation, and the National League of Young Liberals, a resolution was carried to the effect that it would be a gross betrayal of everything for which Liberalism stood for to entrust the maintenance of the Liberal faith to the keeping of either the Conservative or Labour Parties.

<sup>1</sup> 'The General Election and After', Contemporary Review, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Memorandum dated 1938. Lloyd George Papers.

Power or the possibility of gaining it, is the lifeblood of any political party. And yet the Liberal defeat had been so complete that a policy of total independence, as outlined in the resolution, excluded the party from any immediate chance of attaining office and in exercising any important influence on public policy. Herein lay the crux of the Liberal dilemma of the next five years. Virtually relegated to the role of onlookers, Liberal MPs wondered whether their cause might be better promoted by co-operating with one or other of the major parties rather than by keeping their faith inviolate and aspiring to be a second and weaker opposition.

### The Labour Party

It was not the Liberal Party's but Labour's disunity which had provided the Government with a good opportunity for appealing to the country. Under the lead of Arthur Henderson the party had adopted a policy of strong support for the League, but there was in Labour's ranks a strong pacifist section led by George Lansbury. The crisis came over the question of the application of sanctions against Italy, should she invade Abyssinia. After a full if somewhat acrimonious debate at the Annual Party Conference at Brighton in October, the pacifists were overwhelmingly defeated. A few days later Lansbury resigned the leadership and Clement Attlee was elected leader in his place.

In addition to the break with the pacifists, the Brighton Conference also witnessed the disaffection of the Left, which viewed the Abyssinian issue in the most abstract terms as a clash of rival imperialisms. Mussolini was intent on imperial conquest, as everyone knew, but by supporting sanctions against him, so their argument went, the Labour Party was committing itself to a Conservative policy which might lead to war in which they would be fighting not for the true principles of the League of Nations but for the defence of purely imperialist

interests. So long as the Government was in power, they argued, Labour must withhold its support, devoting its resources instead, in the words Cripps used in opposing the Executive's resolution, "to the defeat of that very capitalism and imperialism which is represented in this country by our class enemies masquerading under the title of a 'National' Government". Only when a Labour Government was in power could there be, he concluded, any hope of a true policy of collective security. In protest against Labour's adopted course Cripps, the Left's leading spokesman, had already resigned from the National Executive Committee and from the Executive Committee of the parliamentary party in order that he could challenge the resolution which the Executive had drafted for submission to the Conference on the Abyssinian affair.

The loss of two such outstanding personalities as Cripps and Lansbury was serious, but far more serious was the disunity Labour displayed on the eve of the dissolution of Parliament. There seems little doubt that Baldwin had been carefully noting the divergencies of opinion at the conference and the subsequent resignations and changes, and had decided it was a favourable time for an election. So it proved to be, as A L Rowse, himself a Labour Candidate at the election, admitted: "The doctrinarism of the Left Wing and the pacifists played straight into the hands of the Government", costing Labour, on his account, over 40 seats.<sup>1</sup> And even Cripps's official biographer concurred with this judgement. "There is no doubt", he wrote, "that the Party was weakened in its 1935 campaign by the affair at its last Conference."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rowse, 'The Present and Immediate Future of the Labour Party', Political Quarterly, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> Cooke, The Life of Sir Richard Stafford Cripps, p.177.

Nevertheless, the abnormal ebb-tide of 1931 turned. In all the Party made 94 net gains, compared with 213 losses in 1931. Labour now held the Coalfields, the East End of London, the Potteries, and a minority of seats of some of the great industrial towns. She did not, however, make the inroads into industrial areas which had been hoped for, particularly in places classed as distressed. Broadly speaking it may be said that Labour regained seats which had been classified by the Government as certain losses, but they did not secure the seats which had been ranked as doubtful. Herbert Morrison did not attempt to hide his disappointment, at the results of the General Election, in the November issue of Forward.

"We ought to have done better. Look at the "certainties" we have failed to win. There are too many of them for my liking."

Yet the parliamentary party was now a good deal better off for leaders and debaters. In addition to Clement Attlee, Sir Stafford Cripps and Arthur Greenwood, the return of A V Alexander, J R Clynes, Hugh Dalton, H B Lees-Smith, Herbert Morrison and F W Pethick-Lawrence strengthened the Labour front bench. G D H Cole commented that there was once more "a team that could reasonably cover the field, though the Party was weak on foreign affairs and none too strong in incisive debating power."<sup>1</sup> Tom Jones endorsed this verdict:

"The front Opposition bench should be a much better debating team than was the last, which was pitiable . . . Dalton, Lee-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence will make some amends for these defects in the new Parliament."<sup>2</sup>

In fact the 1935 election marked a significant change in the leadership of the Parliamentary Labour Party. The Executive Committee

<sup>1</sup> A History of the Labour Party from 1914, p.311.

<sup>2</sup> Letter dated November 17, 1935. A Diary With Letters, p.156.



consisting of 12 Commons members, and six ex-officio members: the leader and deputy leader of the Party, the Chief Whip of the House of Commons, the Leader of the Labour Peers, the Chief Whip of the Labour Peers, and their elected representative, is elected at the beginning of each session of Parliament. Prior to 1935 the Executive Committee had been composed largely of men of working class origins who, denied an opportunity of higher education, had climbed to the leadership through years of trade union and party work. By contrast, the leadership from 1935 was to contain a higher percentage of members with a university and professional background, who had had little, if any, contact with the unions. In all 18 MPs were to be elected onto the Committee during the next four years and three positions were to remain permanent: Attlee, Greenwood and Sir Charles Edwards. Ten of the twenty-one serving had professional and university backgrounds - a proportion quite unwarranted, by their numbers in the party.<sup>1</sup> The fact that few trade unionists were finding their way into the inner counsels of the party caused a certain amount of disquiet in union circles. Following the executive elections, in 1936, when only three trade unionists were successful, John Marchbank, General Secretary of the Railwaymen, complained that the remainder of the Committee, though men of high ability, had little industrial experience or direct contact with the unions. He therefore welcomed the decision, recently taken, to reconstitute the trade union group of members, which had existed in previous Parliaments, looking to it to restore the influence of the union members in the counsels of the party.<sup>2</sup> It never did.

<sup>1</sup> These were: Attlee, Greenwood, Benn, Dalton, Johnston, Morgan Jones, Lees-Smith, Noel-Baker, Pethick-Lawrence and Pritt.

<sup>2</sup> The Times, November 27, 1936.

A further feature of the parliamentary leadership must be considered; that of age. The oldest of the members, Sir Charles Edwards, had first been elected Chief Whip at the age of 64 and continued to hold the office until 1942, when he was 75. In November, 1938, Aneurin Bevan was to get into hot water for stating the obvious:". . . he should resign. He is no match for the Government Chief Whip. . . . There are plenty of able younger men who are aching to win their spurs in this pivotal position, and it is intolerable that the effectiveness of the party should be impaired by the continuence in office of men who are not equal to the demands of the present day." Bevan's attack did not end at Sir Charles Edwards, "The same could be said of others who sit on the front bench. It is true they are elected by their colleagues, but the natural reluctance of their comrades to remove them ought not to be allowed to impair the efficiency of our efforts."<sup>1</sup> It is difficult, however, to ascertain just who these members were that Bevan referred to. The average age at the 1935 General Election of the 21 elected to the committee in the 1935-39 period was 54 years six months, slightly lower than that of the party, and in 1938, when Bevan made his attack, the average age of the 15 then on the committee was 53 years 2 months. Other than Edwards, the oldest were Pethick-Lawrence (64), Wedgwood Benn (58), and Lees-Smith (57), while the others compared very favourably with the parliamentary party.

One of the most serious weaknesses in Labour's strategic position at the General Election was its failure to advance a leader who then measured up to the electorate's standard for a Prime Minister. "The Labour Party", wrote G D H Cole, after the election was over, "lacks an effective leader more than anything else; and until it finds one, and is prepared to trust him to speak to the people in its name, it will fail to win back the ground that has been lost."<sup>2</sup> Attlee, MP for

<sup>1</sup> Manchester Guardian, November 26, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> New Statesman and Nation, November 23, 1935.

Limehouse, Stepney, had carried the unexpected burden of leadership creditably enough through the election campaign, but he was no national figure, and Tom Jones went so far as to describe him as "unknown" at the time of the election.<sup>1</sup> The great objection to Attlee retaining the leadership was that he was not a strong man, who could emerge as a national figure, but somewhat retiring, "too nervous and too modest ever to become dominating at the box in the House of Commons."<sup>2</sup> Indeed it would seem that Attlee recognised his limitations:

"I have been a very happy and fortunate man . . . in having been given the opportunity of serving in a state of life to which I had never expected to be called."<sup>3</sup>

Consequently he was widely regarded as just filling the post until after the election, when a more dynamic leader would be found.

Now that the election was over and the parliamentary party possessed a wider array of talent, the question of leadership had to be determined anew. There were three contestants: Attlee, the incumbent; Morrison, a strong contender who had already won distinction as Minister of Transport and more recently as leader of the London County Council; Greenwood, who had strong links with the party headquarters and was largely supported, by northern trade unionists. As Tuesday, November 26 was the first party meeting after the General Election, it was then that the leadership question was settled. There was a close contest, with this preliminary result: Attlee, 58 votes;

<sup>1</sup> Diaries and Letters, p.156.

<sup>2</sup> J Wedgwood, Memoirs of a Fighting Life, p.236.

<sup>3</sup> As It Happened, p.156.

Morrison, 44; Greenwood, 32.<sup>1</sup> The latter then withdrew, as it had been agreed that the bottom candidate would drop out after the first ballot. Attlee, on the second ballot, was then elected by 88 votes to Morrison's almost unaltered total of 48.

Clearly Greenwood's supporters had swung almost solidly to Attlee and against Morrison. Dalton put this down to a "prejudice, surprisingly strong and widespread" against Morrison getting the leadership as he would be too dominant.<sup>2</sup> "Powerful leaders", wrote the latter's biographers, "could take the party in the wrong direction, as it was thought MacDonald had. What was wanted was a leader who would follow the party. Attlee fitted that bill, but Morrison was divisive; he enjoyed controversy. Attlee, however, shunned dissension. He sought to conciliate and unite. With Morrison the party would be rent by disagreement over policies, tactics and personnel."<sup>3</sup>

After the second vote the two losing contestants moved and seconded the decision so as to make it unanimous. Attlee, returning thanks said that his election was for one session only and that if the party wanted a change later he wouldn't complain. In effect the question of leadership, far from being conclusively settled, was left open for subsequent debate, or perhaps more accurately, the seeds were sown for future discord. Dalton summed up his feelings:

"I felt that we had lost by far the strongest personality and by far the most efficient politician of the three. I

<sup>1</sup> The figures in the first ballot "strongly support the view that Attlee's principal support came from his colleagues of the previous four years". R Jenkins, Mr Attlee, p.167. Attlee's vote coincided almost exactly with the number of Labour members in the previous House.

<sup>2</sup> The Fateful Years, p.82. Shinwell concurs, I've Lived Through It All, p.125.

<sup>3</sup> B Donoghue and G W Jones, Herbert Morrison, p.241. Other factors were that the Left felt that Morrison was little more than a Liberal, while the Trade Union leaders, particularly Bevin, were incensed by his opposition to the principles of workers representation on governing boards of socialized industries.



wrote in my diary: 'a wretched, disheartening result. And a little mouse shall lead them!'"<sup>1</sup>

The memoirs of several of Attlee's leading colleagues reveal similar sentiments, and just how uneasy they continued to be at his leadership. They were to frequently criticise his work and on various occasions over the next 20 years intrigue to unseat him.<sup>2</sup> Several instances are baldly recorded in Dalton's autobiography and private papers, of which the following are a sample. In September, 1939 Dalton told Greenwood that "CRA at no time, and much less now . . . is big enough or strong enough to carry the burden", and went on to suggest that he (AG) should be leader in place of the sick Attlee.<sup>3</sup> Nothing came of this. Almost a year earlier, during the Munich crisis, Sir Stafford Cripps had proposed that Attlee should be 'shunted' from the leadership and replaced by Morrison. "Attlee", he said, "even after making a good speech, sat down like a frightened rabbit". Dalton agreed that Attlee inspired little enthusiasm but, as he had recently told Morrison, a change was not on the cards.<sup>4</sup> On another occasion Ellen Wilkinson attempted to get a movement underfoot to replace Attlee by Morrison. As part of the campaign she wrote

<sup>1</sup> Dalton, The Fateful Years, p.82. Dalton thereafter referred to Attlee as "rabbit", though privately of course, eg Diary, September 19, 1939, "Rabbit is back". By contrast Attlee's colleagues on the General Council spoke of him as 'Clam' Attlee, "and worthily he sustained the reputation". Citrine, Men and Work, p.357.

<sup>2</sup> As recorded by Morrison who claimed "in none of which I ever took part". An Autobiography, p.164.

<sup>3</sup> Diary entry, 18 September, 1939.

<sup>4</sup> Diary entry, 6 October, 1938.

an article for the Sunday Referee outlining the need for decisive, courageous and inspiring leadership of the Labour Party. If Chamberlain were confronted by Morrison, "a superb organiser and first-class political leader", the political situation would be transformed and a Labour victory would soon follow. The substance of the article was subsequently debated at a party meeting where feeling was strongly against her, partly on the grounds that Attlee was sick.<sup>1</sup>

The question of Labour's leadership, therefore, remained a constant source of contention throughout the 1935 Parliament, with leading front benchers and a section of the rank and file resenting Attlee's being over them. In consequence Attlee was never 'comfortable' in his position, and perhaps this, coupled with a natural diffidence, so obvious to those who desired an alternative, was why he appeared as a chairman or spokesman rather than a dominant national figure with the confidence of the movement behind him. In retrospect Attlee's great weakness - strength to some of those voting for him - was that he all too often simply personified the ambivalent attitudes that were held within Labour's ranks, and at a time when the party badly needed a man who could perform the extremely difficult task of making it face up to unpleasant realities.

#### Analysis Of The New House

In the following pages the Members returned in 1935 have been successively examined for age, education, occupation and religion. The supporters of the National Government will also be analysed, although this thesis is concerned only with a small number of them; but this is merely to obtain a comparison with the Tory dissidents and see how representative or otherwise they were of their party.

<sup>1</sup> The Fateful Years, pp.222-25.

Age

Of the 615 MPs elected in 1935 the average age was fifty-one years, which was the highest between the wars except for Lloyd George's 'Coupon' Parliament. In fact Ronald Cartland, the newly-elected MP for Kings Norton and a mere stripling of twenty-eight, wrote to his mother concerning his first impressions of Parliament: "Most of the House seem old. No one looks as young as I . . ."<sup>1</sup> Two factors caused the rise from the 1931 figure, 48 years 6 months.<sup>2</sup> There was, first, a considerable transfer of seats, approximately a hundred, from Conservative to Labour MPs. The latter, as we shall see, tended to be older than their contemporaries in the House. Secondly, in 1935, the number of new members was quite abnormally small. The fact that a large proportion had sat in the previous House is alone sufficient to account for a considerable rise in the average age.

National Members

The following table breaks the 428 Government supporters into their respective age groups:

Table A

Range	Conservative	Liberal National	National Labour
21-9	12	---	---
30-9	87	5	2
40-9	91	4	1
50-9	102	10	1
60-9	64	12	2
70 upwards	15	2	1
Unknown	16	---	1
	<u>387</u> <sup>3</sup>	<u>33</u>	<u>8</u>

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Cartland, by his sister B Cartland, p.67.

<sup>2</sup> Both the 1931 and 1935 figures have been taken from Parliamentary Representation by J F S Ross, p.32.

<sup>3</sup> See over.

It is interesting to note that more than one quarter of the Tory party, 99 MPs, were under 40 while less than half (181) were over 50. Consequently, the average age of Conservative Members was somewhat lower than for the whole of Parliament, 49 years 4 months. By contrast, the Liberal Nationals were an 'older' party: over two-thirds, 73%, were on the wrong side of 50 while 14, 42.4%, were over 60. Their average age was 54 years 1 month, over four years nine months older than their Conservative counterparts. Similarly, the National Labour MPs, the third component of the National Government, had a high average age, 54 years 9 months.

Table B

Opposition Members

Range	Labour	Liberal
20-9	2	1
30-9	9	6
40-9	32	4
50-9	53	7
60-9	40	1
70 upwards	8	2
Unknown	10	---
	<u>154</u>	<u>21</u>

The figures for Labour illustrate Hugh Dalton's remark, that nearly everyone he "cared for in the younger generation had been beaten. John Parker was a solitary young victor."<sup>1</sup> In fact Parker, the newly-elected Member for Romford, was not the sole representative

<sup>3</sup> Information on the Conservative Members (age, education, occupation) has been derived from J H McEwen's thesis, Conservative and Unionist MPs 1914-39, pp.358-84.

<sup>1</sup> The Fateful Years, p.76.



of the younger generation. M K MacMillan, MP for Western Isles, at 22 years of age was not only the youngest member of the parliamentary party but was also the 'babe' of the House. Parker and MacMillan apart, however, the party contained little of youth and good new blood. Of the 154 Labour Members only 11, about one-fifteenth, were less than 40. Apparently the younger generation of Gaitskells and Gordon Walkers had been left to contest the more difficult seats. Harold Laski, a member of Labour's National Executive, complained bitterly of this practice:

"It must give its younger members seats that can be won. It has many permanent (and old) backbenchers in the party who are simply not available as members of a future government. They weaken the party's debating strength in the House; they lessen its impact on the country."<sup>1</sup>

As things stood Hugh Dalton, at 48, could be considered a member of Labour's 'younger generation'. Three-quarters of his colleagues were over 50 and a third over 60, which produced a high average age, 54 years 7 months. This state of affairs in a party dedicated to change compared very unfavourably with the Conservative Party, which on these figures certainly appeared more a party of 'youth' than Labour. It is well to remember the effects of advancing age, particularly on a radical party. "With the accumulation of years", wrote W P Maddox, "the fires of the agitator and of the youthful enthusiast burn with less intensity - and gradually subside into smouldering embers."<sup>2</sup> As it was, the defective lack of vigour on the part of many Labour Members in the 1935 Parliament must have made the Party less intransigent than a normal opposition and may in part account

<sup>1</sup> 'The General Election', Political Quarterly, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Foreign Relations In British Labour Politics, p.76.

for its clinging to old shibboleths, like disarmament, long after they ceased to be practical politics. On both counts, therefore, Labour paid the penalty for treating Parliament like a mausoleum.

Of the three major parties the Independent Liberals were the youngest in content. One-third of the party were under 40 and less than a half over 50, producing an average age of 47 years 9 months. This was perhaps fortunate from their point of view. Albeit a small party, the members still intended to function on a national scale, examining and questioning the whole range of Government activities as well as making detailed proposals of their own. In consequence a considerable strain must have been placed on the individual Liberal MP, in both fulfilling everyday duties and acquainting himself with the necessary background information in order to intervene, regularly, on a variety of subjects in the House. As on average they were a younger Party, the Liberals presumably had more stamina and vigour to carry out the irksome tasks of an MP.

One fact that arises from the figures, requiring some attention, is the age gap between the two wings of the historic Liberal Party. Whereas the average age of the Independent was 47 years 9 months, that of his National counterpart was 54 years 1 month, a difference of 6 years 4 months. Since the party had been united until 1932, this is somewhat surprising. The age difference cannot be satisfactorily explained by reference to an influx of Independent Liberals, due to the country moving against the Tories, as it did to some extent in 1935.<sup>1</sup> Both Liberal camps, in fact, had their share of newly-elected members.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As suggested by Sir Richard Acland, Letter to the Author, 4 February, 1972.

<sup>2</sup> Liberal Nationals: J S Dodd (Oldham) and S N Furness (Sunderland), aged 31 and 33 respectively; Independent Liberals: R Acland (Barnstaple), 29, Wilfred Roberts (N. Cumberland), 30, Sir Hugh Seely (Berwick-on-Tweed), 37.

Was age, therefore, a factor in deciding which Liberal camp to join? It is possible to generalise that the older Member tended, with age, to be more conservative, ready to play safe and hold on to what might prove the last chance of office.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, the younger Liberal was more independent-minded, and with youth on his side, not so easily moved by the prospects of immediate power as to abandon principle and throw in his lot with a traditional rival.

### Education

The study of the 615 Members elected in 1935, reveals the division between the two main parties according to class interest. The education system of the late 19th Century produced wide social divisions. The children of the masses went to elementary schools to learn the "three R's", leaving before adolescence with only a rudimentary knowledge of how to read and write. Such was the educational background of most Labour MPs. By contrast the children of the privileged went to expensive boarding schools, then proceeded to expensive public schools, and from thence to university. For the most part they went to Oxford or Cambridge, as the more modern universities were regarded as inferior institutions. From such circumstances the majority of Conservative, and for that matter Liberal, Members came. Here were two different educational worlds catering for different classes and providing education for what had hitherto been the rulers and the ruled.

### Government Supporters - Public Schools

In no other country do a few great public schools have such an influential role in educating the nation's leaders as in Britain. The following table shows how the more famous public schools were represented

<sup>1</sup> That it is a generalisation should be stressed, as there were exceptions to the rule, eg 5 Liberal Nationals in their 30s and 2 Independents over 70.

in Government ranks:

<u>Table C</u>			
School	Conservative	Liberal National	National Labour
Charterhouse	9	1	
Eton	98	1	
Harrow	26		
Marlborough	6		
Rugby	14		
Uppingham	6	1	
Winchester	10		
Others	45	9	4
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	214	12	4
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>

The election resulted in 214 MPs sitting on the Conservative benches who had a public school background. This was 56.2% of the total number of male Conservatives (381). The most striking figure of all perhaps is the 98 MPs that had attended Eton. It is interesting to note that Old Etonians formed more than a quarter of the Tory Party in the Commons. This fact was commented on by certain contemporary observers. One such occasion was 28 October, 1938, when an article in the Evening News read:

"Mr Chamberlain's changes in the Ministry add two more Old Etonians to the Cabinet. Earl Stanhope and Earl De La Warr join their school colleagues Viscount Hailsham, Lord President of the Council, who was Capt of the Oppidans in his time; Lord Halifax, Secretary for Foreign Affairs; Mr Oliver Stanley of the Board of Trade, and Earl Winterton, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Eton thus has a majority in the Cabinet."

Contemporaries were surprised by such a high proportion of Old Etonians in Cabinet rank. They need not have been. The Conservative



Party had been dominated by Old Etonians and public school men for generations. In fact a somewhat scurrilous work, published in 1939 by the Left Book Club, drew attention to this long-standing Tory tradition, pointing out that public schools were a most important training ground for prospective Conservative politicians. The writer went on to brand them as part of "a series of institutions which develop the outlook of Tory legislators".<sup>1</sup>

Of the 214 Conservative MPs that attended public school, 79% hailed from the more famous ones. By contrast, only 3 of their electoral allies can be included in this category, although 31.7% of the National Liberals and Labourites had attended public school. The education of those remaining was somewhat varied, as was the case of Conservative Members. A large number went to Grammar or High Schools of some local importance, while others were educated privately. Some, quite young, entered a branch of the Armed Forces or undertook a course at a naval or military college, in order to commence service careers.<sup>2</sup>

#### Opposition - Public Schools or Early Education

The most striking fact in the following figures is the very poor showing of the Labour Party:

<sup>1</sup> Simon Haxey, Tory MP, p.96.

<sup>2</sup> Eg Sir Godfrey Collins, Secretary of State for Scotland, who wrote of himself as educated on 'HMS Britannia'.

<u>School</u>	<u>Labour</u>	<u>Liberal</u>
Charterhouse		
Eton	2	2
Harrow	1	2
Marlborough	1	1
Rugby	1	2
Uppingham		
Winchester	2	
Others	7	8
	<u>14</u>	<u>15</u> <sup>1</sup>

Only 9.1% of the Labour Party could be classed as public school, much the lowest of all the parties or groupings in the House of Commons. By contrast the 15 Liberals represent 71.4% of their party, the highest percentage of all for public school attendance.

Excluding the 14 Labour MPs that attended public school, 140 have still to be accounted for. One of the obstacles to assessing the educational background of Labourites is the failure on the part of many Labour members to record the schools which they attended. Where this has occurred it has been assumed that the member concerned received only a rudimentary level of education, the very absence of information lending weight to such a view. In addition such members took manual jobs and tended to rise to Parliament via the trade union movement, factors which fit the picture admirably. The following table analyses the education, up to secondary standard, of the 140 Labour MPs that failed to attend a public school:

<sup>1</sup> Of the missing Liberals, 4 attended Grammar School, David Lloyd George was educated at Church Schools and his daughter abroad.

Elementary only (recorded)	50
Elementary only (assumed)	37
Elementary (recorded) but who received some further education later in their careers	24
Elementary (unrecorded) but who received further education	2
Self-educated	2
Grammar or Secondary	18
Royal Naval College	1
Privately	1
Unknown	5
	<hr/> 140 <hr/>

Overall the tables reinforce the impression that the major public schools were the preserves of Conservative politicians. Whereas 79% of the 214 Conservatives went to schools of repute, 62.5% of the 45 Labourites, Liberals, National Liberals and Labourites attended the less famous, more modern public schools. Another interesting feature is the discrepancy between the two wings of the historic Liberal Party. Over twice as many Independent Liberals attended a public school despite their more limited numbers, than did the Liberal Nationals. Perhaps the most telling fact of all, however, is the poor showing of the Labour Party, where a majority, 56.5% had not progressed beyond the elementary stage. Labour Members too, it seems, had their preserves, the elementary schools.

#### University and Further Education

##### The National Government

Here we get a similar picture but Oxford and Cambridge are the Eton and Harrow, as is indicated by these tables:

Oxford	Conservative	Liberal National	National Labour
Balliol	15		2
Christ Church	31		
Magdalen	17		
New College	17	1	
University	8		
Others	21	3	3
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	109	4	5
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>

Cambridge	Conservative	Liberal National	National Labour
Clare	4		
King's	8		
Trinity	40	1	1
Trinity Hall	6	1	
Others	16	4	
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	74	6	1
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>

A smaller number were educated at the modern universities in large towns, regarded as inferior to Oxford and Cambridge:

University	Conservative	Liberal National	National Labour
Aberdeen		1	
Belfast	3		
Bristol	1		
Dublin	2		
Dundee	1		
Durham	2		
Edinburgh	9	2	
Glasgow	6		



University	Conservative	Liberal National	National Labour
Leeds	3		
Liverpool	2	1	
London	7	2	
Manchester	4		
Reading		1	
S Wales	1		
Dominions	3		
Foreign	5	1	
	<hr/> 49 <hr/>	<hr/> 8 <hr/>	

Graduates on the National Government benches were very numerous. The number of Conservatives attending a university was 232, 60.9% of the party; that of the Liberal Nationals was 18, or 54.5%; the National Labourites 6, or 75%. Oxbridge's importance can be gauged from the fact that 78.9% of those Conservatives attending universities went to Oxford or Cambridge. The corresponding figures were 55.5% Liberal National and 100% National Labour. It would appear that social status from an education embracing university, usually Oxford or Cambridge, and public school for that matter, was an important qualification for a prospective National, more particularly Conservative, candidate.

The Opposition

The following table indicates the number of university men on the Opposition benches:

	Independent Liberal	Labour
Cambridge		
Clare		
King's		1
Trinity	3	2

	Independent Liberal	Labour
Trinity Hall	2	1
Others	1	3
Oxford		
Balliol	5	
Christ Church		
Magdalen		
New College		
University		1
Others	1	2
Edinburgh		1
Exeter		1
Glasgow		4
Leeds		1
Liverpool	1	1
London		3
Manchester		3
Reading		1
Royal College Science		
South Wales	1	2
Foreign	1	1
	<hr/>	<hr/>
	15	28
	<hr/>	<hr/>

Twelve, or 57.1% of the Liberal Parliamentary Party were Oxbridge men and if one includes the three provincials, the total is 71.4% university educated on the Liberal benches. This was the highest percentage for the three major parties. As with public schools, there was a discrepancy between the two wings of the old Liberal Party. Only one half of the Liberal Nationals were university educated compared with four-fifths of their counterparts,

the Independent Liberals. Of the six non-university Liberal MPs remaining, they either finished their education privately, or went into the forces.

Again the Labour Party made a very poor showing; its percentage of university trained members was a mere 18.2%, the lowest of the major parties. Nevertheless, there were others that had undertaken some form of further education. Most of those in this category had received an elementary education, going on to work in mine, shop or factory and later on in life gaining admittance to a Labour College. In this way 17 Labourites attended courses at Labour and Co-operative Colleges including 9 at Ruskin College, Oxford. Another 4, of whom 2 were graduates, studied at theological college, and 5 pursued courses at art school, polytechnic and training college. A further 3 underwent evening, tutorial or university classes. Thus the total number of Labour members that had engaged in some form of what may be described loosely as further education was 54, 35.1% of the party.

With 56.5% not progressing beyond the elementary level, 18.2% attending university and 35.1%, including graduates, 'further educated', it is not surprising that there were charges that Labour squandered its resources. "It remains an outstanding feature of the party", wrote Harold Laski, "that few . . . intellectuals were returned".<sup>1</sup> Instead of making use of able university men, and there were many of such that turned to the party in the inter-war period, it simply had the wrong personnel in Parliament. "This may to some extent account", felt A L Rowse, "for the impression that undoubtedly exists, an objection which one constantly encounters in many circles, often well-inclined, that the Labour Party has not the men, for one

<sup>1</sup> 'The General Election', Political Quarterly, 1936.

thing, with whom to govern."<sup>1</sup>

### Occupation

The third aspect of the 1935 House of Commons considered in these pages is that of occupation. This analysis is somewhat different. Age and education are constant factors for they do not change, whereas occupation is in a state of flux. Thus a Tory MP might have started his career in the armed forces and then moved into commerce or industry. Alternatively, a Labour man might start his career in a baker's shop at the age of 11, later moving into another trade, such as the print. The difficulty lies in trying to classify these MPs into a certain group. Would the Tory be classed as a soldier or director, the Labourite printer or shop assistant? Consequently a certain amount of overlapping occurs and one has to be careful lest the overall picture is distorted.

In order to analyse occupation it has been found necessary to assume the existence of four major divisions: armed forces and official services; land; professions; commerce, finance and industry. This is a very satisfactory method of considering the Conservative and Liberal MPs, but it is not very rewarding for the Labour Party, so that a modification of the four-fold division is essential.

### National Supporters

#### (1) Land

One of the main components of the Conservative Party has always been the landed aristocracy. Robert Lowe had said as much over 100 years ago:

<sup>1</sup> Political Quarterly, 1938, 'The Present and Immediate Future of the Labour Party'. On one occasion Churchill described "the Labour people" as "so ineffectual, weak and uneducated. And that an uneducated Opposition was always powerless". Diary entry for 4 May, 1937, Chips, The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.122.



"You, the gentlemen of England - you with your ancestors behind you and your posterity before you - with your great estates, with your titles, with your honours, with your heavy stake in the well-being of this land, with an amount of material prosperity, happiness, dignity, and honour which you have enjoyed in the last 200 years, such as never before fell to the lot of any class in the world."<sup>1</sup>

By 1935, however, the proportion of Conservative MPs who could be classed under land had declined. Twenty-three could be referred to as land-owners; 7 possessing large areas of land, while the other 16 had more modest estates. There were also 14 heirs to estates, thus bringing the total number of country gentlemen up to 37. This was a mere 9.7% of the Party.<sup>2</sup>

## (2) Armed Forces and the Official Services

An appreciable number of men, after following a career in the Armed Forces or Official Services, reached the age of retirement or became bored with their occupation and turned to Parliament as an outlet for their energies or a vent for the opinions they have acquired elsewhere. For the most part the retired Colonels, Generals, Judges etc turned to the Conservative Party.<sup>3</sup> The following table

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, May 20, 1867, Col.606.

<sup>2</sup> A percentage of 381 - the total number of Tory MPs excluding 6 women MPs.

<sup>3</sup> The influx of retired Colonels and Generals, Admirals and Commanders, Colonial Administrators and Judges is sufficient to raise the average age of the Conservative Party appreciably. The influx of Trade Unionists into the Parliamentary Labour Party is their political counterpart.

analyses this grouping on the Tory benches:

Army	49
Royal Navy	8
RAF	1
Diplomatic	9
Civil and Colonial	7
	<hr/>
Total	74
	<hr/>

The Army was well represented in the Parliament of 1935, and yet prior to World War II the Service which was neglected in favour of its rivals, was, in fact, the Army. Somewhat surprisingly the Navy had only 8 representatives in a country where there was such a strong Naval tradition. The third Service, the Royal Air Force, due to its comparative youth, could hardly be expected to have many former officers in Parliament before 1939. Taken as a whole, the Official Services constituted 19.4% of the Tory Parliamentary Party.

### (3) The Professions

Advocates, Barristers and Solicitors	79
Printers and Publishers	11
Lecturers and Teachers	8
Medics	9
Theatrical	2
Authors and Journalists	14
	<hr/>
Total	123
	<hr/>

The figure of 79 for those connected with the legal profession before their entry into Parliament is not high nor surprising. Parliament, after all, is the highest court in the land. The 123 MPs represented 32.3% of the Party.

### (4) Commerce, Finance and Industry

In the following table those MPs who could loosely be called

businessmen have been lumped together:

Accountants	5
Stockbrokers	11
Merchants	25
Insurance	6
Company Directors	20
Bankers	4
Shipowners	8
Manufacturers	15
Textiles	11
Engineering	21
Coal and Iron	4
Builders	4
Brewers	6
Others	16
	<hr/>
Total	156
	<hr/>

The businessmen, an increasing group in the Conservative Party in the inter-war period, constituted 40.9% of members elected in 1935.<sup>1</sup> This was by far the largest of the four groupings.

In noting the business interests of Conservative politicians, Simon Haxey wrote that the facts proved that "Conservative MPs are part of a particularly small section of society concerned with the pursuit of profit and the employment of labour. It is also interesting to note that very few important industries are without Directors in the House of Commons, showing the extent to which the Conservative Party is dominated by this section of society."<sup>2</sup> Haxey's book, Tory MP, was typical of a new sort of political literature which flourished in the late 1930's. It was engendered by distrust of the Government's handling of the unemployment question and by the

<sup>1</sup> The discrepancy in the percentage (Total 102.3%) is due to the certain amount of overlapping in occupations and professions.

<sup>2</sup> Tory MP, p.52.

bitterness and controversy aroused by its foreign policy. His book set the fashion which was soon followed by other writers.<sup>1</sup>

Haxey anatomised the character of the Tories in a manner reminiscent of Sir Lewis Namier's investigation of the structure of politics in George III's time: the strength of the aristocratic influence in the House of Commons; their wealth, their company directorships and business connections. The reader learned how many Conservative MPs hailed from Eton or Harrow, Cambridge or Oxford, from the Army or Navy. What Haxey was really implying was that such associations influenced points of view, votes and policy. "The foreign policy which the Conservative Party has pursued", he argued, "is the natural policy of a wealthy and privileged class. The Conservatives have supported General Franco, Mussolini, Hitler, and even the Mikado, because these men are the champions of the wealthy and privileged class of other countries. There are many British Conservatives who believe that a defeat for the dictators or a victory for democracy anywhere in the world would weaken British Conservatism at home or in some part of the Empire".<sup>2</sup> Haxey's book certainly reflected the pent-up bitterness of the Left over the foreign policy of the National Government in its latter years, but as C L Mowat aptly commented, it contained "more malice than truth".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The late thirties and early forties saw a spate of Left books in a similar vein to Haxey's by pseudonymous authors, whose names evoked the glory of Rome. The most famous of course, were Cato's Guilty Men (1940) and Your MP (1944) by Gracchus.

<sup>2</sup> Tory MP, pp.239-40.

<sup>3</sup> Britain Between the Wars, p.634.



What Haxey did effectively show, however, was that, in so far as their occupations were a guide, the Conservative Members were clearly not a true cross section of the nation. Rather, that only successful businessmen who could afford time for Parliamentary duties, or successful professional men, or persons of independent means, or the wives of any of them, could become Conservative MPs. This was never in dispute. At that time the majority of Conservative candidates had to pay for their electoral organisation and the expenses incurred during a campaign, and this necessitated the Conservative Party having a class bias far more emphatic than was warranted by its support in the country.

Dividing the 41 Liberal National and National Labour MPs into their four component parts the results are as follows:

Occupation	Liberal National	National Labour
Armed Forces and Official Services	1	1
Land	2	
Professions	15	5
Businessmen	10	
Unknown <sup>1</sup>	5	1
	—	—
	33	7 <sup>2</sup>
	—	—

Perhaps the most notable feature of the Conservatives' electoral allies was their professional slant. Twenty or almost 50% can be categorised in this way, as opposed to 32.3% of the Tory Party.

### The Opposition

The following table divides the Opposition Parties into the

<sup>1</sup> Liberal Nationals: Barrie, Fildes, Harbord, Leckie, Magnay.  
National Labour: S T Rosbotham.

<sup>2</sup> J H Thomas had been General Secretary of the National Union of Railwaymen prior to his entry to Parliament.

four groupings utilised in the analysis of the National Supporters:

Occupation	Liberal	Labour
Armed Forces and Official Services	2	2
Professions	9	34
Land	4	1
Businessmen	3	7
	<u>18<sup>1</sup></u>	<u>44</u>

It is interesting to note that 8 Independent Liberals were attached to the legal profession. The corresponding figure for the Liberal Nationals was ten, 8 barristers and 2 solicitors. Taken together a total of 18 MPs out of the 54 from the two wings of the party had legal training. This was a third or 33.3%. For the Conservative and Labour Parties the comparable figure was much lower, 20.4% and 5.2% respectively.

Only 44 Labourites have been classified in the four categories utilised so far. As the party contained 154 Members only a fraction have been dealt with, approximately 28.6%, and of this 21.4% was made up from the professions. In fact the bulk of Labour MPs, originating from the poorer sections of the community, cannot be dealt with in this way. For the most part this large group was composed of trade unionists, the backbone of the party, whether in Parliament or in the country, since the establishment of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900.

Most of the delegates to that foundation conference had been trade unionists, wanting independent Labour representation in the House of Commons to maintain and enhance their painfully-won rights. Thus it is true to say that the birth of the Labour Party was mothered

<sup>1</sup> I have been unable to trace the occupations of Sir H H Jones and H G White.

by a need of the trade unions to have a voice in Parliament.

Ernest Bevin had said as much to the 1935 Party Conference:

"I want to say to our friends who have joined us in this political movement, that our predecessors formed this Party. It was not Keir Hardie who formed it, it grew out of the bowels of the Trades Union Congress."<sup>1</sup>

Originally constituted as the political party of the unions it was inevitable that many of its Parliamentary representatives were trade unionists, and they continue to be today.

The following table breaks down those MPs who had been actively involved in trade union affairs prior to their election to Parliament in 1935. Their occupations can normally be derived from the unions they belonged to, as in the case of George Hicks, MP for Woolwich East, the General Secretary of the Building Trade Workers, who had started life as a bricklayer.

Trade Union	Number of Representatives in the 1935 Parliament
Miners' Federation of Great Britain	36
Transport and General Workers' Union	8
National Union of Railwaymen	4
Railway Clerks' Association	6
National Union of General and Municipal Workers	6
National Union of Allied and Distributive Workers	6
Amalgamater Engineering Union	3
London Society of Compositors	2
United Society of Boilermakers	2

<sup>1</sup> Labour Party Conference Report 1935, p.180.

Trade Union	Number of Representatives in the 1935 Parliament
Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers	2
Others (unions with a single representative in Parliament)	16
	<hr/>
	91
	<hr/>

The 91 represented 59.1% of the parliamentary party.

The large number of trade unionist MPs was not only due to the political importance the trade unions played in the life of the party. The growth of the movement from its inception in 1900 had brought with it, as the years progressed, a determination to fight every possible seat. In a large number of constituencies, however, Labour election campaigns were badly hampered by a lack of funds. This was the opportunity of the trade unions. They assumed financial responsibility for many constituencies, paying for elections, the services of a regular agent and for the maintenance of the organisation in a good state between the elections. In return the constituency adopted a candidate who was in most cases an official of the union concerned. Consequently, the proportion of trade union MPs was high. In 1935, of the 552 Labour Candidates, 118 were financed by trade unions; and of these 118 candidates, 78 were elected.<sup>1</sup> In other words, less than a quarter of the candidates were financed by trade unions, but half the Labour members were. This shows that sponsored trade unionists occupied many of Labour's safest seats and represented 50.6% of the total number of Labour MPs.

That the trade unions occupied many of the safest Labour seats would not have mattered if they had exercised their choice wisely;

<sup>1</sup> The 91 trade unionists were not all aided by their unions. In a minority of cases the Divisional Labour Party was responsible for sponsorship.



but in fact they did nothing of the kind. They tended to appoint trade union officials who were no longer wanted in their organisations. According to Josiah Wedgwood, Labour Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme, it had been for years the practice of the Miners' Union to find seats in Parliament for their superannuated agents, and thus augment their old friends' inadequate pensions.<sup>1</sup> A distinct phenomenon, therefore, on the Labour side, was the elderly trade unionist who had, in his youth, worked vigorously for his union and the Labour Party. As a result he was retired by his union to Parliament, where he spent his declining years in comfort. This is admirably illustrated by a close study of the age groups of trade union sponsored members:

Age	Trade Unionists
20 - 29	0
30 - 39	3
40 - 49	12
50 - 59	27
60 - 69	27
70 upwards	4
Unknown	6
	<hr/> 79 <sup>2</sup> <hr/>

A mere 3 of the group were less than 40 while approximately four-fifths were above 50. 42.5% of this group were above 60. The average age was 58 years 1 month and yet the party's average was 54 years 7 months. Consequently the trade unionist member was, on average, over 7 years older than his counterpart, sponsored by the Divisional Labour Party. The existence of such a large number of elderly trade unionists meant that Labour did not secure the most energetic representation within Parliament.

<sup>1</sup> Testament to Democracy, p.22. In fact the average age of the Mineworkers Federation of MPs, 57 years 7 months, was lower than that for the other unions.

<sup>2</sup> The figure 79 is drawn from the list of Labour Members contained in the Labour Party Conference Report, published after the November election.

Another defect on the part of certain of the trade unionists, that of their environment hitherto, also did much to impair the effectiveness of the Parliamentary Opposition. Pat Strauss, wife of George, the Labour Member for North Lambeth, wrote that while the trade unionists were usually first class people they had been "worn out by a life of hard work and struggle. They find the atmosphere of Parliament utterly unlike their previous battlefields, and they are too old and exhausted to reorientate themselves to a new outlook and a new career. They are intimidated by the lush atmosphere of social correctness imparted to the House by generations of Tories, and are afraid to speak in the House because their accents are 'common' and their vocabulary is homely and direct. Rather than risk making fools of themselves, in their own eyes, they spend most of their time in the smoking rooms . . . They alternate between a nagging feeling of inferiority in the House, and the compensation of being the Big Man in their district every time they return home."<sup>1</sup> Naturally, the existence of such unobtrusive members weakened the Parliamentary Labour Party, as they occupied seats that could have been held by young, vigorous and unafraid Labourites, who would have been far more useful in the House.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to give the impression that trade union members were essentially a liability to the party. In fact certain trade unionists were of a spectacular fighting breed. It should not be forgotten that some of Labour's greatest leaders, like Arthur Henderson, Jimmy Thomas, J R Clynes and Ernest Bevin, have been drawn from trade union ranks.

As well as the 91 MPs engaged in trade union work prior to their elevation to Parliament and the 44 analysed earlier, 10 Members were

<sup>1</sup> Bevin and Co., p.83.

sponsored by and involved in the work of the Co-operative Party.<sup>1</sup> This had been formed in 1917, originally being called the Central Co-operative Parliamentary Representation Committee. As this title proved too cumbersome it was changed to Co-operative Party in 1920. Its raison d'etre was political protection for the Co-operative Movement. A national agreement existed between the Co-operative Movement and Labour Party so that any candidate sponsored by the Co-operative Party was designated 'Labour and Co-operative'. Not all of the 10 sponsored MPs were solely occupied by Co-operative affairs prior to their election, a handful were engaged in trade union work and one, the Rev. G S Woods, in pastoral work.

In addition three members had been actively engaged in the life of the Labour Party Organisation before the 1935 election. The most notable of this group was Herbert Morrison, Secretary to the London Labour Party and Leader of the London County Council. Of those remaining, a few followed individual trades such as bookbinding, stereotyping and engineering, making their way into Parliament via a Divisional Labour Party. While the occupations of five it has not proved possible to trace, as none of these progressed further than an elementary education, it is probable that they were engaged in some form of manual work.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas the occupation figures for Labour indicate that the party represented a wide variety of social backgrounds, from miners to middle class professional men, it is still true to say that the bulk of the party was made up of men from humble origins. James Griffiths, who entered Parliament following a by-election in 1936, in recording his first impressions, wrote that he was "surrounded by the old

<sup>1</sup> Eg W H Green was Political Secretary to the RACS while Neil Maclean had been organiser for the Scottish CWS.

<sup>2</sup> D Frankel, B Gardner, T Kennedy, E Marklew and George Muff.

'cloth-cap' MPs . . . Nowadays (1969) the 'cloth-cap' is giving way on the Labour benches to the 'cap and gown'."<sup>1</sup>

Working class origins, in practice, meant a lack of financial independence on the part of many Labour Members, and this scarcity of money made a Labour Opposition less intransigent than a comparable Tory or Liberal one. Effective Opposition, in which obstruction must play its part, implies long sittings into the night. Most Labour members, being comparatively poor men who had to live in the cheaper and therefore more remote sectors of London, could not afford taxi fares, and if debates were kept going beyond midnight they missed the last trains or buses home. Thus there was every incentive for making long sittings infrequent.<sup>2</sup>

Tom Jones, too, noted that "these Labour leaders are often poor and unable to command the secretarial service available to the Conservatives. . . . In the last Parliament a small handful of them had to be prepared at short or no notice to range over topics from China to Peru and confront Ministers equipped with all the ability, knowledge and experience of the Civil Service."<sup>3</sup> In June 1937, Emmanuel Shinwell, Member for Seaham, attempted to rectify a situation that was hardly conducive to the party's effectiveness.<sup>4</sup> He prepared a memorandum in which he called for a more energetic and uncompromising opposition to the National Government, suggesting that Labour's machinery should be so adjusted to increase the effectiveness of the work of the party in the House of Commons. One of his proposals was

<sup>1</sup> Pages from Memory, p.54.

<sup>2</sup> See Jennings, Parliament, p.179.

<sup>3</sup> Letter dated November 17, 1935, A Diary With Letters, p.156.

<sup>4</sup> Shinwell: national organiser Marine Workers' Union; MP Linlithgow 1922-24, 1928-31; Seaham 1935-70; Parliamentary Secretary, Department of Mines, 1924, 1930-31; Financial Secretary to the War Office, 1929-30.



the creation of a central information bureau, for the setting up of which each MP should contribute £8 per year. It is probable that lack of income was the major factor in the rejection of this and the other suggestions, The Times commenting that there was "little enthusiasm" for the memorandum.<sup>1</sup>

One further aspect of the members returned in 1935 that requires study is that of religious affiliation. Unlike other aspects of an MP's background this is not something that will constantly be referred to throughout the thesis, and it is easy to view this section as an irrelevancy. But it is well to remember that the influence of religious sentiment on the attitude of members, from all sides of the House, was apparent during the Spanish conflict, and it is, therefore, worthwhile categorising MPs as far as is possible.

The difficulty here, however, proved to be an absence of information. There is a simple reason for this - in a nation where the majority of men in public life belong to the established church it hardly seems necessary to comment upon their religion. Consequently the lack of a stated religious persuasion leads one to assume that the member was either Church of England or, if of Scottish parentage, Church of Scotland. A rider is added to the effect that some of this number may have been of another persuasion or not genuine adherents of the Christian faith.

By contrast, the names of Nonconformist MPs elected for English constituencies appeared in the Congregational Christian World, the Methodist Recorder, and the Baptist Times and Freeman, following the General Election. The breakdown was as follows:

<sup>1</sup> The Times, June 24, 1937.

	Labour	Liberal	Liberal National	Conservative
Congregationalist	9	2	5	-
Friends	3	-	-	1
Unitarian	4	-	-	1
Baptist	5	2	2	1
Methodist	22	5	10	7
	—	—	—	—
	43	9	17	10
	—	—	—	—

These statistics show that the Conservative Party was still "the Church at prayer" for a mere 2.6% of Tory MPs dissented (Protestant) from the established church. Belonging to the Liberal Party, on the other hand, was still related to Nonconformity, and indeed the same connection could be made to a lesser extent for Labour. 42.9% of Liberal MPs and 51.5% of Liberal Nationals fitted into this category, while the Labour figure was 27.9%. These figures throw some doubt on Stephen Koss's conclusion that the process of 'estrangement between Nonconformity and Liberalism' and the 'steady drift of Free Churchmen into the Labour and Conservative camps' was virtually complete by the outbreak of the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> With percentages of 42.9% and 51.5% a mere four years before, a later date would be more appropriate for 'virtual completion' of this process.

Nevertheless Koss's contention that Nonconformity had, by 1935, ceased to be a "viable and fairly homogeneous tactical unit" is valid.<sup>2</sup> With Free Churchmen in the new House sitting on the Opposition and Government sides in the ratio of 2 to 1 it could not have been otherwise. And from reactions to events abroad and the policies of the

<sup>1</sup> Nonconformity in Modern British Politics, p.10.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.13.

National Government at home it is evident that Nonconformity remained split asunder. Whatever the strictures of leading Nonconformists such as Lloyd George, Albert Alexander and Chuter Ede, Walter Runciman was despatched to Prague in July 1938 as the accredited agent of appeasement. Sir John Simon was tarred by the same brush. Among the other MPs prominently identified with Nonconformity, Sir Kingsley Wood was one of Chamberlain's most intimate friends and advisers, and Ernest Brown and Geoffrey Shakespeare were otherwise attached to the Government.

Turning to Catholicism and Judaism, the Universe and Catholic Weekly recorded the name of the former's MPs, and its figures for 1935 were:

Labour	Conservative
6	10

Consequently a very small proportion of MPs, 3.2% of Labour and 2.6% of Conservatives, were Roman Catholic. Jewish MPs could be easily recognised by their names, for example, Sidney Silverman or Emmanuel Shinwell. But it was impossible to tell whether such Members still practised Judaism or were converts to the established branch of the Protestant Church.

This brief look at the age, education, occupation and religion of Members elected in 1935 leads one to the conclusion that, of the three major parties, the Conservatives appear comparatively best-equipped to watch over the Government's handling of defence and foreign affairs. They were younger than Parliament as a whole, and possessed a sound educational background, which for some included the study of foreign cultures and languages. Others had attended either naval or military college and had behind them a long and distinguished service career. Money, the essential prerequisite

of foreign travel, was not lacking to the average Conservative MP. In addition several had business interests which encompassed foreign lands, while others could look back on residence in foreign countries or involvement in Britain's overseas possessions. Of the Parliamentary Liberal Party much the same could be said but on a vastly limited scale. By contrast the average Labour MP had none of these advantages. Rather he was older than the House as a whole, and had a narrow education, his formative years spent in shop, office, mine or factory. Rarely did his feet touch foreign soil, except perhaps during military service. By the time Parliament had been reached, he might be too worn out by a life of hard work and struggle to take his new duties seriously.



## C H A P T E R   I I

### REARMAMENT

By November 1935 the centre of interest was shifting from home to international affairs, to the political repercussions of the Great Depression. Three events were instrumental in this change: Japan's conquest and annexation of Manchuria; Hitler's accession to power and the commencement of German rearmament; Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia. These, however, were to be a mere prelude to the crises which came thick and fast as the 1930s progressed. The result of this fluid international situation was that the British Government began to stir itself, recognising the need for rearmament, albeit on a modest scale. An £130,000 increase in expenditure in the 1934 air estimates was budgeted for, and then, in July of the same year, Baldwin gave a pledge that the Royal Air Force would at least retain parity with all possible competitors, coupling with this an announcement that the number of squadrons would be raised over the next five years to 41.

The following year a Government White Paper, Statement Relating to Defence, was issued. Much of the document was devoted to a defence of past policy and a pledge of its continuance: support of the League and collective security, efforts to bring about a reduction of armaments. But, it continued, the Government "can no longer close its eyes to the fact that adequate defences are still required". The Disarmament Conference was at a standstill, Germany and Japan and other countries were rearming, and in Germany the "spirit in which the population . . . are being organised lends colour to . . . the general feeling of insecurity". The condition of each branch of the services was then discussed, and the paper concluded with the

words: "An additional expenditure on the armaments of the three Defence Services can, therefore, no longer be safely postponed."<sup>1</sup>

It might have been thought that the Service Estimates which accompanied the White Paper would betoken an opening of a real programme of rearmament. However, the Estimates put forward showed only an increase of £10 million over the 1934-35 figures, and of these only the Air Estimates carried any provision for an actual increase in size.

It was not until 1936 that Britain began to rearm more vigorously though still without full conviction. The new programme, foreshadowed during the election campaign, was announced in another White Paper published on 3 March, 1936.<sup>2</sup> After the customary reference that rearming would not deter the Government from taking every possible opportunity for reducing the general standard of armaments, the provisions for increases were set out. The army, which was below the strength of 1914, was to be modernised and four new battalions added, and the Territorial Army was to be reconditioned. In the navy two new battleships and one aircraft carrier were to be laid down, existing battleships modernised, and the number of cruisers brought up to seventy. The first-line strength of the air force for home defence, which under existing programmes was to rise to 1500 planes, would be increased to 1750 planes, and twelve more squadrons would be distributed along the empire's defences. The country's capacity for the production of war goods would be increased by orders and financial aid to companies not normally engaged in

<sup>1</sup> Statement Relating to Defence (Cmd. 4827, 1935).

<sup>2</sup> Statement Relating to Defence (Cmd. 5107, 1936).

the manufacture of munitions; in this way companies would be helped to expand their plants and to equip themselves for a quick change-over to war production when necessary.

### Critics on the National Benches

The reluctant progress of the Government towards rearmament and the removal of deficiencies within the Armed Forces did not pass unnoticed amongst the Ministerial supporters. Indeed from the Government rank and file there arose no small amount of criticism at what appeared to be the Government's refusal to face the facts squarely; it was a mood summed up in Leo Amery's words, "The more dangerous and confused the international situation the more urgent the case for putting our defences in order."<sup>1</sup> These critics, several of whom were distinguished servicemen or ex-ministers, with authoritative knowledge in their individual fields, were not slow in making their views known.

Winston Churchill, Unionist MP for Epping since 1924, was the foremost Cassandra. Hitherto Churchill had had a somewhat chequered career.<sup>2</sup> Entering the Commons in 1900 as a Tory he soon transferred his allegiance to the radical wing of the Liberal Party, and thus served in the ensuing Liberal administrations. Removed from the Admiralty in 1915, because of his supposed responsibility for the Dardanelles fiasco, he returned to high office in 1917 when Lloyd George made him Minister of Munitions. After the fall of

<sup>1</sup> Amery, My Political Life, Volume III, The Unforgiving Years, p.195.

<sup>2</sup> Under Secretary for the Colonies, 1905-08; President of the Board of Trade, 1908-10; Home Secretary, 1910-11; First Lord of the Admiralty, 1911-15; Secretary for War and Air, 1919-21; Colonial Secretary, 1921-22.

the Coalition, Churchill lost his seat, but within two years was back in the House as a 'Constitutionalist', unopposed by the Epping Conservatives. The same year Baldwin rescued him from possible oblivion by appointing him Chancellor of the Exchequer, a post he held until 1929.

During the Labour Government that followed Churchill figured prominently in the Conservative Shadow Cabinet. However in 1931 he withdrew because he bitterly opposed the Labour Government's policy towards India, which Baldwin supported. Churchill denounced the Government's policy as premature and dangerous: concessions to Indian nationalism would only increase disorder, and the struggle would go on for the complete severance of every tie between Britain and India, "a frightful prospect to have opened up so wantonly, so recklessly, so incontinently and in so short a time". He believed that India, "a jewel of Empire" should never cease to be a part of the Empire. In a typical phrase, he spoke of Gandhi as a "seditious saint striding half-naked up the steps to the vice-regal Palace".<sup>1</sup>

When the National Government was formed, Churchill redoubled his efforts to get the Government to abandon the policy of its predecessor. Not only was his opposition ineffective but, in the words of A J P Taylor, it established his reputation "as a romantic sabre-rattler and discredited him in advance against the time when he took up worthier causes".<sup>2</sup> All in all he estranged many Conservatives and also deepened the profound hostility which

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, January 26, 1931, Col.702.

<sup>2</sup> English History 1914-45, p.278.



practically all Labour men felt towards him. Thus began the years of isolation which ended only with the Second World War.

Undaunted by his isolation Churchill devoted himself to his personal pursuits: his home, family, painting and the biography of his ancestor, Marlborough. In the midst of his solitude, Churchill thought constantly of the European situation and the rearming of Germany. Soon he became associated with another group of rebels in the Commons, those warning of the "German menace" and the need for British rearmament. While some dismissed him as a warmonger, others saw his warnings as another drive for power. His one-time close friend, the press magnate, Lord Beaverbrook, was among the latter and felt that "If he continued on his present course I would not be surprised if Baldwin put a veto on him in his constituency".<sup>1</sup> The Times, too, suspected his motives, remarking that it is "generally felt that he is now determined to carry on a continuously hostile campaign against the Government".<sup>2</sup> In effect, suspicion as to his intentions was handicapping the warnings he now gave to Parliament. David Maxwell Fyfe, then MP for West Derby, recalled:

"Winston Churchill's mighty philippics on defence matters, perhaps the greatest and bravest speeches he ever delivered, were listened to in grim silence in the House of Commons, but his reputation had suffered so severely over the India Bill and his hapless intervention in the Abdication dispute that he made little impact.

<sup>1</sup> K Young, Churchill and Beaverbrook, p.121.

<sup>2</sup> May 8, 1936.

In the lobbies and the Smoking Room he was almost universally regarded as a finished man, and it certainly seemed to be the case."<sup>1</sup>

Although Churchill later saw fit to condemn British statesmen, unmindful of his warnings, as blind, it should not be forgotten that what he was then saying carried less weight simply because he put it forward.

At the beginning of the decade, when the virtues of disarmament had been extolled by all parties Churchill had struck a different chord. He deplored the fact that the Disarmament Conference was mainly attempting to secure some sort of approximation in military strength between Germany and France. The danger of urging France to disarm was that Britain would be involved more closely on the Continent. His hope was that Britain would be able to steer clear of European commitments, and that a strong France and her allies would be able to cope with any European dangers that might arise:

"If we wish to keep our freedom, we should forthwith recognise our role in Europe is more limited than it has hitherto been considered to be. Isolation is, I believe, utterly impossible, but we should nevertheless practice a certain degree of sober detachment from the European scene. We should not try to weaken those powers which are in danger, or feel themselves in danger, and thereby expose ourselves to a demand that we should come to their aid."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Political Adventure, The Memoirs of the Earl of Kilmuir, p.51.

<sup>2</sup> From an article dated November 7, 1933, Arms and the Covenant, p.101.

But even at this time Churchill was constantly pointing out that, if Britain wished to secure a real measure of detachment from the Continent and to preserve her liberty of action, early rearmament was essential.

1933 witnessed the European situation being further complicated. Germany, under its new Chancellor, commenced rearming and this was to become, for Churchill, the central issue in any Continental appraisal. Faced with such circumstances Churchill continued to expose what he felt was the unwisdom of the successive attempts to weaken France, and intensified his demand for a strengthening of Britain's defences. Thus he told a London audience at a meeting in November, 1933, that it was "our business, our wisdom to detach our country as much as possible from the vehement conflicts which are gathering on the continent of Europe".<sup>1</sup> Britain could not do this if she encouraged Germany's neighbours to disarm and failed to put her own defences in order. Growing relatively weaker must inevitably involve Britain more closely on the Continent and therefore, he argued, a measure of detachment could only be regained by a vigorous and timely rearmament. Deficiencies in the national defences should be made good, and in particular the Government should accept the "principle of having an Air Force at least as strong as that of any other Power that can get at us".<sup>2</sup>

Although Churchill's warnings of German rearmament and of Britain's inferiority in the air had begun as early as 1933, it

<sup>1</sup> The Times, 15 November, 1933.

<sup>2</sup> Article dated 7 February, 1934, Arms and the Covenant, p.111.

was the following year that they became more frequent. He complained in March that Germany, now "arming fast", would within a year or eighteen months be strong enough in the air to threaten "the heart of the British Empire", while Britain was "the fifth Air Power only - if that".<sup>1</sup> Small wonder he thought the increased expenditure budgeted for in the 1934 estimates - £130,000 - was derisory. Replying for the Government, Baldwin dismissed Churchill's charges but pledged the administration to maintain parity in the air, that is, an air force as large as Germany's.

Six months later Churchill told the House that not only did Germany have a military air force but that within a year it would be as strong as Britain's and by 1937 twice as large. That same day, November 28, in company with other Government backbenchers, including Sir Robert Horne, Leo Amery, Captain F E Guest, Lord Winterton and Bob Boothby, he moved an amendment to the Address which declared that "the strength of our national forces is no longer adequate to secure the peace, safety and freedom of Your Majesty's faithful subjects". Baldwin denied this flatly, describing their calculations as "considerably exaggerated", but, on May 22 of the following year, was forced to eat his words, admitting that the German Air Force had already achieved parity.

The absurd part of the story is that Baldwin was nearer to the truth than Churchill. The German air force had to start from a very rudimentary basis early in 1934 and was not able to achieve much operational strength before 1936. The total German production of combat aircraft from the beginning of the new air force up until the end of 1935 was only about 2663 machines, while the Royal Air

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 8 March, 1934, Col.2031.



Force had more than that number in service in March 1935.<sup>1</sup> Evidently the Germans had not achieved parity and the Royal Air Force still had a considerable lead, as the unrepentant Air Ministry had then maintained. The only evidence to the contrary came from Hitler himself. On 2 May, 1935, he told Sir John Simon that his air force was as strong as, if not stronger than, the British. Hitler's assertion was at once accepted as true by Baldwin on behalf of the Government, and has generally been accepted to the present day. As A J P Taylor has commented "It was unprecedented for a statesman to confess to more arms than he had. But this was Hitler's way: he hoped to win by bluff."<sup>2</sup>

Although Churchill's figures were incorrect, in a further sense he was right. This was in his conviction that German rearmament would gain momentum and thus leave Britain behind. Seen in this light the Government's new programme, which was immediately planned, providing for an expansion of front-line strength equivalent to double the existing target, was inadequate to "restore" or, more accurately, maintain parity.

Fortified by the Prime Minister's admission, Churchill again and again in the period 1935-37 returned to the same theme, trying to shake the Ministry out of what he considered its cautious approach. His endeavour was to bring the relative strength of British and German armaments to a clear-cut issue. In Germany rearmament was "proceeding upon a colossal scale, and at a desperate break-neck speed . . . they have organised the whole industry of the Nation

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, Overall Report 1945, p.11.

<sup>2</sup> English History, 1914-45, p.385.

to war, and a very large part of it is actually working on a war basis".<sup>1</sup> In Britain, however, Baldwin's Government - unwilling to interfere in the normal course of trade and alarm the public with a prodigious programme of rearmament - was, in Churchill's opinion, unable to decide on measures equal to the emergency. What did trade and public disquiet matter when Britain's life was at stake and she could be caught defenceless? To this end he witheringly attacked the Government for its seeming lack of leadership:

"Is there no grip, no driving force, no mental energy, no power of decision or design?"<sup>2</sup>

By now Churchill was convinced that the best time to commence rearming, and the scale of armaments required, had gone un-noticed, and a long interval must now elapse before Britain could once again be strong to maintain an independent position. Ever flexible, Churchill began to feel his way towards the establishment of a collective system to meet the arming German menace. By 1936 he was pressing with increasing resolution for a firm League policy to ensure that a united stand might be made so that the peaceful nations should not be struck down one by one.

It is necessary to add that as 1937 progressed, and with the succession of the more determined Chamberlain, Churchill's criticisms of British rearmament plans lessened in their intensity as he became conscious of the new Government's efforts to improve national defences:

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 21 April, 1936, Col.1506.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Col.1508.

"At present the Government is making a great effort for rearmament . . . It is our duty to support His Majesty's Government in its policies of defence and world peace by every means in our power. Party unity is indispensable."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps Churchill also hoped that by muting his attacks Chamberlain would find it possible to bring him back into office. Apparently Churchill told Leslie Hore-Belisha of his desire to get into the Cabinet and the Secretary for War discussed the matter with the Prime Minister. But Chamberlain was firm in his refusal:

"If I take him into the Cabinet . . . he will dominate it. He won't give others a chance of even talking".

When Hore-Belisha brought up the subject again the Prime Minister replied: "I won't have anyone who will rock the boat".<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, soon after Eden's resignation, by when it was apparent to Churchill that he had no more chance of obtaining office than he had had in Baldwin's day, conflict over rearmament was to reach a new pitch.

It has since come to light - as in the case of air parity in May 1935 - that Churchill's estimates of German strength were exaggerated. In 1936, according to Churchill, Germany was rearming at an annual rate of 12,000 million marks. The actual rate was 5,000 million. Hitler himself boasted that he had spent 90,000 million marks on rearmament. His actual expenditure in the six years up to March, 1939, was 40,000 million. In a sense then,

<sup>1</sup> Burton Klein, Germany's Economic Preparations For War, pp.17-20.

<sup>2</sup> R J Minney, The Private Papers of Hore-Belisha, p.130.

Churchill, whose estimates of German spending on armaments before the war were consistently almost twice what was actually being spent, had an exaggerated fear of Hitler. In retrospect, it could well be argued that if exaggerated precautions, on the lines advocated by Churchill, had been taken against Germany it might well have proved beneficial for this country and Europe. As it was the Government, somewhat in advance of an unperturbed public - at least till 1938 - rearmed, albeit slowly, and on a scale insufficient to meet the coming catastrophe.

However much the impression is conveyed in The Gathering Storm, Churchill was no lone Cassandra. There were other MPs who realised more acutely than most the transformation in the relative war power of victors and vanquished that was taking place in Europe. Sir Austen Chamberlain, the Member for West Birmingham, was perhaps the most distinguished of this group. Austen came from the celebrated Midlands family, the eldest son of Joseph and half-brother of Neville, who was soon to be premier. Entering politics in his late twenties, he held various minor offices until his appointment, in 1903, as Chancellor of the Exchequer. In 1911, when Balfour resigned the leadership of the Unionist Party, Austen was a contender for the vacant throne. He stood down, however, as did Walter Long, his rival, in favour of Bonar Law, who was to rely heavily upon him. In 1915 he was made Secretary of State for India, and he entered the War Cabinet in 1918. 1919 saw him back at the Treasury, and two years later he became leader of the Conservative Party on the resignation of Bonar Law. His hold on the leadership did not last long. In October, 1922, at the Carlton Club meeting dissatisfaction with Chamberlain's support of Lloyd George came to a head. The Coalition



and Chamberlain's leadership drew abruptly to an end. He returned to office in 1924 when Baldwin made him Foreign Secretary, a post which he held until the Government's defeat in 1929. His foreign policy, highlighted by the Locarno Pact, revealed a deep love of France, which was unpopular in many quarters. 1931 saw Chamberlain First Lord of the Admiralty in the National Government. His tenure of office only lasted a few months, for in October, 1931, he declined further office to make room for younger men. It was a decision he later regretted.

Until his death in 1937, Austen Chamberlain is held to have exercised his greatest influence as elder statesman. Keith Feiling, in his biography of Neville, referred to Austen winning as "a private member an influence he had never held as a Minister".<sup>1</sup> Doubtless he was a much respected figure on the backbenches but the fact remains he was a declining political figure. His speeches on the German menace and the need for rearmament were listened to with the respect appropriate to an elder statesman, but there is little evidence that they made much impact. This is well illustrated by the diaries of Henry Channon, MP for Southend, who went so far as to describe Austen as "the doyen of the House of Commons donkeys" after he made "a really stupid speech in which he attacked Germany with unreasoning violence".<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, for those restive about the Government's conduct of affairs the respectable Chamberlain, and not the tainted Churchill, appeared as a natural leader and mentor. It was to him that critics tended to turn, as Ronald Cartland implied in a letter to his sister.

<sup>1</sup> Feiling, Life of Neville Chamberlain, p.277.

<sup>2</sup> Diary entry, July 27, 1936, The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.73.

"He is the Elder Statesman", he wrote, "the backbenches have given him what the Front Bench never did - disciples".<sup>1</sup> In February, 1935, even Churchill's son-in-law, Duncan Sandys, felt pressed to write that he "in common with many other younger members", was heartened by a great speech Chamberlain had made on defence. "It will make all the difference", he went on, "if we can continue to look forward to a strong and independent lead from you in the very difficult and decisive times that lie ahead".<sup>2</sup> They were to be disappointed. There were family reasons why Austen could not take his dissent too far, as he outlined in letters to his sister Hilda: "I have to be double careful lest I should injure Neville"; "I believe I should attack him (Baldwin) but for the fact that by so doing I should damage Neville's chances".<sup>3</sup> Furthermore Chamberlain, like another occupant of the Foreign Office, Anthony Eden, was not a rebel by nature, and although he was frequently dissatisfied with aspects of the Government's defence and foreign policies, he was effectively loyal to the end.

Sir Robert Horne, Conservative Member for Hillhead, Glasgow, was another malcontent. Entering politics in 1918 he immediately obtained a minor post in Lloyd George's Government. His promotion was equally rapid: Minister of Labour, 1919-20; President of the Board of Trade, 1920-21; Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1921-22. Like Austen Chamberlain, Horne lost office when the great Coalition was

<sup>1</sup> B Cartland, Ronald Cartland, p.70.

<sup>2</sup> Duncan Sandys to Austen Chamberlain, February 15, 1935, Austen Chamberlain Papers.

<sup>3</sup> Letters dated respectively 10 October, 1936, and 4 July, 1936. Austen Chamberlain Papers.

overturned. Unlike Austen he was never again to sit on a government front bench, although this can be traced to Baldwin's hostility towards him. Apparently the latter regarded his habit of haunting night clubs with distaste, and was moved to describe Horne as "that rare thing - a Scots cad".<sup>1</sup>

The dissident grouping included Sir Edward Grigg, Sir Henry Page Croft, Viscount Wolmer and Earl Winterton. After a service career from which he retired in 1921, Grigg served as Lloyd George's private secretary, a post which brought him a seat in the House of Commons. From 1922-25 he sat as National Liberal Member for Oldham but was then appointed Governor General of Kenya, only returning to England in 1931. Within two years he re-entered the Commons as a Conservative sitting for the Altrincham Division of Cheshire. His views at this time were set out in a letter written by Tom Jones, following a meeting between the two men in February, 1936:

"Grigg talked most of the time with a vigorous, monotonous dogmatism. Baldwin must go. The Cabinet is useless. Defences have been shockingly neglected. We are impotent in the air. By July we shall be in the soup. Musso will be on top and we shall have to choose between War and Humiliation."<sup>2</sup>

Grigg's colleague, Page Croft, had a "purer" Tory background, and first sat in the House as Member for Christ Church, 1910-18, during which time he served in the Great War. He severed his connections with the Army in 1924, when he was made an Honorary Brigadier General.

<sup>1</sup> Blake, The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill, p.226. Evidently Baldwin offered Horne the Ministry of Labour in 1924, knowing he was bound to decline.

<sup>2</sup> Letter dated February 25, 1936, A Diary With Letters, p.176.

From 1918 until 1940 he represented Bournemouth, when Churchill elevated him to the Peerage and appointed him Under Secretary of State for War. He was very much to the Right of his party, as his stand over India and, to a lesser extent, Abyssinia was to reveal.

Viscount Wolmer also entered the House in 1910, sitting for South West Lancashire and subsequently Aldershot, which he continued to represent to 1940.<sup>1</sup> He was Assistant Director of War Trade, 1916-18; Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Trade, 1922-24; Assistant Postmaster General, 1924-29. In 1942 he was appointed Minister of Economic Warfare. Wolmer's constituency of Aldershot contained a service training ground, and it is therefore likely that he would have had strong local support in his views on the inadequacy of Britain's defences.

Earl Winterton, an Irish Peer, entered the House at the tender age of 21, in 1904. He was to represent Horsham, Sussex for 47 years. His political career encompassed several offices of State: Under Secretary of State for India, 1922-24 and 1924-29; Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, 1937-39; Deputy to the Secretary of State for Air and Vice President of the Air Council, March-May, 1938; Assistant to the Home Secretary, June 1938 to January 1939; Postmaster General, January 1939, relinquishing the post in November. Thompson has it that Winterton, in accepting the Chancellorship of the Duchy of Lancaster in 1937, was "bought off" by Chamberlain, and this is quite possible for, as we shall see, he had proved himself to be an effective opponent of Baldwin's administration.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wolmer was heir to the Earl of Selborne, a title to which he succeeded in 1940.

<sup>2</sup> The Anti-Appeasers, p.14.



Loss of office in 1939, however, marked the return of Winterton to the dissidents, for in May, 1940, he voted against the Chamberlain Government.

Bob Boothby, Brenden Bracken and Duncan Sandys were the youngest of this group of MPs. Boothby had entered the House as Member for East Aberdeenshire in 1924 at the age of 23.<sup>1</sup> Although he had strongly criticised the return to the Gold Standard in 1925, Boothby had served as Churchill's Parliamentary Private Secretary at the Treasury 1926-29. He had not taken part in Churchill's India campaign but consistently supported him on defence and foreign affairs. He was one of the first Members of Parliament, during the 1930's, to advocate compulsory military service.

Bracken, in contrast to the open Boothby, was something of a mysterious character, as he still remains.<sup>2</sup> Born in Ireland, he left for Australia at an early age, returning to Britain in his twenties. He entered the world of journalism and banking, becoming Chairman and Managing Director of the Financial News and the Investor's Chronicle, while continuing - still in his twenties - to edit The Banker. He won Paddington North in the 1929 election for the Conservatives, against the national swing, and from then on was Churchill's man totally, being friend, informant, critic and counsellor. His contacts in the City and other high places provided Churchill with much valuable information which he might otherwise have missed. Unlike Boothby, he was very definitely right of centre.

<sup>1</sup> Boothby was briefly Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Food, in 1940, but was then forced to resign over an enquiry into his finances, over which he felt bitter at Churchill for not supporting him.

<sup>2</sup> MP North Paddington, 1929-45. "He was a man of mystery to the end", wrote Robert Rhodes James. "He died of cancer in August, 1958, after years of ill-health, and left explicit instructions that his papers were to be destroyed". Churchill, A Study in Failure, 1900-39, p.294. And he remains a mystery. Andrew Boyle's Poor,

Duncan Sandys was elected to the House in 1935, after resigning from the Foreign Office to go into politics.<sup>1</sup> His association with Churchill can be linked with his marriage to Diana Churchill in 1935 after meeting her during the Norwood by-election. It was his father-in-law that set him on what was to be a long and distinguished ministerial career, which began in 1941 with his appointment as Financial Secretary to the War Office.

By any standard, both at the time and in retrospect, this was a notable group of distinguished Parliamentarians. Churchill wrote of them:

"The Ministers eyed this significant but not unfriendly body of their own supporters and former colleagues or seniors with respect. We could at any time command the attention of Parliament and stage a full dress debate."<sup>2</sup>

This was not arrogance on Churchill's part. Tom Jones commented that the "hostile critics in the House are a formidable group: Austen, Winston, Horne and Winterton".<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note that the handful of Conservative and Unionist Members so far mentioned were not the sum total of those alarmed over the state of the country's defences. The call for increased rearmament - over and above that which the Government intended - attracted, as it always has done, considerable support

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Dear Brendan - because of the chronic lack of information on his activities, opinions etc - goes nowhere near unravelling the true Bracken.

<sup>1</sup> For more information on Sandys see p. 212-13.

<sup>2</sup> The Gathering Storm, p.70.

<sup>3</sup> Letter dated May 23, 1936, A Diary With Letters, p.209.

on the Conservative benches. Yet the others, some of whom will be mentioned later, were not part of the Churchill-Chamberlain circle, which met regularly, pooled information, and acted as a pressure group in the House.

According to Sir Henry Page Croft the group met very frequently at dinner and each of them in turn invited the other, either to a room at some well-known restaurant or to their private houses.<sup>1</sup> In Sir Austen Chamberlain's appointment diary for 1936 twelve such dinners are recorded, and these were mostly held at the Savoy or Claridges.<sup>2</sup> It is not clear whether the whole group was present on each occasion, as the diary for the most part merely alludes to single dinner companions. However it is possible that they were all gathered together and that Chamberlain's reference to dining with a certain member of the group indicates which one was to act as host on that occasion.

As to meetings at private houses, Chamberlain's diary and letters reveal that he attended at least two in 1936, the notorious May gathering at Shillinglee Park, and the other held at Churchill's home at Chartwell in February. In a letter to Ida, dated February 23, Austen confessed that he was staying with Churchill for the weekend. "It is a man's party", he wrote, and Robert Horne, Edward Grigg, Page Croft, Bob Boothby and the Professor, otherwise Professor Lindeman of Oxford, were the guests. "We were a merry party", he continued, "and the talk was good. There were almost as many opinions as men, but on one thing we were all agreed - that

<sup>1</sup> My Life of Strife, p.285.

<sup>2</sup> Appointment Diaries, Austen Chamberlain Papers.

Germany was a danger, the one danger that might be fatal to us, and that that danger had been too long neglected."<sup>1</sup> Such sentiments were reiterated by Sir Henry Page Croft:

"All of us were obsessed with the German peril and the nakedness of our country to meet it, and Winston was galvanic in collecting the latest information to place before us . . . We had convincing evidence that he was right or very nearly right in every particular."<sup>2</sup>

The May weekend was held at Earl Winterton's home, Shillinglee Park, on the 22-23 of that month. Members of the party included the Austen Chamberlains, the Winston Churchills, the Edward Griggs, Page Croft, Robert Horne, and of course the host. It was designed as another informal occasion when those present might get down to jointly considering matters that troubled them, and this is what appeared to have happened. A week later Austen Chamberlain wrote to Ida saying that "we discussed some serious questions of defence and foreign policy and laughed and amused ourselves a good deal".<sup>3</sup>

What made the occasion notable was that an enterprising reporter managed to enter the grounds and published a correct list of those present. With such a group of malcontents it was not surprising that sensational articles were written in the popular press that they had constituted themselves a cabal and a "shadow cabinet" and were plotting to bring down the Government. Such was the substance of The Daily Express and Daily Herald stories, while the News Chronicle gave the feature three columns on the front page.

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Austen to his sister Ida, February 23, 1936. Austen Chamberlain Papers.

<sup>2</sup> My Life of Strife, p.285.

<sup>3</sup> Austen Chamberlain to Ida, 29 May, 1936. Austen Chamberlain Papers.



Inevitably this gave the group bad publicity and for a while threw them in a somewhat sinister light.<sup>1</sup> Yet had they hoped to bring the Government down? One faithful Government supporter certainly thought they were concocting "dark schemes to torpedo the government".<sup>2</sup> This seems unlikely, although it is only fair to add that some, if not most, of the membership would have liked to see a change of leadership. Chamberlain, writing to his sister in February, had asked the question was the group a "cave". Answering his own query he commented that "some would like to make it so, but I am not a cave-man".<sup>3</sup> In any case dislodging Baldwin or other national leaders was not part of the group's avowed purpose. As Page Croft related "We were engaged in no form of intrigue against the Baldwin Government, our whole purpose being to force the administration to face the facts by stating the truth in Parliament".<sup>4</sup>

It is probable that members of the group circulated information to each other, but the evidence for this is scanty. In the Chamberlain Papers there is a memorandum from Sir Edward Grigg setting out his views on defence, and it is reasonable to assume that each member of the group received a copy. In it Grigg argued that there were a series of questions that required immediate answer which were "being neglected or deferred by the Government". Such, for instance, was the question whether the minimum production necessary to bring

<sup>1</sup> It was this episode that provoked Baldwin's remark about it being the time of year when midges came out of dirty ditches.

<sup>2</sup> Diary entry, 26 May, 1936, The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.61. Chips also recorded that the group was now known as the "House Party".

<sup>3</sup> Austen to Ida Chamberlain, 23 February, 1936. Austen Chamberlain Papers.

<sup>4</sup> My Life of Strife, p.285.

Britain's defences up to security level could be undertaken by industry without disturbance of its commercial programme, or whether emergency measures should be imposed to speed up production, which would inevitably result in commercial sacrifice. The industrial aspect of the defence problem was "undoubtedly the most serious" but Grigg did not see how a decision could be taken upon it until "a general Defence Plan comprising all the three Services" was worked out. Such a plan would have to take into account certain factors: ground and air defence of England against air attack; the protection of ports and sea-borne trade; the provision of a Field Force for action on the Continent; the co-ordination of Army and Air Force expansion; and, the scale and range of the air forces required for attack on enemy supply and nerve centres. Only in this way would it be possible to get a clear outline of the equipment necessary for Britain's security, in order that a well-grounded decision on production could be taken. In the war, Grigg recalled, the "problem was easier to solve because commerce went by the board and every effort was bent to secure the maximum output by the earliest date. That is what Germany is doing today. But England cannot be turned into a vast munitions factory in time of peace to the sacrifice of everything else. The Government must therefore plan its minimum requirements in order to decide whether or not special measures are indispensable and, if so, what."

Grigg went on to argue that somebody should be commissioned with the duty of working out an "organic and articulated Defence Plan" at once. "Frankly I believe", he wrote, "that some authority should be set up to produce a Defence Plan within a maximum period of two months." Similarly a Ministry of Munitions should be

established through which all orders to industry could pass in the order of priority laid down by the authority responsible for the Defence Plan as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

At one of their informal meetings the idea was conceived that leading Unionists in both Houses should act together, bringing pressure to bear on the Government to accelerate the pace of rearmament. What they had in mind was either a secret session of Parliament or a deputation to Baldwin and senior ministers.<sup>2</sup> During the Defence Debate on July 20, Churchill put forward the alternatives. Scrupulously refraining, so he told the Commons, from saying anything which was not obviously known in foreign countries, he and his associates had a number of questions to ask which were not for public consumption.

"They are questions to which full answers could not be given in public. We have statements to make which we should like to have answered, but not here before all the world. The times have waxed too dangerous for that."<sup>3</sup>

Either a deputation or a secret session would meet the need for secrecy.

In fact both alternatives had already been mooted by Austen Chamberlain with his brother Neville. Austen had informed the Chancellor, early in July, how concerned he was with the situation of this country and of Europe. "For the first time since the late Marquess of Salisbury's Government he noticed that the House

<sup>1</sup> Memorandum from Grigg on Defence, 11 May, 1936. Austen Chamberlain Papers.

<sup>2</sup> A secret session is an occasion when it is felt proper to exclude strangers. It is done by Standing Order. Strangers are excluded by a motion carried without amendment or debate, reserving to the Speaker or Chairman the power to order the withdrawal of strangers from any part of the House.

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Debates, 20 July, 1936, Col.839.

of Commons was divided on foreign policy." To remedy this he suggested a secret session, at which the Government could give information, which could not be given in ordinary debate, with a view to "bringing the various parties together and securing a united front". If this proved impossible the Government should receive certain influential members of the House including the leader of the Labour Opposition.<sup>1</sup>

Neville raised Austen's proposals at the Cabinet meeting on 6 July. The ministers were unanimous in rejecting the secret session idea, Ramsay MacDonald arguing that there was "no precedent except in time of war". As to a deputation the Chancellor was afraid lest "it would lead to a series of conferences at each of which Mr Winston Churchill would probably adopt an increasingly aggressive line. Very likely he and Mr Lloyd George would work together and would accuse the Government of not taking Defence sufficiently seriously and eventually they might insist on telling the country, or at any rate Parliament, what they thought about it." The Lord President of the Council, Ramsay MacDonald, expressed similar fears concerning Churchill. He asked whether the Cabinet "would welcome the prospect of having to face his criticisms in Parliament . . . The more he thought about it the less he liked the idea of a meeting attended by Churchill, whether Attlee accepted or not."

Whatever may be said about the accuracy of Churchill's warnings it is clear that in his self-appointed role as defence watchdog he was much feared by his own Government. Baldwin had excluded Churchill because of his disturbing and forceful nature:

<sup>1</sup> Cabinet Minutes, July 6, 1936. Both the Labour and Liberal Parties were to decline to be represented in the deputation.



"Winston is a blister and I came to the conclusion that it is more comfortable to have a blister outside than inside."<sup>1</sup>

Yet here was Churchill proving he could be almost as great a thorn outside the Cabinet as inside.

After considerable discussion the Cabinet agreed that they could not refuse the request. Lord Swinton, the Secretary of State for Air, expressed the hope that the deputation might turn out to the Government's advantage. Under the scrutiny of Churchill and his friends the administration seemed uncertain. On their chosen subject of rearmament it was most difficult to give a wholly frank and convincing answer in Parliament, as it was necessary, for security, that the country remained ignorant of what went on behind the scenes. Yet at such a deputation, Swinton argued, "things might be said which could not be spoken of outside but which would convince any unprejudiced mind". By giving the critics, in particular Churchill, precise information as to the real state of affairs their criticism might be stilled.<sup>2</sup>

On 28 July, the deputation was received by Baldwin, Lord Halifax and Sir Thomas Inskip at the Prime Minister's room in the House of Commons. The deputation from the Commons consisted of Chamberlain, Churchill, Horne, Amery, Sir John Gilmour,<sup>3</sup> Captain F E Guest,

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Sir Percy Harris's Forty Years in and out of Parliament, p.131.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that Churchill recorded that as a result of his confidential contacts at home and abroad, he was as "well instructed as many Ministers of the Crown", The Gathering Storm, p.70. Middlemass and Barnes, in their biography of Baldwin, contest this claim, p.945.

<sup>3</sup> Gilmour: MP East Renfrew, 1910-18, Pollok, 1918-40; Secretary of State for Scotland, 1924-29; Minister of Agriculture, 1931; Home Secretary, 1932-35; Minister of Shipping, 1939-40.

Sir Roger Keyes, Winterton, Page Croft, Grigg, Wolmer, J T C Moore-Brabazon<sup>1</sup> and Sir Hugh O'Neill.<sup>2</sup> That of the Lords included Salisbury, Viscount Fitz Alan, Viscount Trenchard, Lord Milne and Lord Lloyd. Churchill noted that this was "a great occasion. I cannot recall anything like it in what I have seen of British public life. The group of eminent men, with no thought of personal advantage, but whose lives had been centred upon public affairs, represented a weight of Conservative opinion which could not be easily disregarded".<sup>3</sup>

The proceedings, which were confidential, occupied three to four hours on two successive days. As Chamberlain was the Senior Privy Councillor there, he introduced the deputation:

"We are profoundly anxious about the European conditions, which to us are extremely menacing, and about our own position faced with these conditions . . . I do not think there is much dispute about the enormous preparations which Germany has made and is making, for what purpose we may guess, but the information that reaches us as

<sup>1</sup> Brabazon was the first English pilot, holding the Number 1 Certificate granted by the Royal Aero Club for Pilots. He served in the 1914-18 war, and was made responsible for the Photographic Section of the Royal Flying Corp. Entering the House in 1918 he was twice Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Transport. Brabazon was, however, plagued with financial troubles which hindered his Parliamentary career, although he was later to be Minister of Transport, albeit briefly, in the Coalition Government (1940-41).

<sup>2</sup> O'Neill: Ulster Unionist MP, 1915-52; Chairman, Conservative Private Members Committee, 1935-39 (1922 Committee); Under Secretary of State for India and Burma, 1939-40.

<sup>3</sup> The Gathering Storm, p.201.

to the progress of our own programme and the adequacy of our programme does leave us with grave anxieties and doubts. We wish to put that information before you. If you can remove our doubts and fears, no one will be more pleased than we."<sup>1</sup>

Churchill, however, was the chief spokesman and put the greater part of their case against the Government. He led off with a statement on the dangers of the situation in which Britain found herself, and the inability of the government's efforts to overcome it. He touched on munitions, and then dwelt on the danger from the air, emphasising the problems of supply. Stating firmly that the Government's programme of 120 squadrons and 1500 first line aircraft for Home Defence would in no wise meet the deadline of 1 April, 1937, he doubted whether even 30 squadrons would be ready on time. It was imperative, he said, that the Government should act at once to ensure that industry carried out their plans.

Once Churchill had concluded the rest of the delegation made their various contributions: Keyes<sup>2</sup> reviewed the position of the Navy, while Grigg concentrated on the Army; Guest's<sup>3</sup> chosen field

<sup>1</sup> Cabinet Papers, Memorandum on the July 28-29 Deputation, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Keyes: Director of Plans, Admiralty, October, 1917-January, 1918; implemented audacious operation of storming the German batteries and sinking of blockships at Zeebrugge, April, 1918; Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff, 1921-25; Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean, 1925-28, and of Portsmouth, 1929; Admiral of the Fleet, 1930; 1934 stood for Parliament in the naval constituency of Portsmouth North, and during the by-election was supported by Churchill and the India Defence League; represented Portsmouth until 1943, and throughout was recognised as an outspoken champion of the Navy.

<sup>3</sup> Guest: Private Secretary to his cousin, Winston Churchill, 1907-10; Liberal MP, 1910-29; Joint Patronage Secretary to the Treasury, 1917-21; Secretary of State for Air, 1921-22. In 1929 he lost his seat in North Bristol and when he returned to the Commons, two years later, he represented Drake, Plymouth as a Conservative. He died in 1937.

was the Royal Air Force, and Amery, as he recorded, mainly confined himself to the question of anti-aircraft defence.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the two days the whole gamut of Britain's defences had been covered by the deputation. In reply Baldwin and Inskip assured the delegation that the various aspects of the defence problem which had been brought to their notice would receive attention and promised a more complete statement in the autumn.

This was given on November 23 when all those involved in the deputation were invited by the Prime Minister to receive a comprehensive statement on the whole position. Inskip gave them a frank account of what he considered to be the situation, saying that he felt the estimates given him by the deputation were too pessimistic; that everything possible was being done, short of emergency measures which would only upset industry, cause widespread alarm and advertise the existing deficiencies.

In detail, Inskip informed Churchill that his figures for the front line strength of the German Air Force were, according to the Air Staff, too high: Churchill disputed this, although as has since become apparent, his figures were exaggerated. As to the suggestion that in numbers of aircraft the programme would not be completed by the appointed date, Inskip admitted that there would be a delay of approximately three months in the completion of the 1937 programme. The principal reason for this was the failure of the aircraft industry to keep to the delivery programme. An added factor was the Air Ministry policy of going for the newest types with a view to their bulk production. In effect this

<sup>1</sup> The Unforgiving Years, p.197.



was a telling criticism of Churchill's views. It would have been quite easy to order a large number of older types - as in fact Churchill was requesting - instead of the later machines, the production of which would not begin before the end of the year. Their prototypes were first seen by the public in 1936: the Wellington, Blenheim and Hampden bombers, the Spitfire and Hurricane fighters, on which Britain's survival in 1940 largely rested. Even so Churchill's statement that only 25% of the aircraft promised (120 squadrons) by March 1937 would be available by then was denied. The Air Staff's figure was as high as 80%.

As to the deficiencies in Army Equipment, a subject raised by Grigg, the War Office had prepared a memorandum for Inskip's use with the deputation. Grigg had suggested that machine-guns, anti-tank rifles and stokes mortars hardly existed. In fact there were ample machine-guns, but not enough mortars or rifles. Elsewhere a sorry picture was painted: field artillery was short; mechanised transport lacking; tanks not up to strength. The War Office memorandum concluded with the suggestion that the deficiencies could be remedied sooner if the Government were prepared to interfere with normal trade. This of course was what the critics were suggesting, that in the emergency the Government should impinge to a certain extent on the ordinary industries of the country - a half-way house between peace and war industry. The Government, regarding such a step as "a gigantic stride" that would damage trade and do harm to Britain's international interests, remained unconvinced. Thus it was not until 22 March, 1938 that the Services were freed from the restriction not to interfere with normal trade.

Inskip's reply then ranged over several fields: the low recruiting figures for the Services, shipping, the Fleet Air Arm and air raid precautions. In effect it was a comprehensive statement, but it failed to relieve the anxieties of the majority present. Churchill made this clear:

"I think you have given a very full and interesting answer to the points which have been raised but I do not feel you have made us a party to the grave situation which you have before you except in regard to one or two particular points where you have not contradicted the assertions which were made."

In a similar vein Amery recorded that "we all went away with long faces".<sup>1</sup> Clearly Swinton's hopes that the Deputation would redound to the Government's advantage were mislaid. Although "things were said which could not be spoken outside", Churchill and his associates were not, as had been hoped, convinced.

Dissatisfied with the Government's answer to their criticisms, the critics continued their efforts to force the pace of rearmament. Feiling's Life of Neville Chamberlain recorded how persistent they were and how "the Government was daily under critical scrutiny by powerful elements . . . Austen, Churchill, Amery, Londonderry, Winterton and Lloyd, ex-ministers or would-be ministers, whose chosen ground was a subject of which several of them were masters, and concerning which the country was fully perturbed, the need of defence".<sup>2</sup> In fact Page Croft commented that "we had such a galaxy of talent in Parliament that I was not called on to intervene but I

<sup>1</sup> The Unforgiving Years, p.197. Amery was the MP for Sparkbrook, Birmingham, 1911-45; Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, 1919-21; Parliamentary and Financial Secretary to the Admiralty, 1921-22; First Lord, 1922-4; Secretary of State for Colonies, 1924-29; not included in the National Government because of his strong and unpopular imperial views, which on one occasion provoked a row with Neville Chamberlain.

delivered a series of warning speeches in the country".<sup>1</sup>

Sir Thomas Inskip had doubted whether the deputation would quieten the fears of the Government's critics, and had predicted further attacks. When Parliament reassembled, he wrote "we must anticipate a continuance of the attacks made on the Defence Programme before the Recess, mostly by supporters of the Government".<sup>2</sup> Sure enough, the group raised the matter in the debate over the Address. Churchill made what was to be one of his greatest and most memorable - if somewhat unjust - speeches:

"The Government simply cannot make up their minds, or they cannot get the Prime Minister to make up his mind. So they go on in strange paradox, decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant for drift, solid for fluidity, all-powerful to be impotent. So we go on preparing more months and years - precious, perhaps vital, to the greatness of Britain for the locusts to eat."<sup>3</sup>

Churchill was followed by Winterton who took the opportunity to challenge the Government for its "soothing syrup" of Ministerial generalities:

"Are you doing all you might do, or only what it is comparatively easy to do without upsetting

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The Unforgiving Years, p.285.

<sup>1</sup> My Life of Strife, p.286.

<sup>2</sup> Cabinet Memorandum entitled The Defence Programme, 30 October, 1936.

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Debates, 10 November, 1936, Col.925.

anybody's feelings or causing political difficulty among a population that is notoriously adverse to drastic measures in peacetime?".<sup>1</sup>

Such persistency in critical scrutiny can be gauged by the frequency of their interventions in the House. In the two year period from November, 1935, to November, 1937, fifteen members on the Government benches, excluding Ministers, spoke three or more times on defence matters. Seven of the fifteen were Amery, Brabazon, Churchill, Grigg, Keyes, Sandys and Winterton, who respectively spoke on six, four, ten, five, nine, four and three occasions. In fact both Churchill and Keyes intervened on more occasions than any Defence Minister. The other eight were W J Anstruther-Gray, Viscountess Astor,<sup>2</sup> Captain H H Balfour,<sup>3</sup> Wing Commander James, O Simmonds,<sup>4</sup> Major Sir R D Ross,<sup>5</sup> Rear Admiral Sir Murray Sueter and Vice Admiral E A Taylor.<sup>6</sup> They were also anxious to force the

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 10 November, 1936, Col.934.

<sup>2</sup> Astor: wife of Viscount Astor; the first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons; MP for Sutton, Plymouth, 1919-45.

<sup>3</sup> Balfour: attached to the Royal Air Force, 1918-23; MP Isle of Thanet, 1929-45; Under Secretary of State for Air, 1938-44.

<sup>4</sup> Simmonds: aeronautical engineer; MP Duddleston, 1931-45; Chairman of the Air Raid Precautions Committee of the National Government supporters.

<sup>5</sup> Ross: MP Londonderry, 1929-45; Parliamentary Private Secretary to First Lord of the Admiralty, 1931-35.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor: MP South Paddington, 1930-59.



Government's hand over rearmament but did not associate themselves with Churchill.

Another platform for the dissidents was the Annual Conference of the National Union of Conservatives, at which they were extremely active in using as a goad and stimulant to Government policy. Indeed the principal preoccupation of Conferences during the 1930's could be said to be the problem of defence. Beginning with 1933 the Conference, "amid scenes of great enthusiasm", passed a resolution stating "that this Conference desires to record its grave anxiety in regard to the inadequacy of the provisions made for Imperial Defence".<sup>1</sup> In 1934 the Conference underlined its anxiety by passing a resolution identical in wording to that of the previous year, while Churchill, in 1935, secured the passage of a resolution requiring the Government:

"(1) To repair the serious deficiencies in the defence forces of the Crown, and in particular, first, to organise our industry for speedy conversion to defence purposes, if need be.

(2) To make a renewed effort to establish equality in the air with the strongest foreign air force within striking distance of our shores.

(3) To rebuild the British Fleet and strengthen the Royal Navy, so as to safeguard our food and livelihood and preserve the coherence of the British Empire."<sup>2</sup>

Later Conferences, 1937 in particular, spoke with an equally clear voice urging the Government to substantially increase its armaments programme.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> R MacKenzie, British Political Parties, p.228.

<sup>2</sup> The Gathering Storm, p.156.

<sup>3</sup> J P MacKintosh, British Cabinet, p.581.

The pressure on the Government at Conference, in Parliament and the Press, as well as the many warning speeches delivered throughout the country, were not the only symptoms of concern over the state of Britain's defences. In the autumn of 1936 there was established an Army League Committee, a private organisation of men who were anxious about the decline of the Army. It included several members of Parliament including Amery, who was Chairman of the Committee, W J Anstruther-Gray,<sup>1</sup> Grigg, Horne, William Mabane,<sup>2</sup> J R J Macnamara,<sup>3</sup> O'Neill, and Sandys.

The Committee felt that public attention had been focused almost exclusively upon the serious state of Britain's air defences, and, to a lesser degree upon the Navy. "The nation", so a manifesto claimed, "is prepared to vote whatever sums are needed to bring both the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force up to the strength required to cope with any probable contingency. The work of re-equipment and expansion in both of these vital services is well in hand."<sup>4</sup> But what of the Army, the remaining link in the chain of security? The no less serious problem of land defences, both as regards the small regular army and the calls that might be made upon it, and also as regards the reserves of expansion behind the Regulars, remained neglected, alike by Cabinet and by public opinion. This had resulted in Britain's foreign policy being

<sup>1</sup> Anstruther-Gray: Member for North Lanark, 1931-45.

<sup>2</sup> Mabane: National Liberal Member for Huddersfield, 1931-45.

<sup>3</sup> Macnamara: elected Member for Chelmsford, Essex in 1935, a division he represented until his death in action in 1944; he was associated with Eden's 'glamour boys', 1938-39; he voted against Chamberlain in May, 1940.

<sup>4</sup> Rising Strength, 1 March, 1938.

"weakened during the past few by the known inferiority of our military position, which has caused certain militaristic powers to question the continued vitality of our people".<sup>1</sup> More serious, as Amery later warned, "in any crisis we should find our present Army and its reserves woefully inadequate".<sup>2</sup>

After considerable discussion the Committee presented to the Government, in July, 1937, a report suggesting the re-organisation of the Army.

The report contained a careful analysis of the whole military position, both from the strategical and recruiting aspects, and put forward a number of proposals.<sup>3</sup> It urged that the whole structure of the Army be changed from the sixty-year-old Cardwell system, with its scheme of linked battalions, which bore no relation to Britain's needs in war; that the pay, general conditions and terms of service should be improved in order to secure the type of men required;<sup>4</sup> the reconditioning of both wings of the Army simultaneously, and not the Government's proposed gradual renovation of the Territorial Army so that it did not interfere with the Regular's programme.

In the report the Committee visualised the further step of forming an Army League, the object of which would be "to explain

<sup>1</sup> Beddinton Behrens, 'How the League Started', Rising Strength, March, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> Amery, speech to Army League luncheon at Leeds, 17 June, 1938. Recorded in The Times, 18 June, 1938.

<sup>3</sup> Rising Strength, January, 1939 issue. Article by Behrens.

<sup>4</sup> Amery had long advocated this in the House. See his speech on the Army Estimates, 12 March, 1936.

to the public the necessity for maintaining an Army, for assisting its recruitment, and for raising its status in the eyes of the people".<sup>1</sup> The idea was not original. The League was to do for the Army very much what the Navy League had done for the Navy. To achieve its aims, the League sought to obtain a national membership of men and women, and to establish branches throughout the country. It organised demonstrations, indoor and open air meetings, invited social and political organisations to arrange for League speakers to address them. It assisted local authorities in instructing the public on air raid precautions. Study groups were formed and an attractive monthly magazine called Rising Strength was published.<sup>2</sup>

"We are not concerned to criticize the Government", announced Amery. "They are doing the best in accordance with what they believe to be the support that public opinion will give them. Our business is to create the public opinion which will enable the Government, or any other Government, whatever its complexion, to do those things which we believe to be essential to the very existence of our country."<sup>3</sup> Despite these assurances the League, by ignoring the deliberate Government policy of neglecting one service in favour of the other two, and drawing attention to the army's weaknesses, was flying in the face of the Administration. Small wonder one of the participants later recorded that "official circles frowned on our

<sup>1</sup> Rising Strength, January, 1939.

<sup>2</sup> Rising Strength featured articles like 'Berlin's Air Raid Precautions' by Dr Haden Guest (Labour MP for North Islington), 'War in the Air' by Duncan Sandys, and 'Women in War' by Winston Churchill.

<sup>3</sup> From a record of Amery's speech to the annual meeting of the League, Rising Strength, February, 1939.



agitation for improved defence, on the general grounds that a breath of criticism weakens the Government".<sup>1</sup> Such a clash, however, had been foreseen by the Army League's founders who, in Amery's words, wanted at all costs to "strengthen the hands of the Secretary of State for War". In fact Leslie Hore-Belisha was very "receptive" to their proposals, and was soon to put underway a fundamental re-organisation of the army's structure.<sup>2</sup> Rising Strength was able to boast, in January, 1939, that the League's proposals "have very largely been carried out or known to be under consideration". But before the Army League seriously got underway, the whole situation was transformed by the Munich Crisis of 1938, with its drastic warning of the perils of unpreparedness, and of the need of preparation for instant readiness on a scale, both in numbers and in adequacy of training, far exceeding anything contemplated in 1937. Amery noted that "the situation revealed by Munich gave a new direction to our activities".<sup>3</sup>

As we have already noted a Navy League was in existence, having been established some years before. This had the dual purpose of interpreting to civilians the fighting forces at sea, and keeping the needs of maritime defence before the political eyes of the people. Several Conservative MPs were associated with it, including several of the aforementioned: Horne, Keyes, Sandys, Amery, Guest and Grigg. Lord Lloyd was its President throughout this period, while Churchill

<sup>1</sup> Behrens, 'The League', Citizen Service, June, 1939.

<sup>2</sup> The Unforgiving Years, p.200.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.200. For the new direction see pp.565-6.

was a frequent guest and speaker at League functions. Consistently the League bewailed the fact that the fleet had been "allowed to fall into decline" and pressed for the construction of adequate naval forces so vital to the "one Power which was absolutely dependent on the sea for its existence".<sup>1</sup> Although it welcomed the Government's awakening on the naval issue a certain jealousy of the priority given the air force was apparent in League circles. It was admitted that there was a need for a strong air force "but to suggest that the arm by which we alone really lived, and without which nothing could fly in the air for lack of fuel, did not need further strength and vigilance, was very dangerous folly indeed".<sup>2</sup>

Another aspect of the defence question, in which the Government's critics were to have some success, was in the appointment of a Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence. Early in 1936 a campaign had been launched for a Ministry of Defence, backed by The Times and instigated in the Commons by the Member for Wellingborough, Wing Commander A W H James.<sup>3</sup> It was not simply a question of spending more on existing forces as they stood, so James and the other critics argued; what was needed was a plan to relate those forces, both in total strength and in relation to each other, to the dangers Britain might have to meet. The situation required a Minister of Defence to co-ordinate the scale and the tasks of the three Services in the light of a coherent plan and commend this plan to the Cabinet. Such a Minister, the critics felt, should have a

<sup>1</sup> Jellicoe addressing the Trafalgar Day Dinner, The Times, October 18, 1935.

<sup>2</sup> Lord Lloyd addressing the Navy League, The Times, 16 May, 1935.

<sup>3</sup> James: MP, 1931-45; formerly instructor RAF College, Cranwell.

staff of his own, to work continuously on the central problem of defence, in conjunction with the three Service Ministers, and so get better value for the large sums of money devoted to Imperial Defence.

Re-organisation was urged in a Private Member's Bill on 14 February, the Ministry of Defence Creation Bill. This called for an end to the "three tremendous vested interests" which did not give way an inch to one another, especially in the financial allocations each year; the introduction of one Service, the amalgamation of the three, was proposed. The Bill was presented by Sir Murray Sueter<sup>1</sup> and supported by George Lambert.<sup>2</sup> Amery took the opportunity to associate himself wholeheartedly with the concept of a Minister of Defence. He proceeded:

"What is needed is a Minister who shall be free from administrative preoccupations of a great Department and who can give his whole time to the problem of co-ordination and supply."

It was necessary, he suggested, to make sure that too much money did not go to any one Service. Rather money should be related to strategic needs, and this task was work for a co-ordinator:

"There must be someone with a co-ordinative conception of our strategical needs to stand between the Chancellor and the Departments when the main issue of the allocation of money is being considered."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sueter: a Rear-Admiral; Conservative MP for Hertford, 1921-45. By all accounts he had a very fertile mind and was in part responsible for the introduction of submarines in the British Navy (1902-03) and the creation of the Royal Naval Air Service, the first Anti-Aircraft Corps for London, and the Armoured Car Force. He made a contribution to the evolution of the tank, helped develop the Empire airmail services and invented the torpedo carrying aircraft.

<sup>2</sup> Lambert: Liberal MP for South Molton, 1891-1924 and 1929-31; Liberal National, 1931-45; Civil Lord of the Admiralty, 1905-15.

Another speaker in support of the bill was the elder statesman, Sir Austen Chamberlain, who intervened with damaging effect. Quoting from a letter by Lord Trenchard to The Times, he alleged that the Chiefs of Staff Committee deliberately shelved important decisions if they could not reach agreement and did not refer them to the Committee of Imperial Defence or the Cabinet.<sup>1</sup> However, what "caused a mild sensation" was Chamberlain's attack on the Prime Minister.<sup>2</sup> Baldwin's biographers put this down to "a desire to show the true feeling in the party and his opinion that Churchill should have the job (the new ministry)".<sup>3</sup> However, Chamberlain's colleague Earl Winterton, wrote "that it meant no more than he was seriously alarmed, like the rest of us, at the turn of events and at a certain mental inertia on Stanley Baldwin's part."<sup>4</sup> That Winterton was closer to the truth can be gauged from a letter sent by Austen to his sister Hilda:

"It did rather flutter the journalistic doves  
and I think rather surprised S.B. To tell the truth I  
thought that the time was overdue for trying to shake  
him out of his self-complacency. Of course it is true  
that no man can do all the work which in these days the

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House of Commons Debates, 14 February, 1936. Cols.301-635.

<sup>1</sup> Lord Trenchard, the former Chief of the Air Staff.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, Letter dated 17 February, 1936, A Diary With Letters, p.174.

<sup>3</sup> Middlemass and Barnes, Baldwin, p.908.

<sup>4</sup> Winterton, Orders of the Day, p.214. Another member of the July deputation, Moore-Brabazon, shared this view: "I became more and more irritated with Mr Baldwin, who seemed to be drifting rather than doing anything constructive on many questions of policy." The Brabazon Story, p.161.



Prime Minister is supposed to do, but what angers me is that the present P.M. does none of it and this, mastering all my self-restraint, I refrained from saying.<sup>1</sup> But S.B. had better show himself more alive to his duties or he will get into serious trouble, for discontent is spreading and becoming more serious. It is discontent bred of anxiety as to the results of his slackness and having done much to save him in December when an adverse vote would have been a direct vote of censure and necessitated his resignation, I decided to use this non-party debate when no vote would be taken to tell him what not only the older but many of the younger members are privately saying."<sup>2</sup>

Altogether a total of 20 members spoke during the course of the debate: 6 Labour, 1 Liberal, 1 Communist and 12 supporters of the Government. Only 3 were opposed to a measure of reorganisation: Lord Eustace Percy, the Government spokesman; George Hardie, the

<sup>1</sup> Chamberlain would have been less than human if he had not felt bitter to Baldwin following the December days. Acting upon the hint that once the Hoare-Laval crisis was over Baldwin would "Want to talk" to him about the Foreign Office he had rallied support for the Government only to be then bypassed in favour of Eden. His feelings were well expressed in a letter to his sister Ida: "I should like to write about the real Baldwin whom we know does not fit in at any point with the picture which the public have made of him for themselves . . . we know him as self-centred and idle; yet one of the shrewdest not to say slyest of politicians but without a constructive idea in his head and with an amazing ignorance of Indian and foreign affairs and of the real values of political life. 'Sly, sir devilish sly' would be my chapter heading, and egotism and idleness the principal characteristics that I should assign him." Letter to Ida, 28 December, 1935, Austen Chamberlain Papers.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Hilda, 15 February, 1936. Austen Chamberlain Papers.

pacifist member for Springburn; Willie Gallacher, the lone Communist, representing West Fife.<sup>1</sup> The general tone of the debate therefore was that the system was inadequate, especially at a time when a reconditioning of the defence forces was an admitted necessity.

That same day Sir Maurice Hankey, Secretary to the Cabinet, wrote to Sir Warren Fisher, the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury and Head of the Civil Service:

"After today's debate I am afraid we have got to make some concession for a Minister of Defence."

Hankey therefore recommended a compromise to Baldwin in order "to meet the widespread desires in Parliament and elsewhere for a Minister concentrating on the central problems of defence".<sup>2</sup> Three days later the Cabinet appointed a Ministerial Committee under the Chairmanship of the Prime Minister, with the following terms of reference:

"To consider the question of co-ordination of defence in the light of the Debate in Parliament on Friday, 14th February, 1936, and the Cabinet discussion, and report their conclusions."<sup>3</sup>

The report by the so-called Committee on the Co-ordination of Defence was ready by 20 February and, almost inevitably, concluded that a new Minister should be appointed. A White Paper on these lines was issued within a few days.

<sup>1</sup> The Government reply to the debate, made by Percy, was somewhat ineffective. His speech was described by Tom Jones as but a "thick cloud of words". Letter dated 17 February, 1936, A Diary With Letters, p.174.

<sup>2</sup> Cabinet Papers, Memorandum on Defence Co-ordination, 14 February, 1936.

<sup>3</sup> Committee on the Co-ordination of Defence Report, 20 February, 1936.

The Government's moves offer a splendid illustration of the way in which the House of Commons is able to influence the conduct of the Nation's affairs. Criticism in the House, and complaint in the lobbies, combined of course with agitation outside, forced the Government to amend its policy.<sup>1</sup> Although the new departure was limited in scope and in some ways a sop to Parliament, it showed that Baldwin's government, despite its large majority, was not impervious to criticism.

Austen Chamberlain welcomed the new arrangement, writing to his sister Hilda that he was "very well satisfied with the Government reorganisation of the Defence duties".<sup>2</sup> Some of the other critics, however, were far from satisfied with the new post. Amery dismissed it as a "concession" to the "general demand for such an appointment", reflecting Baldwin's desire not to "upset the even tenor of the Government's life by creating a new office with formidable powers".<sup>3</sup> Churchill, too, considered the constitution of the new office and its powers unsatisfactory.<sup>4</sup> Both were of the opinion that no Minister entrusted with the work of co-ordination would achieve it without some

<sup>1</sup> It does appear that Baldwin had begun to realise that the co-ordination of the new programme and the mobilisation of industry would require full-time attention. Prior to the February Debate he was already feeling his way to the creation of a Minister responsible for Defence, answerable to Parliament. Doubtless the Debate gave a new direction to his activities, both forcing immediate action and aiding him to steer the proposal through a hostile Cabinet. Middlemas and Barnes, pp.908-10.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Hilda, 29 February, 1936. Austen Chamberlain Papers.

<sup>3</sup> The Unforgiving Years, p.196.

<sup>4</sup> The Gathering Storm, p.175. This criticism proved most perceptive; because of the circumscribed nature of the post "no living man - not even Winston Churchill - could have made a success of the appointment." Ismay, The Memoirs of General Lord Ismay, p.75.

greater share of executive authority than the White Paper of 3 March gave him. It would be only too easy for that Minister to offer advice which none of the heads of the three Service Departments would take. There was also the danger that co-ordination of the Defence plans and the question of the industrial side of arming would become intermingled with the result that the task would be beyond the capabilities of any one man. And even Austen Chamberlain admitted that the "new man will have a terrific task and I do not believe that anyone now in the Government is fit for it except Neville, who I am glad to know has definitely refused it, and I am dreadfully afraid that Baldwin will appoint some incompetent".<sup>1</sup>

To prevent the new minister being bogged down with the industrial side of arming Churchill, and others closely associated with him, began to advocate the need for a separate Minister, who would set up something in the nature of a Ministry of Supply. Such a Ministry, by co-ordinating the demands of the three Services, would go a long way towards the re-equipment of Britain's expanding forces and adapting industry to war production, should the emergency arise.<sup>2</sup> Despite their pleas no action was taken until the spring of 1939.

Churchill's views at this time were clearly set out in a Cabinet note circulated by Sir Maurice Hankey. He happened to live close to the ex-Minister, and attended a dinner at Chartwell on the 19 April. Churchill used the occasion to have a full and penetrating discussion on Britain's defences. Points arose which gave an

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Hilda, 29 February, 1936. Austen Chamberlain Papers.

<sup>2</sup> As urged by Grigg and Horne in the Defence Debate of 29 May, 1936.



indication of the line that Churchill was likely to take in the forthcoming debates in Parliament and Hankey considered the conversation important enough to warrant informing Baldwin and Inskip of its content. He wrote:

"My impression is that he intends to be rather aggressive on Imperial Defence during the remainder of the present session. The point on which he was strongest was the desirability of setting up a Ministry of Supply."<sup>1</sup>

Churchill's main criticism as to the duties of the Minister of Defence Co-ordination was his assumption of the chair at the Principal Supply Officers Sub-Committee. Inskip's role, he said, should be confined to questions of general policy, such as bombs versus battleships, the value of Russia as an ally, and so forth. To chair the Supply Officers Sub-Committee should be the role of a Minister of Supply or Munitions. Churchill, according to Hankey, "went out of his way to explain that he did not want the job for himself. He had already held the post in war and would not touch it again".<sup>2</sup>

What intrigued Parliament, however, was not the duties or limitations of the new post, but the identity of the new Minister. Austen Chamberlain backed Churchill and openly stated that it was an "immense mistake" to exclude him.<sup>3</sup> "There is only one man", he

<sup>1</sup> Cabinet Note, 21 April, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Apparently Hankey suspected Churchill of advocating the new Ministry as a means of getting back to power.

<sup>3</sup> C Petrie, Austen Chamberlain, Vol. 2, p.413.

wrote, "who by his studies and his special abilities and aptitudes is marked out for it, and that man is Winston Churchill. I don't suppose that Baldwin will offer it to him and I don't think that Neville would wish to have him back, but they are both wrong. He is the right man for the post, and in such dangerous times that consideration ought to be decisive."<sup>1</sup> The Defence White Paper Debate in March also witnessed the recommendation of "the Right Honourable Member for Epping" by Winterton and Keyes. Even though this chorus came from his friends, there is no doubt that Churchill was expecting the appointment, as his subsequent disappointment revealed: "to me this definite and as it seemed final exclusion from all share in our preparations for defence was a heavy blow".<sup>2</sup>

According to his biographers Baldwin went through "agonising difficulties" in selecting the new Minister and considered several individuals for the post, including Hoare, Neville Chamberlain, Churchill and Inskip. "The Chief Whip pressed for Inskip as the safest man, and Chamberlain (Neville) advised Baldwin to accept him. The events of the weekend (the violation of the Rhineland) afforded a good reason for discarding both Churchill and Hoare since they had European reputations which might be held to be provocative, and Inskip, while exciting no enthusiasm, would involve the Government in no fresh complexities."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Hilda, 15 February, 1936. Austen Chamberlain Papers.

<sup>2</sup> The Gathering Storm, p.176.

<sup>3</sup> Middlemas and Barnes, p.916. Apparently Hoesch, the German Ambassador in London, was later to write that if Churchill had been Minister of Defence and Austen Chamberlain at the Foreign Office, there would have been war. Ibid, p.917.

It has become very fashionable to condemn the choice. Churchill's unkind description of the appointment as the most remarkable since Caligula had made his horse Consul is often referred to by writers on the period.<sup>1</sup> Inskip, of course, had no knowledge of service administration at the highest level, and although already over sixty, he had not served in the Cabinet before. With such a background it was likely that there would be difficulties in him establishing any effective control over the policies and the plans of the three Services. Nevertheless, what should be remembered in Inskip's favour is that Lord Chatfield, who subsequently succeeded him as Minister, heartily approved of his appointment, and that the crucial decision to give increased priority to the fighter element of the Royal Air Force, which helped to win the Battle of Britain, was due to Inskip.<sup>2</sup> The fact remains, however, that Inskip, for the most part, made himself useful in minor ways, lacking the authority to co-ordinate effectively the three Services. He was increasingly absorbed - as the critics predicted - in what should have been the task of quite a different office, namely that of a Minister of Supply.

In 1938 the critics of the Government's rearmament programme possibly had a further, if somewhat limited, success when the Secretary of State for Air was forced to resign. Between the beginning of 1936 and the outbreak of war the main progress made in rearmament was in the enlargement and re-equipment of the Royal Air Force. This,

<sup>1</sup> Amery recorded that at the time Churchill "only asked me whether there was any prospect of his being offered the vacant Solicitor-Generalship!". The Unforgiving Years, p.196.

<sup>2</sup> Chatfield was then First Sea Lord.

however, was not enough to save the Government from severe criticism at the hands of some of its supporters, let alone the Opposition Parties. According to Winterton, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, who had been appointed in March 1938 to be Lord Swinton's deputy in the Commons, the critics were impatient at "the inevitable delays in producing new types of aircraft off the drawing board, and in having to build and equip new factories". Most of this impatience, he wrote, was "unjustified". The great progress made in offensive and defensive methods and weapons for the air "could not be disclosed in detail to Parliament for security reasons; the invention of radar was a case in point". In any case, neither he nor Swinton had "a free hand to spend as much money as they would have wished in re-equipping, enlarging and modernising the Royal Air Force".<sup>1</sup> Naturally these facts could not be used in the Air Ministry's defence should a debate arise, so that the position always appeared worse than it really was.

The anxiety about air defences continued to grow. In April, 1938, Dalton recorded a conversation he had had with a young Conservative Member, Ronald Cartland. The latter apparently was greatly concerned at the failure of the Air Ministry and of Inskip to speed up the production of military aeroplanes. "The shadow factory business was, up to date, a flop . . . We were steadily falling behind the Germans in air strength. Swinton as Air Minister was deeply responsible for the state of things. He did not know why he kept in favour with Chamberlain, as previously with Baldwin."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Orders of the Day, p.233.

<sup>2</sup> Diary entry, 7 April, 1938, Dalton Papers.



This growing disquiet reached its climax on 11 May when there occurred a debate, most damaging to the Government. With the Secretary of State for Air in the Lords he was not able to defend himself or his department in the House of Commons, but was forced to rely on Winterton, formerly one of Churchill's associates, to state the Air Ministry's case. Reactions to his speech were uniform. "The spokesman," recorded Churchill, "who was chosen from the Government Front Bench was utterly unable to stem the rising tide of alarm and dissatisfaction."<sup>1</sup> Dalton was more forthright: "His speech was a fiasco."<sup>2</sup> Even Winterton admitted that he "underestimated the extent of the feeling against the Ministry in the Commons" so that his presentation of the case had "a very bad reception". Nevertheless, the critics, he maintained in his memoirs "were wrong in their facts. I was right."<sup>3</sup>

All this caused a great Parliamentary stir. On the following day three separate motions were placed on the Order Paper, demanding an inquiry into Britain's air defences; two were on the behalf of the Opposition Parties, while the third was initiated by Churchill and backed by over 20 Government supporters. It read simply that "this House would welcome the appointment of an independent committee of inquiry into the state of our air defences". Excluding Churchill the signatories were: Nicolson, Spears, Oliver Simmonds, Walter Perkins, William Craven-Ellis, Samuel Storey, Cartland, Boothby, Alan Graham,

<sup>1</sup> The Gathering Storm, p.203.

<sup>2</sup> The Fateful Years, p.165.

<sup>3</sup> Orders of the Day, p.235.

Macmillan, John McKie, Adams, Emrys-Evans, J Sandeman Allen, Sandys, Mavis Tate, Keyes, Leonard Plugge, Dudley Joel, Ian Hannah, Sir Sidney Herbert, Charles Emmott, Alan Dower and Frederick MacQuisten. Naturally a critical motion, however mildly phrased, called for a reply and sure enough loyal Government supporters signed an amendment assuring the Government of the House's "whole-hearted support in their efforts and determination to bring our air defences to the highest pitch of efficiency, but deprecates the suggestion of an inquiry into those defences as calculated to interfere with and hamper the speed and success which the House desires to secure from both the Air Ministry and the industry itself."

The damage, however, had already been done and it became obvious to the Prime Minister that the Air Minister should be in the House of Commons. Chamberlain thereupon dismissed Swinton and installed in the Air Ministry Sir Kingsley Wood. This 'official explanation' has of late been challenged. J P Mackintosh writes:

"There is an element of mystery about this episode.

The official explanation was that there had been trouble in the House of Commons and Swinton was asked to resign so that a Secretary of State could be found who was able to defend the Air Ministry in that House. Yet the Government's very large majority was absolutely secure and nothing could be more out of character than the suggestion that Neville Chamberlain would abandon a man he wanted to keep, and who was doing good work, just because of a single row in the Commons. There is evidence that Swinton had crossed some powerful industrialists by being tough in his handling of

aircraft contracts and that those men, who had close connections with the Conservative Party, approached the Prime Minister directly and asked for the removal of Swinton."<sup>1</sup>

This view, in fact, partly refutes itself. If nothing could be more out of character than Chamberlain dismissing Swinton after a row in the Commons, then the same argument could be applied to a behind-the-scenes approach of industrialists. That is not to say that the latter might not have influenced Chamberlain's mind, but it would not explain the removal of Muirhead, the Under Secretary for Air, to the India Office, and the subsequent announcement that Winterton, though he remained Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, would never speak for the Air Ministry again. Clearly such a clean sweep reflected deep dissatisfaction with Air Ministry personnel, particularly when one considers that the new Under Secretary, Harold Balfour, was noted for his interest in the Royal Air Force, in which he had served for 8 years. No, the most likely reason is the 'official' one, however tempered this may have been by the approach of certain industrialists. Chamberlain may also have been influenced, if not annoyed, by reports of Swinton's indiscretion at a dinner party in February.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the reason for it, the Ministerial earthquake gave some Tories, who had signed Churchill's motion, an excuse to withdraw, on the grounds that there was now a fresh man at the top of the department. Churchill apparently only "assented grumpily" to

<sup>1</sup> The British Cabinet, p.438.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 441.

the motion's withdrawal.<sup>1</sup> Both Opposition Parties, however, stuck to theirs necessitating a further debate on air defence, which took place on 25 May. At the close of the day's proceedings, a handful of Tories, including Churchill, chose to abstain rather than vote with the Government.

A Conservative participant in the events of the 1930's has recorded that it was "the England of the extreme Right" where the most acute awareness of the weakness of Britain's defences existed.<sup>2</sup> An analysis of those Tories who met regularly, pooling their information on defence matters, and those involved in the July Deputation revealed several who could be described as belonging to the extreme Right. Taking the Government of India Act as a yardstick, Churchill, Keyes, Wolmer, Croft and Bracken, by their opposition, warrant inclusion amongst the diehards. Amery too can be described as belonging to the extreme Right, as the stand he took over Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia and his opposition to sanctions revealed. Similarly Moore-Brabazon, representing the strongly armed Britain tradition within the Tory ranks, was drawn from the Right of the party. Writing of the 1920's Brabazon recalled that he had been "very keen on the growth of air power in relation to the older Services, and yet there we were, in a critical situation

<sup>1</sup> Letter dated 17 May, 1938, Diaries and Letters 1930-39, p.341.

<sup>2</sup> Quintin Hogg, the victor of the famous Oxford by-election. Elsewhere he described 'a great armed strength' as a Conservative principle: "In so far as the Conservative Party was to blame (for Britain's slow rearmament) it was not their principles which were wrong; it was that they did not adhere sufficiently strongly to their principles." The Left Were Not Right, pp.55, 86.



I thought in the world, with very little air power and the Secretary of State for Air not even in the Cabinet".<sup>1</sup> In effect, Brabazon had been pressing the Government to increase the size of the Royal Air Force in the quiet years of Baldwin's Second Ministry!

The presence of such extremists, even if we exclude Amery and Brabazon, throws doubt on Neville Thompson's claim that "with the passage of the Government of India Act the bond between Churchill and the die-hards was finally severed and they went their separate ways".<sup>2</sup> The rearmament issue, like that of India's future, was near to the heart of many a right-wing Tory MP, and its growing significance politically made possible continued links between Churchill and the die-hards, although it is apparent that they were not so closely associated as before. Churchill was now, of course, attempting to undo the extremist image he had constructed over India, but the bond with the Right was never "finally severed", as the Munich vote later revealed. Equally in need of modification is Thompson's further claim that the die-hards went on to "support" the Administration's foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> Most of them did, but some dissented, a group not allowed for in such a blanket generalisation.

Not all of the Members of Parliament anxious to spur the Government out of what they considered its tentative steps in rearming can be categorized as Tory extremists. Churchill, in fact, later recorded that on "the German danger I found myself working in Parliament with a group of friends. It was composed differently from the India

<sup>1</sup> Brabazon, The Brabazon Story, p.161.

<sup>2</sup> The Anti-Appeasers, p.24.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.24.

Defence League. Sir Austen Chamberlain, Sir Robert Horne, Sir Edward Grigg, Lord Winterton, Mr Bracken, Sir Henry Croft and several others formed our circle."<sup>1</sup> Amongst the dissidents, therefore, there were those who were moderate, middle of the road Conservatives, and others who were 'liberal' or progressive in outlook. Moderates included Horne, O'Neill and Gilmour while Boothby and Sandys could be termed progressive Conservatives.<sup>2</sup> Austen Chamberlain, throughout his long and distinguished career, never referred to himself as a Conservative but rather as a 'Unionist' after the example of his Liberal Unionist father. Both Grigg and Guest had also been influenced by some form of Liberalism and, in contrast to Churchill, did not move to the Right of the Unionist Party during their later careers.

Belonging to the extreme Right, therefore, was not an essential prerequisite for the rearmament critics associated with Churchill. Yet did they differ in any respect from their fellow members? Their average age was 53 years 2 months, almost four years above the party average, while in education a higher percentage had attended public school and university. In occupation they were almost equally drawn from the professions, the armed forces and official services, and the great landowning families. It is noticeable that the business community was hardly represented at all within their ranks, even

<sup>1</sup> The Gathering Storm, p.70.

<sup>2</sup> Both Boothby and Sandys belonged to the Conservative Special Areas Committee formed in 1936 "to press for vigorous action in gloomy areas". The difficulties of classifying British politicians as right or left is amply illustrated by reference to the same committee: its leader was Wolmer and Churchill was the first MP to enlist. B Cartland, Ronald Cartland, p.82.

though this made up the largest section of the parliamentary party. Apart from this characteristic, it is in the constituencies where the most interesting pattern emerges: O'Neill was unopposed, while a further 9 had majorities exceeding 10,000. Of the remaining six, two had majorities of 9,000, two majorities of 7,000, one of 6,000, and the last, Boothby, 3,000 in East Aberdeen, a seat which did not change hands in 1945. Another feature of note is the large proportion of members who had seen long service in the House: 12 were first returned before or at the General Election of 1922; 8 had been members at the time of the outbreak of the Great War.<sup>1</sup> It cannot have been entirely accidental that the majority of the dissidents represented safe seats and were not young in terms of Parliamentary service. Doubtless the large majorities and their long-standing as MPs meant that they had relatively little to fear from the wrath of party whips and Central Office as a result of their intransigence.

It is further apparent that as a group they had a wealth of experience in the field of defence which enabled them to speak with no little authority in the Commons. Churchill, Amery and Chamberlain were ex-First Lords of the Admiralty, to which Horne had once been attached as a junior minister. Guest had been Secretary of State for Air, a post Churchill had once held, combined with the War Office. Of the others, although no longer on active service, Keyes, was an Admiral of the Fleet; Moore-Brabazon, the pioneer aviator, had held high office in the Royal Flying Corp; Croft was a Brigadier-General in the Territorial Army; Grigg was a Colonel in the Grenadier Guards

<sup>1</sup> Amery, Chamberlain, Churchill, Croft, Gilmour, Guest, Winterton and Wolmer.

and Gilmour a Colonel in the Fife Yeomanry. Winterton, Wolmer and O'Neill had also served in the Army, experiencing action in the Great War. The expert technical knowledge gained as a result of these various fields of activity equipped them, in the words of Neville Chamberlain's biographer, to be 'masters' of their 'chosen ground' of defence.<sup>1</sup>

Three of the dissidents, Churchill, Horne and Gilmour, were to be described by Stanley Baldwin as "flotsam and jetsam of political life thrown up on the beach".<sup>2</sup> In fact several of the group are reminiscent of a former age: the Lloyd George Coalition Government, overturned in 1922. Not only had Churchill, Horne and Gilmour served under Lloyd George but also Austen Chamberlain, Guest and Amery, while Grigg had been the Prime Minister's personal secretary. Naturally such names imparted a 'has been' air both to the deputation and the group, and it is not surprising, with such a background, that contemporaries suspected their motives, implying what was afoot was a drive to recover power rather than a real concern for the state of Britain's defences.

The other critics, not associated with the group or the July Deputation were similarly drawn from all sections of the party, not exclusively from the extreme Right.<sup>3</sup> They differed in various aspects, both from the party and their fellow rearmament dissidents: their average age was 41 years 1 month, considerably lower than the Unionist Party's; they were drawn, by and large, from the professions and the

<sup>1</sup> The Life of Neville Chamberlain, p.285. It is interesting to note that a considerable number of those involved in the group or deputation were later to hold ministerial office: Churchill's case speaks for itself; Winterton, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster; Gilmour, Minister of Shipping; O'Neill, Under Secretary of State for India and Burma; Croft, Under Secretary of State for War; Bracken, Minister of Information; Brabazon, Minister of Transport; Amery, Secretary of State for India; Wolmer, Minister of Economic Warfare; Grigg, Financial Secretary to the War Office; Boothby, Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Food; Sandys, Financial Secretary to the War Office.



armed forces and official services;<sup>1</sup> no definite pattern emerged from the constituencies.<sup>2</sup> Again, several of them had expert technical knowledge or experience of aspects of Britain's defences: Rear Admiral Sir Murray-Sueter, Vice-Admiral E A Taylor, Brigadier-General E L Spears, Wing-Commander A H James, Oliver Simmonds, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Air Raid Precautions Committee are examples worthy of note.

It was soon to become apparent that the unity of the Government's critics, including those that grouped together and the wider number of backbenchers that expressed alarm at the slow progress of rearmament, lay essentially in the necessity for improving Britain's defences. There was no unanimity amongst them on the far more vital necessity of how to defend Britain's strategical position. When the issue was joined, in 1938, the result was division. The majority, including Croft, Grigg, Brabazon and Gilmour followed the Government into the orthodox policy of appeasement. Others, such as Churchill, Amery, Wolmer and Keyes remained in 'opposition', urging the Government to construct an alliance of peace-loving nations to thwart Nazi designs.

One further question remains to be answered - the effectiveness or otherwise of the dissidents in their self-appointed role of goading and stimulating the Government towards what they considered adequate

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Jones, diary entry, March 15, 1937, A Dairy with Letters, p.324.

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In addition to the 16 already analysed a further 31 MPs have been referred to: 28 Unionists, 2 Liberal Nationals, 1 National Labour.

<sup>1</sup> Their occupations broke down as follows: 12, Armed Forces and Official Services; 7, Professions; 1, Land; 5, Business (excluding Mavis Tate and Lady Astor).

<sup>2</sup> Three were unopposed; 8 had majorities in excess of 10,000; 1, 9,000; 2, 6,000; the rest, 5,000 and less.

rearmament. Straightway one thing is apparent, and this is that despite their persistent pleas the Government did not commence rearmament until 1934, and not seriously until 1936. Even so the dissidents - with their exaggerated fear of Hitler's preparations - were to be far from satisfied with the extent of the Government's programme of rearmament and the subsequent progress made towards its completion. Vociferous in their criticisms though they were, it is unlikely that they had more than marginal influence on the programme and its timing, at least until the spring of 1938, when their alarm was more generally shared. Similarly as regards a Ministry of Supply, not set up until 1939, they were singularly unsuccessful, although by contrast they played a significant role in the establishment of a Ministry for the Co-ordination of Defence, structurally unsound as it was, and the dismissal of Lord Swinton, unjust as that may now seem. When all is said and done, however, even if we assume a marginal influence for the dissidents, and something fruitful must have come from such a persistent critical scrutiny of Ministers and Departments, that could well have made considerable difference once hostilities commenced.

### The Labour Party

Issues of defence sharply divided the Labour Party in the thirties, as they do today. The movement was, and remains, an alliance of men with widely differing views, not a disciplined army, and this added considerably to its contradictions over rearmament. According to Ralph Miliband and Samuel Davis there were four currents of thought existing over such issues: "The first . . . was the straightforward pacifist view; the second . . . was a waning, but still powerful, belief in Labour's traditional

programme of disarmament by international agreement coupled with an increasingly inconsistent acceptance of the obligation of collective action in defence of Labour's principles, and support for the League of Nations . . . A third view, rapidly gaining in strength . . . was that Labour had no alternative but to support British rearmament. The fourth view was that of the Labour Left, the most 'ideological' of the four, which entailed both an ardent demand for resistance to Fascist aggression, and a no less ardent refusal of support for the Government's programme".<sup>1</sup>

These four currents of thought, which are very convenient for classification purposes, have been adopted here. However, it is well to remember that the party was at a watershed, and its policies and ideology were confused, so much so that it is not strictly accurate to add Labour MPs up and divide by four. Many there were, in fact, that could be fitted into more than one category and others it is difficult to distinguish at all.

What follows is a brief analysis of the basic outlook of each of the party's main groups, for within certain broad units the approach of each was surprisingly individualistic. Labour's policy on rearmament depended on the interplay of the outlook of these groups.

#### (a) The Pacifists

The tradition of pacifism and anti-militarism was deeply rooted in the Labour movement. Francis Williams wrote of it as "an expression of its (Labour's) idealism, of its belief in human brotherhood and international socialism, its suspicion of imperialism

<sup>1</sup> Miliband, Parliamentary Socialism, pp.246-7. See also the introduction to Davis, British Labour and British Foreign Policy 1933-9, Ph.D Thesis, University of London, 1950.

and the economic exploitation of man by man. It represented much that was best and most inspiring in early socialism."<sup>1</sup> Pacifism ran deep in Labour's parliamentary ranks, touching several of the party's leaders as well as the membership generally. The party, in fact, had badly split on this issue in 1914; its new leaders after 1931 had then been divided. Clement Attlee, Albert Alexander and Hugh Dalton had joined the Army immediately, fighting with distinction, while George Lansbury, Herbert Morrison, Tom Johnston, Pethick-Lawrence, Morgan Jones, Noel-Baker and Lees-Smith had been pacifists.

By the middle thirties except for a few, Lansbury chief among them, the idealist pacifism of Labour's early years had been abandoned, and had been replaced by a faith in the League of Nations. Thus it is true that there was still a small minority in the Labour Party who took up the pacifist point of view; they did not believe that war was right, and they were prepared to disband the whole of Britain's defence forces. Their attitude was respected but they were not in any sense representative of the Labour Party as a whole. "As a party", said Attlee in May 1935, "we do not stand for unilateral disarmament. There are members of our party for whom we have the greatest respect, and whose entire sincerity we recognise, who do take that line, but as a party we do not stand for unilateral disarmament".<sup>2</sup> Seen in this light, the view of W R Rock, that "at the beginning of 1938 in the Labour Party, there was a multitude who had not decided in their own minds whether they were

<sup>1</sup> Williams, Ernest Bevin, p.189.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 22 May, 1935, Col.375.



first and foremost champions of the League of Nations and collective security or first and foremost pacifists", is difficult to substantiate.<sup>1</sup>

Of the parliamentary party elected in November, 1935, Lansbury, Salter, Sorensen, Wilson, Barr, McLaren and Davies were associated together in an "ethical-religious" pacifism.<sup>2</sup> Lansbury was a member of the 'cloth cap' brigade, being educated at elementary school, with a career consisting of manual and office work.<sup>3</sup> Although elected MP for Bow and Bromley in 1910 he did not consistently sit for that division until 1922. Seven years later MacDonald appointed him First Commissioner of Works in the Second Labour Ministry. The landslide of 1931, which deprived the parliamentary party of its senior members, resulted in Lansbury's elevation to the vacant leadership. He retained the post for four years until his resignation, following the Brighton Conference of 1935. Throughout his remaining years in the House he was still held in great regard by his fellow MPs:

"George Lansbury personified the Socialism which had won our minds and stirred our hearts. His life of dedicated service had made him the best loved leader of our movement . . . He represented the religious idealism and compassion which made our movement a cause."<sup>4</sup>

Throughout his life he was to remain a staunch member of the Church of England, and it was from the Christian faith that he derived his pacifism.

<sup>1</sup> Appeasement On Trial, p.13.

<sup>2</sup> R W Sorensen, Letter to the author, 2 April, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> MP, Bow and Bromley, 1910-12 and 1922-40.

<sup>4</sup> James Griffiths, MP for Llanelli, 1936-66. Pages From Memory, pp.59-60.

"I'm a Pacifist and Socialist because the principles embodied in the life and teaching of the founder of Christianity appeal to me as those which form the standard of life and conduct which, if followed by even one nation, would ultimately save the world from war and give peace and security at home and abroad."<sup>1</sup>

Alfred Salter was the Member for West Bermondsey.<sup>2</sup> Behind him lay a very distinguished medical career, which began with a Triple First Class Honours at London University. An eminent physician he nevertheless devoted much of his working life to tending the sick in the poorer, industrial areas of London. It was such an area he had represented since 1922. A Quaker, from which he derived his pacifism, he informed his constituents in 1935:

"I stand for Peace, for Disarmament and for refusal to go to war under any circumstances."

Another Friend was Cecil Wilson, MP for Attercliffe, Sheffield from 1922-31 and from 1935-45. Educated at various denominational schools and Manchester University, he had for 37 years been a Director of the Sheffield Smelting Company. The November 1935 edition of the Congregationalist Christian World described him as "an honorary deacon of the Zion Congregational Church, Attercliffe". In fact Wilson had joined the Friends and was an active member of the Westminster meeting. During the 1935 Parliament he held the posts of Chairman of the Executive of the National Anti-Gambling League and Convenor of the Political Pacifist Group.

<sup>1</sup> Why Pacifists Should be Socialists, p.12.

<sup>2</sup> 1922-45, except for a brief interlude 1923-24.

Reginald William Sorensen, MP for West Leyton, 1929-31 and from 1935-64, was educated at elementary school. After working in factory, office and shop he studied for four years in a Unitarian Religious Community and became the Minister of the Free Christian Church, Walthamstow. From there he turned to active politics, anxious to apply his religious views in public life. Another pacifist minister was James Barr, MP for Motherwell, 1924-31 and Coatbridge, Lanark from 1935-45. Educated at Glasgow University he had undergone theological training at Glasgow Free Church College. For over 30 years Barr had been a Presbyterian minister and author of religious books until the time he had entered Parliament. At the General Election he wrote in his manifesto:

"As to the colossal increases to be proposed for Army, Navy and Air Force, I will resist these to the very utmost of my power. Let your increases be for the social services, and not for the armed forces of the land; and remember that but for the mad expenditure on War and Armaments "This country might have been a garden, every dwelling might have been of marble, and every person who treads its soil might have been sufficiently educated"."

Andrew McLaren, aged 52 at the General Election, represented the Buslem Division of Stoke-on-Trent for almost 20 years.<sup>1</sup> Educated at elementary school he later attended a Glasgow school of art. By trade he was an engineer although he occasionally dabbled in journalism. He is best remembered for the remark "Thank God for the Prime Minister" after Chamberlain's return from Munich in 1938.

<sup>1</sup> MP 1922-23, 1924-31, 1935-45.

The last of the religious-motivated pacifists was Rhys John Davies, MP for Westhoughton, Lancashire.<sup>1</sup> Davies had been educated at elementary school and went through a variety of occupations: farm servant, coal miner, and official of the Distributive Workers' Union. Within three years of entering the House in 1921, he held his only ministerial post, that of Under Secretary of State for the Home Department. Outside Parliament Davies led a very full Church life with the Congregationalists, being a Sunday School teacher, choirmaster and local preacher. During the late '20s and early '30s he had been an advocate of the League of Nations until, at the time of the 1935 election, he wrote a letter to his constituency party saying that he would go no further than economic sanctions against Italy.<sup>2</sup> His League conception had come into conflict with his Christian faith's teaching on war:

"It is obvious that these are difficult times in the history of the Churches. What would be the Saviour's answer to the present challenge? If I am not mistaken, He would declare himself a conscientious objector."<sup>3</sup>

These 7 MPs, then, can be associated together in the belief that Christianity taught that it was wrong to hate and kill fellow human beings. In his election address, November 1935, Lansbury set out their faith:

<sup>1</sup> MP, 1921-51.

<sup>2</sup> Barr had included words to that effect in his manifesto: "A consistent supporter of pacifist principles, and an uncompromising opponent of all war, I have always actively supported the League of Nations, with the reservation only, that it should stand ever for the maintenance of peace, and never for the promotion or perpetuation of war."

<sup>3</sup> The Christian and War, p.10.



"I am a Pacifist because I accept as literally true the words "those who take the sword perish by the sword". It is impossible to cast out war by war, or to establish peace by brute force, whether the war is a collective or national war. I cannot support war under any conditions.

. . . . Give up reliance on brute force, accept and act on the teaching "do to others as you would be done by", and you will live. This promise of our Lord's is true. Once we go to the world in His spirit, once we offer to co-operate and to share our gifts and our resources with other nations we shall become the strongest, most powerful people in the world. Our armour will not be poison gas, or machine guns, but the armour of righteousness, peace and love."<sup>1</sup>

Other Labour MPs were pacifists, not on religious but practical grounds. Frederick Messer, Henry McGhee and William Leach believed that the employment of force was worthless because it involved too much destruction. Instead of settling anything war created untold misery and more problems than it could possibly solve. The first of this group, Messer entered the House in 1929 as Member for South Tottenham.<sup>2</sup> Throughout his life he displayed a passionate interest in hospital work, a vocation in which the highest premium is placed upon the preservation of life. Such were the sentiments with which he approached the question of war, and consequently he renounced the use of any form of violence upon his fellow human beings. During the

<sup>1</sup> Lansbury Papers, November 3, 1935.

<sup>2</sup> MP, 1929-31 and 1935-59.

inter-war period Messer was a executive member of the No More War Movement and a member of the editorial board of the pacifist paper Peace. In 1937-38, together with Lansbury, he negotiated with Hore-Belisha, the Secretary of State for War, to get appellate tribunals established to deal with conscientious objectors' appeals.<sup>1</sup>

Leach, educated at Bradford Grammar School, was a retired worsted manufacturer, who represented Central Bradford somewhat intermittently in the period between the wars.<sup>2</sup> Somewhat surprisingly MacDonald, in 1924, appointed him Under Secretary of State for Air, and Leach, in bringing in the air estimates that year, went out of his way to make the Sermon on the Mount a feature of his address. The last of the three, McGhee, was the Member for Penistone, Yorkshire. He had been a practising dentist prior to his elevation to the Commons.<sup>3</sup>

A further three, George Hardie, brother of the famous Keir, his wife Agnes, and Ellen Wilkinson can be termed ideological pacifists. All three believed that war was the product of imperialist rivalries, which enriched the armament makers but debased the position of the working-class still further. Workers, they argued, should resist war, if necessary by industrial action, rather than take up weapons against fellow workers. George Hardie, a foundation member of the Independent Labour Party, represented Springburn, Glasgow from 1922-31 and 1935-37.<sup>4</sup> In February, 1936, during the debate over the Ministry

<sup>1</sup> Letter, Sir Frederick Messer to the author, 17 April, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> MP, 1922-24, 1929-31 and 1935-45; a member of the Union of Democratic Control.

<sup>3</sup> MP, 1935-59.

<sup>4</sup> Hardie began his working life as a miner at the age of 12.

of Defence Creation Bill, Hardie openly disagreed with his leader, whom he claimed, by supporting the Bill, was not speaking for the Party, and went on to declare his total opposition to a move designed to make Britain 'strong for war and not for peace'.<sup>1</sup> On his death in July, 1937, Agnes Hardie was elected in his stead, standing for much the same policies as her late husband.

Wilkinson, MP for Middlesbrough 1924-31 and Jarrow 1935-47, was a University of Manchester graduate. In 1915, at the age of 24, she became National Organiser for the National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers. At this time her political leanings were to the extreme Left for in 1920 she joined the newly-formed Communist Party. Although her independent spirit soon resulted in her breaking with that organisation, she remained 'Left' in outlook, which explains the nickname 'Red Ellen'. The early thirties saw her involvement with the cause of the unemployed and participation in the hunger marches. As part of that agitation she contributed the highly successful work, The Town That Was Murdered to the Left Book Club publications.

In her 1935 election manifesto she was to write:

"War has never settled anything. It creates more misery and problems. In any war the workers always lose . . . the bankers and the armaments shareholders of all countries always profit."

The following summer, the very eve of the Spanish Civil War, witnessed her taking the peace pledge.<sup>2</sup> Events, however, particularly the

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, February 14, 1936, Cols. 1362-63.

<sup>2</sup> Founded in October 1934 by Canon Dick Sheppard. He appealed to men and women to pledge against war by sending him a postcard saying that they bound themselves by the pledge: "I renounce war and never again will I support or sanction another, and I will do all in my power to persuade others to do the same." Sheppard died in October, 1937, and was succeeded as President by Lansbury.

Spanish conflict, with which she was to deeply embroil herself, soon resulted in the abandonment of her pacifist beliefs.

Pacifists, Christian or otherwise, were wholly united in the belief that another war would bring down the curtains on civilisation. Salter informed his constituents that in the event of a war "Bermondsey will be bombed to smithereens".<sup>1</sup> Similarly Lansbury, in a speech to the House, argued that another war would "bring a catastrophic ending to the period in which we are living".<sup>2</sup>

So great was their loathing of war that the pacifists displayed no concern for the problem of confronting aggression. Following the German seizure of Austria in 1938, Salter remarked, "I denounce Hitler's brutal methods as much as anyone but there is no cause on earth that is worth the sacrifice of the blood and lives of millions upon millions of innocent and helpless men, women and children".<sup>3</sup> Similarly Lansbury considered that the Abyssinians had been wrong to resist the Italians.<sup>4</sup> Far better if nations abolished their defence preparations:

"Somewhere, in some land, there will arise, and I pray it may be here, a people who will say to the world: 'Throw down your arms'. We have thrown ours away never to take them up again. We have renounced imperialism, cast away all thoughts of domination and fear, and are now determined to live with all the world as friends and partners in a true commonwealth of peoples working and sharing life and all it has to give one another."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Election Address, November 1935.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, June 23, 1936, Col. 1661.

<sup>3</sup> Fenner Brockway, Bermondsey Story, p.208.

<sup>4</sup> R Postgate, George Lansbury, p.311.

<sup>5</sup> Lansbury, Why Pacifists Should Be Socialists, p.74.



Yet Labour's pacifists had something more positive to offer than refusal to fight or disbandment of the armed forces. In fact they had developed a coherent peace policy. The British Government, they argued, should call all the nations to Geneva and say, "Let us give up this tomfoolery about guns and poison gas. Let us get rid of all the questions about armaments and disarmaments and get down to the bedrock."<sup>1</sup> 'Bedrock' was leading the world away from war by paying some attention to its cause: developing and growing nations with insufficient land, home-grown food supplies and resources, while other countries had more than they needed. Their answer then, was a voluntary economic reorganisation of the world, the only alternative to a war which would destroy Empire, homeland and civilisation.

Early in the new Parliament the pacifists had an opportunity to state their case. Lansbury won the ballot for private members' motions and in February 1936 introduced a resolution calling for a world conference to give all countries access to raw materials. The resolution read:

"That this House affirms its profound belief in the futility of war, views with grave concern the world-wide preparations for war, and is of the opinion that, through the League of Nations, His Majesty's Government should make an immediate effort for the summoning of a new international conference to deal with the economic factors which are now responsible, such as the necessity for access to raw materials and to markets and for the migration of people, with a view to arriving at an

<sup>1</sup> Lansbury, House of Commons Debates, February 5, 1936, Col.212.

international agreement which will remove from the nations the incentive to pile up armaments and establish the peace of the world as a sure foundation."<sup>1</sup>

The motion was supported by David Lloyd George and received in support some 150 votes, the vast majority of which were Labour.

The plan was by no means visionary in itself. Two years later the Belgian Liberal ex-Premier, Van Zeeland, at the request of the British and French Governments, produced a detailed plan based on similar principles which was recognised as practicable. Lansbury, Salter and Labour's other pacifists adopted it and included it in their propaganda.<sup>2</sup>

In 1936 Lansbury and Salter decided to carry their peace campaign to America. Lansbury had a 45 minute interview with President Roosevelt and urged him to call a world conference of the leaders of various nations. Roosevelt showed interest but doubted whether other important powers would. He was willing to participate if only Lansbury could line up enough support elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Upon his return to Europe, Lansbury undertook, under the auspices of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, to sound out rulers of other states as to their views regarding his project. In the late

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 5 February, 1936. Col.213.

<sup>2</sup> Postgate, p.311.

<sup>3</sup> Two years later Roosevelt proposed such a conference. The British Foreign Office received a telegram from Washington on 12 January, 1938, in which Roosevelt, troubled by the deterioration of the international situation, proposed a conference in Washington of representatives of certain governments to consider the underlying causes of tension, with the hope of agreement on essential principles to be observed in the conduct of international relations. Chamberlain rebuffed the offer, see p.418.

summer of 1936 he went to the Continent and obtained interviews with the Prime Ministers of France, Belgium, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Their leaders agreed with his proposals but either, as in the case of France, would not take the initiative or considered that there was no chance for a tiny power successfully to call such a conference.

Although his 1936 trips aroused interest it was Lansbury's visit to Hitler the following spring that caused the greatest stir. From the talks, Lansbury received a favourable impression of the German leader. "Hitler treated the interview very seriously", he was to write, "I think he really wants peace."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the Fuhrer declared that he could not take the initiative in calling such a conference: nobody trusted him and if he attempted to take the lead it would spoil the prospects of any proposed international gathering. Lansbury went away well-pleased, writing the following month to Lord Allen that Hitler would not go to war "unless pushed into it by others".<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere he wrote that history would record Hitler as "one of the great men of our time".<sup>3</sup>

The visits were then extended to Mussolini, President Benes of Czechoslovakia, Prime Minister Smigly-Ridz of Poland, and Schuschnigg, Chancellor of Austria. From all these heads of state and more he received an assurance that if a world conference was called they would attend. His tours now complete, he was able to announce, somewhat naively, that he was "gratified to discover that every

<sup>1</sup> Note by Lansbury, Lansbury Papers, April, 1937. According to Herbert Morrison the reverse was true. Hitler regarded Lansbury as a "simple fool" and went on reading official papers while Lansbury tried to dissuade him from his policies. Morrison, An Autobiography, p.162.

<sup>2</sup> Letter, Lansbury Papers, 11 May, 1937.

<sup>3</sup> My Quest for Peace, p.141.

single ruler of all the countries agreed with my proposal for a conference".<sup>1</sup>

Parallel with Lansbury's efforts abroad, the Labour pacifists, under the lead of Salter, organised a campaign in Britain to arouse public opinion in favour of a world conference. A Parliamentary Pacifist Group was formed to conduct such a campaign with Salter, Lansbury, George Hardie, Sorensen, Barr, Messer, McGhee and Wilson taking an active part. Large pacifist conventions were held in the leading centres of population throughout the country: Manchester, London, Bristol, Birmingham, Southampton, Sheffield, Norwich and Carlisle. "The campaign", wrote Fenner Brockway, "caught on; it probably represented the peak of pacifism in Great Britain."<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the absolute pacifism which Lansbury represented increasingly lost its hold over sections of the Labour Movement. The rise of Hitler and the aggression of Mussolini marked the parting of the ways. Labourites had to decide whether to cast out their pacifism in order to pursue a crusade for collective security, or to renounce their allegiance to collective security to keep their pacifism inviolate. Most chose the former so that the growing League conception made great inroads into pacifist and war resistance circles. The case of Morgan Jones is a prime example.<sup>3</sup> In 1914 Jones had been a teacher, but because of his objection to the war, he was dismissed from his post and imprisoned. Upon release he had gone underground as a colliery worker, refusing reinstatement into the

<sup>1</sup> This Way to Peace, p.23. Lansbury's visits are recorded in detail in My Quest for Peace.

<sup>2</sup> Bermondsey Story, p.200.

<sup>3</sup> MP, Caerphilly, 1921-April, 1939.



teaching profession. In 1921 he entered the House of Commons and soon associated himself with the League of Nations approach to international questions, while at the same time retaining his pacifist ideals. With Mussolini's aggression against Abyssinia Jones abandoned the beliefs that he had suffered for, accepting that collective security rested ultimately on force.

Ernest Bevin's brutal attack on Lansbury at the Brighton Conference, for "hawking his conscience round from body to body", was symptomatic of the rising tide against pacifism within the party.<sup>1</sup> While The Times commented that "at no time since 1918 has pacifism so small a Labour following", a Daily Herald editorial highlighted the change.<sup>2</sup> It spoke of pacifism as "a certain kind of peace campaign" which no longer had very much to give. It went on:

"The old fashioned peace propaganda which denounced the horror and wickedness of war and stopped at that has no real message today. It is no longer necessary to argue that peace is better than war. Men need no further convincing on this point. What they ask urgently is: 'How shall we prevent war, how shall we be sure of peace?'"

Neither incantation nor pious aspiration, the editorial concluded, would prevent war but only the massing of force behind the law.<sup>3</sup>

Although no longer a real force, the pacifist MPs still played an important, albeit negative role. To quote Richard Acland, then

<sup>1</sup> Labour Party Conference Report, p.179.

<sup>2</sup> March 13, 1936.

<sup>3</sup> April 28, 1936.

Liberal MP for Barnstaple: "the pacifists inhibited the Opposition from saying unequivocally: 'If we want to avoid the certainty of a disastrous war, we must now look at the would-be aggressors and say to them beyond all doubt 'If you commit your aggression anywhere we will fight'.'"<sup>1</sup> In effect the Labour leadership were forced to make a special calculation regarding the anti-war wing of the movement, and the knowledge that a more militant stand would split the party, doubtless acted as an important brake on the development of a viable, international policy. The pacifists, too, were in part responsible for helping to compromise the party over the Service Estimates. By the unfortunate formula of 1934, whereby Labour insisted on regarding armaments policy and foreign policy as inseparable, the party remained united and joint action was made possible with the limited number who were opposed to all armaments. However the unity obtained was at the expense of Labour Members being mis-represented as 'mouth fighters' and 'tongue heroes'.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, a pacifist legacy remained: what G D H Cole has described as a "strong, instinctive revulsion against contemplating the idea of war", a feeling that "the wish to avoid war would somehow make avoidance possible without surrender to the dictators if only it was strongly enough felt".<sup>3</sup> The experience of Pethick-Lawrence, Labour's front-bench spokesman on finance, illustrates this well:

"I did not arrive at my own personal conclusion  
(to support the League) without great searchings of  
heart. War was to me a hideous evil both in itself and

<sup>1</sup> Acland, Letter to the author, 11 November, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 28 November, 1934, Col.926.

<sup>3</sup> History of the Labour Party From 1914, p.320.

its repercussions. It not only brought immediate ruin, but it rarely achieved any lasting settlement. It aroused many of the ugliest of human passions. I was under no illusion that a war waged on behalf of the League would materially differ from any other war, either in its conduct or in its results. My whole being revolted against being instrumental in sending other men to their doom, and in depriving women of their husbands, children of their fathers, and mothers of their sons."<sup>1</sup>

This vague sort of pacifism was not open or definite like Lansbury's.<sup>2</sup> Those affected by it knew that the dictators had to be stopped but felt a profound distaste for the means necessary to stop them. On national and humanitarian grounds they felt there must be an alternative to war. Even when it became certain that they were living in a world shaped not by men of goodwill, like themselves, but by men of violence, they clung to the hope of discovering some means to avoid another life-and-death struggle, which at best could only end in a pyrrhic victory. "They had preached the iniquity of war and armaments so long", wrote Josiah Wedgwood of some of his Parliamentary colleagues, that faced with the threat of Fascism "many wilfully shut their eyes and brains".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Fate Has Been Kind, p.185. Pethick-Lawrence: MP, West Leicester, 1923, defeating Churchill; lost seat in 1931 but re-elected at Edinburgh, 1935; Financial Secretary to the Treasury, 1929-31.

<sup>2</sup> James Griffiths, MP for Llanelly, was another Labourite torn by mental conflict over the alternatives: dumb submission to Nazism or meeting force with force. In 1935 he supported Lansbury at Brighton, but the following year, after his election to Parliament, became a staunch supporter of collective security. Yet he could still describe himself in 1939 as "by temperament a pacifist". Pages From Memory, p.61.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Last Of The Radicals, C V Wedgwood, p.212.

The thirteen avowed pacifist Labourites differed in some respects from their fellow Labour Members in the parliamentary party. In education they were not representative but had better averages:

	<u>Pacifists</u>	<u>Party</u>
Elementary	38.5%	56.5%
Grammar	7.7%	11.7%
College	23.0%	14.9%
University	30.8%	18.2%

Occupation also set them apart from their colleagues, revealing a professional/commercial bias to the group:

	<u>Pacifists</u>	<u>Party</u>
Trade Unions	30.8%	59.1%
Professions/Commerce	53.8%	28.6%

The group possessed the relatively high average age of 57 years 7 months, 3 years above that of the party. In fact Barr, Lansbury and Wilson were in their seventies while Salter and Leach were in their sixties.

It is interesting to note that between them the Christian pacifists averaged 62 years 7 months while the non-religious averaged 48 years 9 months, almost 6 years below the party's. Such figures imply that Lansbury and his fellow religious motivated pacifists represented a tradition that was passing away. This was indeed so, for Labour's pacifists of the new generation were to be ideologically or politically motivated, very rarely religious. Symptomatic of the change was the language Lansbury used at the Brighton Conference, when he was still the party leader:

"I cannot believe that the Christ whom you worship, or the saints whose memory you all adore, that for any reason or cause, they would be pouring bombs and poison gas on women and children for any reason whatsoever. Not even in retaliation, because also it is written, 'Vengeance is mine,



I will repay . . . If mine were the only voice in this conference, I would say in the name of the faith I hold, the belief I have that God intended us to live peaceably and quietly with one another, if some people do not allow us to do so, I am ready to stand as the early Christians did, and say: 'This is our faith, this is where we stand, and, if necessary, this is where we die',<sup>1</sup>

the like of which was never to emanate from the platform again.

(b) The Left

The chief stimulus towards socialism within the Labour Party came from its numerically small Left. The Left - though by no means all, for there were a number of Left-leaning MPs who chose not to be associated with a formal grouping - was crystallised in the Socialist League, founded at Leicester in 1932, prior to the party conference there. In effect it took the place of the disaffiliated Independent Labour Party as the driving force towards socialism within the Labour Movement. Its name, a direct reminiscence of William Morris, was a sure indication of the Left political line it was to take. The League stood for a rapid advance towards a socialist Britain, including a decisive change in the whole basis of production and distribution. Its leading members included Sir Stafford Cripps, Aneurin Bevan, Ellen Wilkinson, Denis Pritt and George Strauss.

Cripps, a barrister since 1913, had joined the Labour Party in 1929.<sup>2</sup> The following year, as the parliamentary party was very short

<sup>1</sup> Labour Party Conference Report, p.177.

<sup>2</sup> Served with the Red Cross in France during the Great War; MP East Bristol, 1931-50.

of good lawyers, MacDonald appointed him Solicitor General, although he did not gain a seat in the House until 1931. Narrowly surviving the 'deluge' of that year he rose fast and, with Lansbury and Attlee, soon became, in effect, joint leader of the little party of 50 members. He was much influenced by the events of 1931 and moved violently to the Left, in the sense that he came to believe that Socialism in Britain must be established very quickly, by means which some would regard as undemocratic, and in the face of opposition from King, capitalists, civil servants and armed forces. Elected to the National Executive in 1934 he resigned the following year, before the annual conference, because he disagreed with the party over sanctions against Italy.

Bevan, in contrast, was the son of a coal miner who followed his father's occupation upon leaving school at the age of 13. After studying at a Labour College he soon attained prominence in the councils of the South Wales Miners Federation, and entered Parliament in 1929, as the Member for Ebbw Vale. "Almost from the start", his biographer has recorded, "he stood squarely on the Left of the Party against the leadership."<sup>1</sup> Following the 1931 election he came increasingly in contact with Cripps, with whom he was closely involved in the Socialist League and the Left's newspaper, Tribune.

Strauss, like Cripps, was a man of substantial means.<sup>2</sup> Elected to Parliament in 1929, he served for two years as Parliamentary Private Secretary to Herbert Morrison, then Minister of Transport. Rejected by the electors in 1931, he too was greatly influenced by the events of that year, and his analysis of them began to draw him Leftwards. He soon became involved with the Socialist League and Cripps, whom

<sup>1</sup> Foot, Aneurin Bevan, Vol. 1, p.98.

<sup>2</sup> MP, 1929-31, 1934 onwards.

he helped to finance Tribune.

Pritt, a barrister by occupation, entered the Commons in 1935 as MP for North Hammersmith.<sup>1</sup> He had already established a reputation in Labour circles through his chairmanship of the Reichstag Fire Inquiry Commission, which sat in London in 1933 and established Nazi guilt. For that reason he was excluded from Germany, the following year, on Hitler's orders. As an MP he quickly became prominent in Left-wing circles and was elected both to the party's National Executive and to the Parliamentary Executive. In 1936 he attended the Zinoviev Trial in Moscow and subsequently wrote a pamphlet claiming that the trial was fair. Four years later he again defended the Soviet Union, by publishing two books and many articles "white-washing the Russian aggression against Finland". For showing "himself to be in violent opposition to the declared policy of the Party" over Finland he was subsequently expelled.<sup>2</sup>

As regards defence and foreign policy the Left took up the traditional Marxist line, which with its elaborate ideology was ill-adapted to the rapidly changing international scene. It started with the premise that capitalism caused the imperialist rivalries which in turn caused war. "The connection between imperialism and war is very close. War is not merely a regrettable but accidental feature in imperialist politics. War is an inevitable product of imperialism."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> MP 1935-50; author of Light on Moscow, 1939, and Must The War Spread?, 1940, for which he was expelled from the party.

<sup>2</sup> The Fateful Years, p.293.

<sup>3</sup> Why War? by Ellen Wilkinson and E Conze, p.27.

The only effective way of preventing war, according to the Left, was by abolishing imperialism and with it the whole capitalist system.

Thus the widely accepted belief in Labour circles, that the League of Nations would deter nations from resorting to force, was completely misplaced. The League was itself the creation of capitalism, its objective being to secure the spoils of the victor powers against the revisionist nations. "The League of Nations", Bevan announced, "is increasingly a conspiracy to maintain the frontiers imposed by the peace treaties in an attempt to keep some countries financially dead."<sup>1</sup> By defending the satiated imperialist powers against the hungry ones the League was preserving a state of division, in which lay the seeds of future war.

Confident in their reasoning the Socialist Leaguers declared that any war waged by the Government in support of the League or otherwise, would be a capitalistic war. "The primary objective of this Government", said Cripps, "has always been and is now the maintenance of British Imperial interests, just as Hitler's objective is the maintenance of German Imperial interests, and Mussolini's objective is the maintenance of Italian Imperial interests, and Japan has the same objective as regards Japanese Imperial interests. In that rivalry of Imperial interests in the world, world peace comes in a very bad second as regards the foreign policy of any of those countries in the world today. It is hardly to be wondered at that, when you get a collection of Imperialist exploiters, they will from time to time fall out over the division of the swag."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Aneurin Bevan, p.207.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 23 June, 1936, Cols.1697-8.



In such circumstances it was Labour's duty, the Left argued, to resist any war entered by the National Government with every means in its power.

Seen in this light, rearmament and increased military strength would only be used by the Government for imperialist policies as "the Imperialist nations must prepare for the inescapable results of the policies they are pursuing".<sup>1</sup> It was therefore in the interests of the working classes that Labour should avoid being sucked into a full bi-partisan defence policy with a capitalist Government, whose purposes it could neither share nor control. The party should "oppose the Government's arms plans root and branch", said Bevan, while his colleague Cripps counselled the workers to "fight tooth and nail against the rearmament programme of the National Government."<sup>2</sup>

To the accusation that their analysis did not distinguish between the aggressive Fascist nations abroad and the British Government, Cripps and the Socialist League revealed that they saw Fascism almost wholly as a threat at home. Cripps declared:

"Money cannot make armaments. Armaments can only be made by the skill of the working class, and it is the British working class who would be called upon to use them.

Today you have the most glorious opportunity that workers have ever had if you will only use the necessity of capitalism in order to get power yourselves.

<sup>1</sup> Why War? E Wilkinson and E Conze, p.27.

<sup>2</sup> Bevan, Tribune, 19 February, 1937: Cripps, a speech at Eastleigh, Hampshire, recorded in the Daily Herald, 19 December, 1936.

"The capitalists are in your hands. Refuse to make armaments, refuse to use them. That is the only way you can keep this country out of war and obtain power for the working class.

Refuse to make armaments, and the capitalists are powerless.

One of the saddest things about the Labour Party is its respectability.

Some people say that we in Great Britain are immune from the Continental diseases of Fascism and Nazism. Those of us who sit in the House of Commons and watch what goes on know that there would be no difficulty for those who form the National Government today to form a Fascist Government tomorrow."<sup>1</sup>

Yet it would be unwise to dismiss the stand of the Socialist League as being wholly a "catastrophic counsel of paralysis", for there was more to its case than this.<sup>2</sup> Their hope for the future lay in the prospect that the energies of the workers, in being used to oppose the National Government, would also be concentrated on returning a Labour Government. This government would not rely on the League of Nations but would seek peace by establishing the closest possible relations with the Soviet Union and other countries where socialist governments were in control. In this way it would be possible "for a strong group of states, all determined upon a new method of co-operation in the economic life of the world, co-operating in the use of their resources and in the government of their

<sup>1</sup> Daily Herald, 15 March, 1937.

<sup>2</sup> Miliband, Parliamentary Socialism, p.226.

dependencies to lay a real foundation for a policy of peace".<sup>1</sup>

Such a 'socialist confederation', as Cripps termed it, would attain security by working together to deter and frustrate any member being "set upon one day and left an isolated carcase to be picked by the new imperialist vultures".<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless the Socialist League's approach to rearmament and defence questions was remarkably unrealistic. It altogether failed to discriminate between the British Government and the Fascist powers and to appreciate that salvation lay, not in the denial of arms to the Government, but in trying to compel it, by democratic means, to pursue a foreign policy which would use the arms, if they had to be, for the right purposes. The League's determination to displace the National Government was fine, but its evaluation of defence and foreign affairs was almost completely negative. At a time when the German threat was growing the Left sought to strip its own Government, or a future Labour one, of any power to deal effectively with aggression abroad.

It is interesting to note that of the five MPs prominent on Labour's Left - and it must be stressed again that there were others not attached to the Socialist League - only one, Bevan, could be described as a 'worker', despite all the talk of working-class interests that emanated from these quarters. Cripps, Pritt and Strauss had all attended public school while Wilkinson, Pritt and Cripps undertook courses at university. The odd man out, Bevan, was educated at elementary school and later went to Labour College, but still obtained a better education than the majority of Labour

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 23 June, 1936, Col.1699.

<sup>2</sup> From a Cripps letter quoted in Estorick, Stafford Cripps, p.148.

Members. In occupation the group were equally un-representative of the parliamentary party, containing two barristers, a metal merchant, a trade union organiser and a coal miner. Similarly their average age, 43 years 2 months, was extremely low. Omitting Pritt, whose connection with the party ceased in 1940, the other four were to become ministers in Attlee's Government, with Cripps rising to be Chancellor of the Exchequer and Bevan deputy leader of the party.

(c) Supporters of the League of Nations

The election manifesto of 1935 clearly set out Labour's devotion to the League:

'The Labour Party . . . seeks wholehearted co-operation with the League of Nations and with all the states outside the League which desire peace. It stands firmly for the collective peace system.'

Members of Parliament that supported the League as the most likely instrument through which to establish international peace, were drawn from all sections of the party, including many who in 1914 had held pacifist or war resistance views.

Philip Noel Baker has been described as "the chief figure among the League of Nations idealists".<sup>1</sup> His attachment to the League dated from his membership of the League section of the British delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, and he remained on the League Secretariat until 1922, returning the following year as personal assistant to the British delegate to the Assembly.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> M Phillips Price, Letter to the author, 25 February, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> Pacifist during the Great War but commanded an ambulance unit in Italy, 1915-18; Cassel Professor of International Relations, University of London, 1924-29; MP, 1935-70.



Elected Member for Coventry in 1929, he served as Arthur Henderson's Parliamentary Private Secretary, and after the Labour knockdown, became his principal assistant at the Disarmament Conference. Five years later he captured J H Thomas's seat at Derby, at a time when he combined his appeal for a strong League policy with insistence on disarmament as a means to peace. He persisted in this attitude long after all real hope of agreed disarmament had disappeared.

"The people in the Labour Party", wrote Noel-Baker, "with whom I worked most closely in the House of Commons on these questions were Attlee, Tom Johnston, Arthur Henderson and Herbert Morrison."<sup>1</sup> Interestingly enough for a Labour leader, Attlee had "a fine war record" having served in the Gallipoli Campaign, in Mesopotamia and France, eventually being demobilised with the rank of major.<sup>2</sup> Elected Member for Stepney in 1922 he held office in both Labour administrations, becoming deputy leader in 1931 in the absence of more senior colleagues, and finally leader in 1935.<sup>3</sup> Although in the 'twenties Attlee experienced an anti-war phase and played a prominent part in the No More War Movement, his leadership in the 1935 Parliament was closely identified with strong support for the League of Nations.

Johnston, a pacifist in World War I, was another of Labour's leading League enthusiasts.<sup>4</sup> After graduating from Glasgow University at the turn of the century, Johnston had thrown himself into the task

<sup>1</sup> Noel-Baker, Letter to the author, 31 March, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> The Gathering Storm, p.153.

<sup>3</sup> MP, 1922-55; Under Secretary of State for War, 1924; Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, 1930-31.

<sup>4</sup> MP, 1922-31, 1935-45.

of launching a socialist magazine Forward, which he was to edit for 27 years. In 1922 he entered the Commons as Member for West Stirlingshire, winning preferment seven years later when he was appointed Under Secretary of State for Scotland. Out of the Commons until 1935 his return was marked by his elevation to the Labour Front bench, a position he retained until his departure from active politics in 1945.

Arthur Henderson was not the former Labour Foreign Secretary of that name, but his son.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the father who had risen through the trade union Movement, Henderson had a public school and university background. An MP briefly in the 1920s he re-entered the House in 1935, sitting for the Kingswinford Division of Staffordshire. There he soon established a reputation for specialising in foreign affairs, frequently intervening in debates.

Another of Labour's leading supporters of the League was Morrison, Attlee's rival for the leadership in 1935.<sup>2</sup> Beginning his working life as an errand boy Morrison had made his way up through the Labour Party machine. He entered Parliament in 1923 and six years later was made Minister of Transport in the Second Labour Government, a post in which he gave full play to his administrative talent. Defeated in 1931 he devoted his considerable energies to organising London's Labour Party which he spearheaded to victory in the local elections of 1934, when he became head of the London County Council. Re-elected to Parliament in 1935, and then occupying a central role in Labour politics, he betrayed few traces of his opposition to the Great

<sup>1</sup> MP, South Cardiff, 1923-24; Kingswinford, 1935-50.

<sup>2</sup> MP, Hackney South, 1923-24; 1929-31; 1935-45.

War, being closely associated with a League approach to international questions.<sup>1</sup>

Although Noel-Baker, Attlee, Johnston, Henderson and Morrison were the most prominent League of Nations idealists they "had quite a following within the parliamentary party".<sup>2</sup> Some of these can be distinguished by their membership of organisations connected with the League or the policy of collective security. Four Labour Members, Alexander Walkden,<sup>3</sup> Fred Marshall,<sup>4</sup> Richard Stokes<sup>5</sup> and John Leslie<sup>6</sup> had held, or were at that time holding, executive positions on the League of Nations Union. In fact Leslie, the Member for Sedgefield, Durham, had been a foundation member of the Union. David Chater, Seymour Cocks<sup>7</sup>, Josiah Wedgwood, George Hall<sup>8</sup> and Morgan Jones belonged to the New Commonwealth Society, an organisation which, with Churchill as its President, advocated the

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that of the four that Noel-Baker worked closely with, Johnston and Morrison had been pacifists during the Great War, as had Noel-Baker, while Attlee had experienced an anti-war phase. For more detailed information on Morrison's commitment to the League see pp.300-302.

<sup>2</sup> Price, Letter to the author, 25 February, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> General Secretary of the Railway Clerks' Association; member of the General Council of the TUC, 1921-36; MP, South Bristol, 1929-31, 1935-45.

<sup>4</sup> MP, Sheffield, Brightside, 1930-31, 1935-50.

<sup>5</sup> Chairman and managing director of Rapier Ltd; MP, Ipswich, 1938-57; when Japan attacked China, his firm refused to have business relations with Japan, and refused to carry out Government orders for Italy at the time of the Abyssinian War. In 1937 he offered to make shells for the Government on a no profit basis.

<sup>6</sup> General Secretary National Union of Shop Assistants, 1925-35; MP, Sedgefield, Durham, 1935-50.

<sup>7</sup> Member of the party's Advisory Committee on International Relations during the '30s; MP, Broxtowe, Derbyshire, 1929-53.

<sup>8</sup> Hall: MP, Aberdare, 1922-46; Civil Lord of the Admiralty, 1929-31.

strengthening of the machinery of the League of Nations by the creation of an International Police Force. A further three, Arthur Hayday,<sup>1</sup> George Lathan and William Sanders had personal contacts with Geneva and the League of Nations. Each had been attached to the Staff of the International Labour Office, an offshoot of the League, with Sanders<sup>2</sup> for nine years deputy-chief of the administrative section there.<sup>3</sup>

Although "the supporters of the League of Nations Covenant were much the largest group in the House of Commons", the aforementioned members appear to have been the most active of their number.<sup>4</sup> The bulk of Labour MPs seem to have followed their lead.

An analysis of the main League enthusiasts revealed an average age of 54 years 8 months, remarkably close to that of the party's. In education and occupation, however, they were quite unrepresentative:

	<u>League Enthusiasts</u>	<u>Party</u>
<u>Education</u>		
Elementary	41.2%	57.1%
Public School	29.4%	9.1%
University	41.2%	18.2%
<u>Occupation</u>		
Trade Unionists	35.3%	59.1%
Professions, Services and Business	52.9%	28.6%

<sup>1</sup> Hayday: MP, West Nottingham, 1918-31, 1935-45.

<sup>2</sup> Sanders: Secretary of the Fabian Society, 1914-20; MP, North Battersea, 1929-31, 1935-40; Financial Secretary to the War Office, 1930-31.

<sup>3</sup> "The International Labour Office is the first effort to try and secure international arrangements with regard to wages and conditions of labour and hours, and it is an essential part of the League." David Lloyd George, House of Commons Debates, 27 July, 1936. Col.1204.

<sup>4</sup> Noel-Baker, Letter to the author, 31 March, 1969.



The figures indicate that there was a preponderance of well-educated and affluent members, in short, representatives of the middle class, quite out of proportion to the parliamentary party. This perhaps explains why a majority of their number had held or were to hold, in the wartime or post-war Governments, ministerial posts.

Despite their devotion to the League the attitude of many of Labour's League enthusiasts had been riddled in ambiguity:

"If an act of aggression occurred, it was assumed that, provided that the British Government stood by its obligations to the League, moral sanctions, the solemn naming of the aggressor, or at most economic sanctions would be sufficient to halt it. Support for the League, therefore and the campaign for disarmament, collective security and resistance to war went hand in hand."<sup>1</sup>

In fact, at the Hastings Conference of 1933 a resolution, which pledged opposition to any war and called upon the movement to resist a threat of war by organised working class action, including a general strike, had been carried enthusiastically, while at the same conference the delegates had received an orthodox collective security speech from Arthur Henderson with equal enthusiasm.

Clouds, however, were already beginning to gather over the international horizon for in Italy Mussolini was making preparations for his nefarious raid on Abyssinia. Labour was thereby confronted with the paradoxical situation that the pursuit of peace might involve the country in a war which would bear many of the features of the

<sup>1</sup> Bullock, Ernest Bevin, Volume 1, p.549.

old imperialist conflicts, that the party so deplored. A division of opinion occurred. "Up to then," Pethick-Lawrence recalled, "it had seemed possible to ride at once the two horses of pure pacifism and loyalty to the League. But now it had become apparent that the time might come when they would take us in opposite directions. Loyalty to the League meant support of collective security and a willingness, if need arose, to co-operate in the application of sanctions. If there was actual aggression, that might involve us in war. It was therefore necessary for the members of the Labour Party, individually and collectively, to choose which horse, in that event, they would continue to ride."<sup>1</sup>

At the Brighton Conference of 1935 a majority of the party accepted that support for the League meant sanctions and that sanctions might mean war. Dalton moved a resolution which condemned Mussolini's defiant attitude towards the League and proclaimed Labour's readiness, in co-operation with other nations, to use all measures provided under the Covenant to restrain Italy and uphold the League's authority. Despite the intervention of the Left and the pacifists, an overwhelming majority of the party voted in favour of Dalton's resolution. Noel-Baker wrote that the objections of Lansbury and Cripps were "rejected by a 95.4% majority vote in favour of sanctions".<sup>2</sup>

The Conference was applauded, particularly outside the party, as the beginning of a more realistic Labour approach to the international situation: "A very strong desire", wrote Churchill, "to fight the

<sup>1</sup> Pethick-Lawrence, Fate Has Been Kind, p.185.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to the author, 31 March, 1969.

Italian Dictator, to enforce sanctions of a decisive character, and to use the British Fleet if need be, surged through the sturdy wage-earners."<sup>1</sup> It is true, as Churchill suggests, that Labour now stood unequivocally for collective security, but it is significant that many of Labour's League enthusiasts were convinced that economic sanctions would be sufficient to force Italy into line - as they might have been had they been effectively applied. Although they were prepared to contemplate the use of British forces "if need be" - a new departure - they had not faced up to its implications. Their policy of collective security was not related to the problem of defence. In effect they combined their appeal for a strong League policy with a belief that an attitude of full loyalty to the League would generate forces powerful enough to restrain the aggressor, and consequently refused to acknowledge the need for increased armaments. Collective security, they argued, would stop the aggressor, therefore rearmament was unnecessary. "I stand firmly by the League of Nations", stated Chater in his election manifesto, but "I am opposed to Britain joining a new armaments race".<sup>2</sup>

In theory of course, it was possible to show the plain superiority of League forces against any likely combination of aggressors. Albert Alexander, for instance, in opposing the Naval Estimates simply reckoned up the forces of good and evil and decided that those of the former were sufficiently superior. "If you", he addressed the Government front bench, "are really working to a policy of pooled security and a collective peace system through the League, there is no case for the wide expansion of naval expenditure which is proposed at the

<sup>1</sup> The Gathering Storm, p.153.

<sup>2</sup> Chater: MP, South Hammersmith, 1929-31; Bethnal Green, 1935-50; Chairman, Political Committee of the London Co-operative Society.

present time."<sup>1</sup> But the collective peace system that Alexander spoke of was not in existence, and even if it had been there would have been serious obstacles to its working with a British Government wholeheartedly behind it or not. That is not to imply that it was impractical to labour for collective security. What is meant is that it was really impossible to calculate the British contribution to the task of resisting aggression on the basis of an assumption that all other contributors would supply theirs, or that sufficient force would be available in the region where the conflict arose. In short, many Labourites seemed not to realise how much of the burden of resisting an aggressor would fall upon Britain, with her world-wide commitments.

Inevitably, in regarding collective security as an alternative to rearmament, Labour's League supporters laid themselves open to attack by their political opponents, including one in a lighter vein by Sir John Simon:

"You cannot treat collective security as though it were an arrangement by which you are going to receive a contribution without making one. When I hear that argument I am always reminded of the passage in Lewis Carroll's famous book The Hunting of the Snark in which he describes a man who

'At charity meetings stands at the door

And collects - though he does not subscribe'."<sup>2</sup>

Simon's wit fell on the altogether unappreciative ears of the League enthusiasts, who failed to see the force of his argument, that a measure of rearmament, carried through as a purely British act, would make

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 16 March, 1936. Col.82.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 18 February, 1937. Col.1407.



a vital contribution to a strongly-armed system of collective security, which alone stood any chance of holding the dictators in check.

This continuing inability to recognise that the coupling of collective security with opposition to rearmament resulted in the divorce between their foreign and defence policies moved one of Labour's parliamentary candidates to describe the League enthusiasts' policy as being "hatched in the conceptual heaven of Geneva politics". "We have behaved", he continued, "as if Fascism could be stopped by resolutions, protocols, pacts and covenants; and whenever anyone enquired what force would be required for the job, we airily totted up the populations of the 'good' countries and their mineral wealth. And we have always avoided consideration of the naval and military technicalities by repeating that what we wanted was not an alliance to fight a war, but a Peace Front to prevent it."<sup>1</sup>

#### Opposition to Rearmament

Having set out the basic outlook of three of the party's main groups, it remains to be said that Labour's policy on rearmament depended on the interplay of the views of these groups. Thus when rearmament tentatively began in 1934, with the 41 squadron increase in the Royal Air Force, the pacifists, the Left and the League supporters united to denounce even such a modest measure, just as they were equally firm in their opposition to later increases. Their opposition, according to official statements, would cease when the National Government based Britain's international policy on League of Nations tenets, and took steps to organise a system of collective

<sup>1</sup> R H S Crossman, Labour and Compulsory Military Service, Political Quarterly, 1939.

security. As the Government did no such thing Labour announced that it would continue to oppose the defence programme until Ministers did.

For the next three years Labour outwardly continued to maintain that while they had "steadily opposed the rearmament policy of the Government" their opposition was "not on the ground that the level of armaments . . . is inadequate, or even that the present level is excessive, but because it is impossible to tell what the scale of armaments should be in the absence of any sound foreign policy".<sup>1</sup> This was all very well but it ignored, if not deliberately glossed over, the fact that there were several currents of opinion on rearmament within the party, each with its own peculiar reason for opposing, and in some cases raising definite resistance to, the defence estimates. Seen in this light, Labour's formula of opposing rearmament so long as the Government opposed collective security owed its adoption not only to a wish to register disapproval of existing foreign policy but also to the fact that it offered a convenient screen to the divisions within the party, uniting those pacifists outrightly opposed to the existence of arms, those on the Left that believed the Government would misuse its strength, and those League enthusiasts, some of whom still clung to their hopes of disarmament, who doubted whether more arms were necessary to the British contribution to pooled security.

Bearing this in mind, it is not surprising that when Churchill made his request that the Labour Party accompany him in the July deputation to the Prime Minister, it was declined. As far as the

<sup>1</sup> Attlee, The Labour Party in Perspective, p.108.

majority of Labour Members were concerned an even wider gulf separated them from Churchill, a 'die-hard Tory', as the Daily Herald loved to refer to him, than from Baldwin.<sup>1</sup> That he advocated an even larger armaments programme confirmed many in their views of him. "Naturally", remarked James Milner, Labour Member for South East Leeds, "we on this side expected the bellicose and extravagant speech which was in fact delivered by the right honourable Member for Epping. He made it clear . . . that he and his friends stand for increased rearmament, increased armaments, and increased armaments again, without consideration for cost, or effort, or time, or anything else."<sup>2</sup>

In fact Labour's inability to face up to the realities of the situation caused no little concern to those members involved in the deputation, both backbenchers and ministers alike. Sir Austen Chamberlain confessed that he had originally hoped that "we could arrange some kind of meeting with you (Ministers) to which the leaders of the other Parties would come. I wanted it to be educative". The Prime Minister replied to the effect that he too desired a meeting with the leaders of the other Parties, but particularly with Labour. "I think it would be an extraordinary valuable thing. I still hope it may be possible. At the moment they are showing no inclination."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There were some exceptions of which Jack Lawson, a mining MP, was one. "In a Parliamentary sketch now in my possession and written in April, 1936, I wrote "War is coming as sure as night follows day". It was entitled "Watch Winston", and these words were written of him who was then a voice crying in the wilderness. "Now that he is further off the chief place in the government than he has ever been before, he is nearer to it than he has ever been". The editor of the paper rang me up in 1942 and asked if I remembered the article. I said I did. "You were a prophet" he said. "Yes, a miner prophet" was my reply. The article was in the Sunday Sun, 26 April, 1936. A Man's Life, p.183.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 10 March, 1936. Col.1013.

<sup>3</sup> Cabinet Papers, Memorandum on the July Deputation.

Baldwin gauged Labour feeling correctly. Neither the party leaders nor the Parliamentary Party at large were in a co-operative mood. That same month the Supplementary Estimates came up before the Commons and the Party announced its intention to vote against them. Unlike March, when the main estimate had not been challenged but token reductions moved, Labour decided to vote against every penny of them. The movement's belligerence to the Government had been notably increased with the raising of sanctions the previous month, and with it the realisation that the League and Labour's foreign policy had been dealt a crushing blow. Voting against the Supplementary Estimates was therefore an expression of the anger and bitter frustration that the movement found itself in.

A manifesto was issued in which great pains were taken to stress the symbolic character of the act:

"In order to mark its entire opposition to the international policy of the Government, of which the rearmament programme is an integral part, the Labour Party will on 27-8 July vote against the Estimates for the Fighting Services."

Voting against an estimate, so the manifesto went, was not a vote for the abolition of the Service concerned but opposition to the policy of which the estimate was an expression. Labour, far from advocating unilateral disarmament, had definitely declared its willingness to provide such defence forces as were required for the country to do its part in a system of collective security through the League.<sup>1</sup>

Hugh Dalton challenged the decision to vote against the Estimates and tried to persuade the parliamentary executive and then the party

<sup>1</sup> Daily Herald, 25 July, 1936.



to desist from the practice of voting against the estimates. On the executive he had only three supporters: Alexander, Lees-Smith and Clynes, the latter, however, being absent from the discussion. At the party meeting Dalton was defeated by 57 to 39.<sup>1</sup> Sixty Labour MPs were either absent from the meeting or present and abstaining. When the Service votes came on, Dalton and other Labour Members claimed the conscience clause and abstained from voting.

When the Liberal Geoffrey Mander summed up the 1935-36 session of Parliament, "dominated by the increasing gravity of the international situation", he noted that Labour had found itself in a very difficult position in connection with the defence programme. Distrusting the purpose for which the arms would be used by the Government, the party had voted against the Service Estimates. "This", Mander wrote, "has secured unity and made possible joint action with the very limited number who are opposed to all armaments, but it has seriously compromised them politically". It laid Labour open to the embarrassing taunt that they would not provide the means for the collective system to work. Mander went on to refer to the growing number of Labourites who felt it would be tactically wiser to adopt the same course as the Liberals and support the Army, Navy and Air Force votes while opposing those for the Foreign Office, in order to emphasize their divergence on foreign policy.<sup>2</sup>

(d) The Rearmers and the Policy Switch

A conviction of the need for rearmament, even under the National Government of Stanley Baldwin, was particularly strong among the

<sup>1</sup> This would be the weekly meeting when the party met in full caucus to discuss parliamentary business, to allocate speakers for the important debates and to receive reports from the Executive and the various party committees.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Session', Quarterly Review, September, 1936.

leaders of the larger trade unions: Sir Walter Citrine, General Secretary of the Trade Union Congress; Ernest Bevin, General Secretary of the massive Transport and General Workers' Union; Charles Dukes of the General and Municipal Workers; John Marchbank of the National Union of Railwaymen. These individuals, however, are outside the scope of this thesis, but their recognition of the need to back up ethical convictions with force was paralleled within the parliamentary party. Among Labour MPs there was a group peculiarly free from the old pacifist tradition, wanting the party to rid itself of the charge that it was calling for resistance to aggression while refusing to give the nation the arms with which to resist.

Dalton has been described as the "most prescient of socialists; he tried to bring his side down to earth again".<sup>1</sup> The son of a clergyman, he was educated at Eton and King's College, Cambridge, qualifying as a barrister in 1914. That same year he volunteered to fight in the Great War, and served on the French and Italian Fronts. Following demobilisation he lectured in Economics at London University, and was first elected to Parliament in 1924. Five years later he was appointed Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, a post which he held throughout the life of the Second Labour Government. Re-elected to Parliament in 1935 he took his place on

<sup>1</sup> Vansittart, The Mist Procession, p.510. Like Churchill, Dalton maintained close contact with Vansittart. Regular meetings between the two men are recorded in Dalton's diary, although they become less frequent and more furtive with the approach of war. "There was need", noted Dalton during the Czech crisis, "for even greater care in the arrangement of meetings between him and me. (For some time past we had agreed not to meet at the Foreign Office.) He (Vansittart) did not think he was suspected by Ministers of contact with the Labour Party, but they knew that he and Winston were old friends and that he sometimes saw some of the more active critics in the Conservative Party." Diaries, 19 September, 1938.

the front bench, establishing himself as one of Labour's leading spokesmen.<sup>1</sup>

It is to Dalton's credit that he did not adhere to traditional Labour policy but chose, at the expense of his own personal standing, to oppose the tactic of voting against the Service Estimates. The Government, he was willing to admit, was pursuing a lame foreign policy, but the fact remained that if Great Britain was ever to protect herself from the Fascist states she required a more effective arms establishment. He had held this view since April, 1935, the time of Hitler's claim to have reached air parity with Britain:

"From then on I was sure that, although we must still negotiate, we must also immediately rearm. I was becoming very impatient with the opposite view still held by many of my colleagues. To argue that, in the sorry pass to which we had now come, because we had a damned bad British Government therefore the British nation should not be better armed, was piffle - the arms, one hoped, would outlast the Government. And it was damned bad politics as well."<sup>2</sup>

By the summer of 1937, with the Spanish Civil war in full swing, Labour's attitude, as Mander had foreseen, became more and more impossible. The party's policy being "Arms for Spain" and by contrast, at least to the man in the street, "No arms for Britain". That the public were confused can be gauged from the following remarks of a Labour candidate:

"People only understand a straight and simple line.

I am told that in by-elections people have been saying of

<sup>1</sup> MP, Peckham, 1924-29; Bishop Auckland, 1929-31, 1935-59.

<sup>2</sup> Dalton, The Fateful Years, p.63.

the Labour Party that it was "against the country being defended", that it "didn't want us to protect ourselves" etc. I can well believe it; exactly what they would think, however unjustified it is."<sup>1</sup>

This was not new. Labour's policy since 1934 had given great opportunity for misunderstanding and misrepresentation by political opponents. Amery, for instance, had written in his 1935 election manifesto:

"The Socialist Party had war so much in mind that they have got rid of their leader because he was opposed to military sanctions against Italy. But they have taken good care, by opposing every vote required by the Navy, Army and Air Force, to make sure that if we did go to war we should be defeated and ruined."

With the Spanish conflict leading to a further deterioration in the international situation it was inevitable that Labour Members began to question the Party's standpoint. William Dobbie, the Member for Rotherham and an ex-President of the National Union of Railwaymen, in speaking of Spain, indicated that once Labour abandoned support for non-intervention the Government's rearmament programme could no longer be opposed:

"When I came back from the war in 1918 I did not think I should ever again be under the necessity to advocate provisions of munitions of war. I have had to alter that opinion. When the Fascist danger comes it cannot be met by resolutions and arguments."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rowse, The present and immediate future of the Labour Party, Political Quarterly, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> The Times, 16 November, 1936.



Similarly George Ridley, a leading figure in the Railway Clerks Association and Member for Clay Cross, Derbyshire, explained his unease at Labour's policy:

"One of the things that troubled me most . . . was the fact that the most vociferous demands for intervention (in Spain) came from people who, for the sake of a gesture, were prepared to defy half Europe without being willing to equip themselves with the instruments of defence."<sup>1</sup>

On 19 July Dalton raised the matter on the executive, again with the support of Lees-Smith<sup>2</sup> and Alexander.<sup>3</sup> Clynes was in agreement, but was once more absent from the crucial meeting. Noel-Baker, new to the executive, sat on the fence, as at first did Pethick-Lawrence and Greenwood, but in the end both voted for the existing policy. All of Dalton's other colleagues were exactly where they were twelve months before.

Two days later the party met to consider a change. On the first day Attlee stated the majority view from the chair and was followed by Lees-Smith: Johnston and Shinwell, among others, supported Attlee; Alfred Barnes<sup>4</sup> and George Iathan<sup>5</sup> followed Lees-Smith's lead.

<sup>1</sup> Labour, November 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Liberal MP Northampton, 1910-18; joined Labour, 1919; MP, Keighley, Yorkshire, 1922-23, 1924-29, 1935-41; Postmaster-General, 1929-31; President of the Board of Education, 1931.

<sup>3</sup> MP, Hillsborough, Sheffield, 1922-31, 1935-50; First Lord of the Admiralty in the Second Labour Government and from then on he specialised in defence matters.

<sup>4</sup> MP, East Ham South, 1922-31, 1935-55; Labour Whip, 1925-31; chairman of the Co-operative Party, 1924-45.

<sup>5</sup> MP, Park, Sheffield, 1929-31, 1935-42.

On the second day Morrison, William Lunn<sup>1</sup> and Griffiths<sup>2</sup> spoke strongly against a fresh approach while Sorensen, Jimmy Walker and Ernest Thurtle backed Dalton's proposals. Dalton himself spoke last but one, making an effective plea to stop "dodging the issue and playing the fool". Twelve months ago, he reminded them, there had been a similar discussion, giving a narrow majority for going on as before. "That was after Abyssinia . . . But it was before Spain. Now we had had twelve months of Spanish Civil War, in relation to which, as in relation to Abyssinia, we had pressed the Government to follow a stronger foreign policy. There was no doubt at all that we had been very close to a general war in the last twelve months . . . The Labour Party's policy was . . . Arms for Spain. But what possible answer had we got in the country to the accusation that we wanted Arms for Spain, but no arms for our own country?". People were simply bewildered by their attitude on foreign policy and defence, and unless the party ceased voting against arms it was "putting a gun into the hands of the National Government, with which they would shoot down our candidates like rabbits all over the country".<sup>3</sup>

Greenwood, who wound up the debate, was apparently very halting and unhappy. Whatever way they voted, he said, the party would be misrepresented. Yet it would make a bad impression to change course now and Labour must simply go on trying to wear down misrepresentation by the other side. When the issue was put to a vote the Party, by 45 to 39, decided to upset the majority recommendation of the executive

<sup>1</sup> MP, Rothwell, Yorkshire, 1918-42.

<sup>2</sup> MP, Llanelly, 1936-66.

<sup>3</sup> The Fateful Years, pp.134-36.

and to abstain from voting on the Defence Estimates. Only slightly more than half the Labour Members cast ballots, but Dalton assumed that a larger attendance would have increased the majority: "If I polled all my promises, the majority would have been nearly 30".<sup>1</sup>

The Press took quite an interest in the affair, one or two newspapers arguing that Dalton had either been supported by the "intellectuals" or the "trade unionists". The political correspondent of the Daily Express wrote:

"Old Etonian ex-Foreign Under-Secretary Dr Dalton and his powerful group of 'intellectuals' contend that, while they are asking the Government to stand by 'collective security', it is illogical to deny the country the force with which to carry out that policy . . . And trade union leaders add their weight to the arguments of Dr Dalton by making it plain that they are on the side of rearmament."<sup>2</sup>

To discover, as far as possible, the composition of Dalton's followers, and ascertain whether they were trade unionists, intellectuals or a combination of both, it is first necessary to examine the division lists for July, 1936, the occasion of the party's voting against the total estimates.

On July 20 the parliamentary party moved a token reduction of £100 in the Navy Supplementary Estimates, voting 134 in favour; after that defeat only 116 voted against the Estimate. Exactly one week later the party voted against the final stages of the total Supply Estimates. By consulting division lists for both days, we can isolate 9 Labour MPs who were consistent abstainers: Barnes,

<sup>1</sup> The Fateful Years, p.135.

<sup>2</sup> Daily Express, 22 July, 1937.

Bellenger<sup>1</sup>, Dalton, Fletcher<sup>2</sup>, J Henderson<sup>3</sup>, Lees-Smith, Leslie, G Mathers<sup>4</sup> and Price<sup>5</sup>. In addition Alexander, Clynes and W Green<sup>6</sup> abstained on the 20th, though they cannot be placed definitely in the Commons on the 27th. A further seven abstained on the second occasion: J Compton, J Gibbins<sup>7</sup>, D Logan<sup>8</sup>, F Montague, G Oliver<sup>9</sup>, W Robinson<sup>10</sup> and Sir Robert Young<sup>11</sup>. Gibbins, Logan and Montague had been absent on the 20th while the others voted against the Estimate on that occasion.

Dalton had recorded that he was supported in his technique of passive opposition "by 20 others".<sup>12</sup> In fact it did not reach such a figure: 12 on the 20th; 16 on the 27th. Unlike the Tory

<sup>1</sup> Married, in 1922, Marion Theresa, daughter of Generalkonsul Karl Stollwerck of Cologne; MP, Bassetlaw, 1935-68.

<sup>2</sup> Liberal MP Basingstoke, 1923-24; Nuneaton (Labour) 1935-42.

<sup>3</sup> President of the NUR, 1933-36; MP, Ardwick, 1930-31, 1935-50.

<sup>4</sup> A prominent member of the Railway Clerks Association; MP, West Edinburgh, 1929-31; Linlithgow, 1935-50.

<sup>5</sup> The son and grandson of Liberal MPs and himself Liberal candidate for Gloucester, 1911-14; joined Labour 1919; MP, Whitehaven, 1929-31; Gloucester, 1935-59.

<sup>6</sup> Political Secretary to the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society; MP, Deptford, 1935-45.

<sup>7</sup> MP, West Toxteth, 1924-31, 1935-50.

<sup>8</sup> General Secretary of the National Pawnbrokers' Assistant Approved Society; MP, Scotland, Liverpool, 1929-64.

<sup>9</sup> MP, Ilkeston, 1929-31, 1935-64.

<sup>10</sup> MP, St Helens, 1935-45; General Secretary of the National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers.

<sup>11</sup> MP, Newton, 1918-31, 1935-50; General Secretary, 1913-19, of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers.

<sup>12</sup> The Fateful Years, p.133.



dissidents at Munich Dalton and his associates did not sit ostentatiously in their seats. "We simply left the House and went home, and said nothing to the Press about it. A study of next day's Hansard was required to ascertain who had been absent from these deplorable divisions".<sup>1</sup> There was good reason not to attract the attention of the Press, as one of the abstainers indicated when writing of one of his colleagues, Fred Bellenger:

"he abstained somewhat reluctantly, however, because he was out for a career which this sort of action was bound to endanger. That, I think, was true of others who sympathised with us but did not want to prejudice their chances of preferment when Labour came to power".<sup>2</sup>

The whole incident, in fact, passed without a ripple on the surface of the newspapers so that a minimal amount of friction was caused within the parliamentary party, and the future prospects of the abstainers remained unblemished.

John Naylor has also made an attempt to ascertain the size and composition of the rearmament lobby within the parliamentary party, but restricted himself to the abstentionists of July, 1936. Of these he wrote "no striking generalisations emerge". This conclusion may have been due to the small numbers involved and therefore it is necessary to delve further and widen the numbers of the rearmer before an analysis is made. Turning to the July 1937 party meeting Dalton is very informative as to the members voting to reverse the Executive's decision by 45 votes to 39. He received the support of all the Co-operative MPs save G S Woods: F Broad<sup>3</sup>, Chater,

<sup>1</sup> The Fateful Years, p.90.

<sup>2</sup> Price, Letter to the author, 14 February, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> MP, Edmonton, 1922-31, 1935-45.

T Henderson,<sup>1</sup> W Leonard,<sup>2</sup> Alexander, Barnes and Green. All the Lancashire Miners voted his way: G MacDonald<sup>3</sup>, J Parkinson<sup>4</sup>, G Rowson<sup>5</sup> and J Tinker. Other members noted for their support included G Lathan, J Lawson, J Ritson<sup>6</sup>, E Thurtle<sup>7</sup> and R Sorensen.

It is surprising that the latter, a pacifist, should be found in their number. His reasons were complex. He recorded that he was "increasingly disturbed and critical of those who having failed to convert the nation to pacifism or non-violent methods then found compensation in obstruction. I felt this was dishonest, confusing, unscrupulous and did nothing to encourage appreciation of pacifism." Thus he argued that it was "futile both to oppose rearmament and to obstruct those who sincerely and consistently believed military defence against possible Nazi aggression was imperative". As rearmament was the consequence of deep-seated wrongs in the international order and not the cause of war, Sorensen felt that pacifists should concentrate attention on the alternatives to mass conflict rather than hindering war preparations.<sup>8</sup> Such a fresh approach to the question, entailing

<sup>1</sup> MP, Tradeston, Glasgow, 1922-31, 1935-45.

<sup>2</sup> MP, Rollox, Glasgow, 1931-50.

<sup>3</sup> MP, Ince, 1929-42.

<sup>4</sup> MP, Wigan, 1918-41.

<sup>5</sup> MP, Farnworth, 1929-31, 1935-37.

<sup>6</sup> MP, Durham, 1922-31, 1935-45.

<sup>7</sup> MP, Shoreditch, 1923-31, 1935-54.

<sup>8</sup> Sorensen, Letter to the author, 2 April, 1969.

the abandonment of opposition to the rearmament programme, was to result in Sorensen being severely criticised by his fellow pacifist members.

Four other known rearmerers can be added to Dalton's lobby: W Dobbie, J Walker, G Hicks, and J Wedgwood. Walker, the Chairman of the Scottish Trades Union Congress, and a leading figure in the Iron and Steel Trades Federation, had been one of the first supporters of British rearmament in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> According to Dalton he was one of those who steadily abstained from voting in Parliament against the arms estimates or against conscription claiming the conscience clause usually monopolised on such issues by pacifists. By 1935, however, he was nearly blind and for this reason took little part in parliamentary debates, though he sometimes intervened effectively at party meetings. Despite his blindness he was Chairman of the Party, 1940-41, and was "a great power on our National Executive. Often he beat Laski and other intellectuals by sheer weight of logical argument".<sup>2</sup>

Wedgwood, the eccentric member for Newcastle-under-Lyme, had had a somewhat different background from the majority of Labour MPs. Educated at the Royal Naval College in the 1890s, he had commanded a battery in the South African War, and remained attached to the services until 1918 when he was demobilised, serving as he then was as Assistant Director of Trench Warfare, with the rank of Colonel. From 1906 he had sat as a Liberal Member of the House of Commons, but had transferred his allegiance to the rapidly growing Labour Party in 1919. His memoirs record that in the thirties he kept on "year by

<sup>1</sup> MP, Newport, 1929-31, Motherwell, 1935-45.

<sup>2</sup> Dalton, The Fateful Years, p.307.

year, asking for more planes, more tanks, small ships instead of monster battleships; but also pressing for better relations with possible allies, and for standing up to obvious bluff."<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, Hicks had commenced his working life as a general builder's youth at the age of eleven, making his way up through the Operative Bricklayers Society.<sup>2</sup> In 1921 he became the first General Secretary of the newly formed Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers, a post he continued to hold after his entry to Parliament in 1931 as Member for Woolwich East. Despite his hitherto narrow horizons, Hicks soon began to take a particular interest in foreign affairs, probably as a result of his membership of the International Federation of Trade Unions, in which he rubbed shoulders with leading socialists from the continental parties. His advocacy of rearmament derived in part from an increasing awareness of the Nazi threat, coupled with a realisation that rearmament would give increased utilisation to Britain's industrial facilities, benefitting the workers in many trades, including his own.

An analysis of the members sympathetic to Dalton's move revealed that whereas the average age of the party was 54 years 7 months, that of the rearmers was 55 years 2 months, a minute rise of 7 months. Similarly, in education the rearmament lobby approximated to the figures obtained from the party analysis, save for a rise in elementary trained members receiving some form of further education, and a 10% drop in the numbers attending university. The full figures were:

<sup>1</sup> Memoirs Of A Fighting Life, p.234. MP, Newcastle, 1906-42; Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, 1924.

<sup>2</sup> President of the TUC, 1926-27; MP, 1931-50.



<u>Education</u>	<u>Rearmers</u>	<u>Party</u>
	%	%
Elementary only	56.8	57.1
Elementary plus some later training	27.8	16.9
Public School	8.3	9.1
University	8.3	18.2

If possessing a good education can be equated with being an intellectual then Dalton's followers cannot, for the most part, be described as an intellectual grouping as opposed to the party as a whole.

But were they a trade unionist grouping? Sir Walter Citrine has judged that Dalton would have got nowhere without the considerable pressure exerted by the Trades Union Congress.<sup>1</sup> Ernest Bevin's biographer, too, recorded that he also lent "strong support" to Dalton's advocacy of rearmament within the Parliamentary ranks.<sup>2</sup> A breakdown of the trade unionists and other occupations is as follows:

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Rearmers</u>	<u>Party</u>
	%	%
Trade Unionists	62.2	59.1
Co-operative Members	22.2	6.5
Professions, Armed Forces, Land	19.4	28.6

The results indicate that the numbers grouped under land, armed forces and professions have fallen by almost ten per cent, while the co-operative percentage has risen by over sixteen per cent. Twenty of the 36, or 55.6%, can be classed as trade unionists and of these six, Clynes, Compton, Henderson (J), Lathan, Robinson and Walker, were

<sup>1</sup> Recorded in Naylor, Labour's International Policy, p.192.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Bullock, Ernest Bevin, Vol.1, p.593.

members of the General Council of the Trades Union Council, as well as being trade union representatives on the National Executive Committee of the party. Doubtless this explains the remark of one of Dalton's colleagues on the Parliamentary Executive, after the vote, urging him not to make a speech emphasising the new policy and requesting him to keep the "troops quiet and particularly the Trade Union leaders on the General Council".<sup>1</sup>

With only a slight rise of 3.1% in the trade union percentage it would appear that the view that but for trade union pressure Dalton would have got nowhere seems for the most part unsubstantiated. But is it? It is well to remember the corresponding figures for the pacifist, Left and League enthusiast groupings. The analysis revealed that on each occasion there existed a non-manual, middle-class preponderance, whereas in the case of the rearmament lobby the reverse held true, a majority was drawn from the "cloth-cap" or trade union circles. With the groups taken together some credence is thereby given to Citrine's statement that the policy switch was in large measure dependent on the trade unions.<sup>2</sup>

But why should the trade union circles, in particular, support rearmament? Price considered that they "were more inclined to favour some form of rearmament largely because they were dealing with practical affairs than the intellectuals of the party".<sup>3</sup> Organising a union, dealing with disputes, negotiating with employers left

<sup>1</sup> The Fateful Years, p.136.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that an examination of the 23 trade unionists, and the unions that sponsored them, revealed that only one known rearmer, G H Oliver, was sponsored by the TGWU, Bevin's own creation, although 8 had been at the 1935 election.

<sup>3</sup> Price, Letter to the author, 25 February, 1969.

little time for theorising as such, and consequently the unionists as a whole were neither essentially idealistic nor, for the most part, even imaginative. Therefore when approaching the question of rearmament their down-to-earth manner and trade unionists' common sense brought them to realise that the circumstances necessitated Labour's support, whatever the movement thought of the Government's foreign policy.

Had the 37 been connected in some way with the Armed Forces or with Service Departments? Eleven, in fact, of whom 7 had risen to be officers, had served in the forces, while a further four had been attached to a Service Department in the course of their parliamentary careers. In this sense the rearmament group were not a cross-section of the party, as the following table indicates:

	<u>Rearmers</u>	<u>Party</u>
Members serving in the Armed Forces	12 or 32.4%	24 or 15.6%
Members attached to a Service Department	4 or 11.1%	10 or 6.5%

There seems therefore to be a link, as one would perhaps expect, between experience in the Armed Forces or Service Departments and the rearmament lobby in the party.

Dalton's speech to the parliamentary party on 22 July had laid great stress on electoral considerations:

"this was, perhaps, the most important decision that the party would have to take in this Parliament. This decision might make all the difference between victory and defeat at the next election . . . one reason for our poor polls in the by-elections was that people were bewildered by our attitude on foreign policy and defence . . . If we went on without a change, I believed

that not only should we not win a majority next time, but that there were men sitting in that meeting with small majorities and vulnerable seats who would not come back. (This remark of mine caused great resentment among some people with safe seats. They said it was "a craven appeal to fear". I am sure, however, that it was true, and I think it turned a few votes)."

In order to discover whether a slender majority, and therefore a greater susceptibility to public opinion, characterised Dalton's followers, the election results of the 154 Labour Members were broken down and contrasted with those of the rearmlers:

<u>Majorities</u>	<u>Rearmlers</u>	<u>Party</u>
0-1000	3	12
1000-2000	6	21
2000-3000	2	17
3000-4000	3	9
4000-5000	5	17
5000-6000	4	12
6000-7000	4	7
7000-8000	1	9
8000-9000	2	7
9000-10,000	-	5
10,000 upwards	5	24
Unopposed	2	14
	<u>37</u>	<u>154</u>

As the table indicates, small majorities and vulnerable seats were far from being a hallmark of the rearmament lobby, although this does not rule out the possibility of what Dalton termed "a few" being so influenced.

It is possible, however, that some of the rearmlers were swayed by the interests of their constituents or an organisation to which



they belonged. The Member of Parliament is, after all, not only attached to his party; he is the representative of his constituency and must bear its interests in mind. Again, a Labour Member might belong to an organisation such as a trade union, which would benefit from the pursuit of a particular policy. Such Labourites, representing areas or unions that would benefit from rearmament, were naturally faced with the vexed conflict of constituents' or union demands with the professions of the party. It was all very well to say that expenditure on arms was uneconomical and might lead to war but the fact of the matter was that an armaments boom would give increased utilization to Britain's idle industrial resources, bringing with it employment and a measure of prosperity. Thus the interests of workers likely to benefit from expenditure on armaments must have presented a serious problem to Members who did not wish to be accused of depriving their constituents or fellow trade unionists of much-needed employment or prosperity.

Ever since the establishment of the parliamentary party when it came to voting against the naval or arms estimates, there were always some who did not follow the party lead. An instance of this was in 1909 when Alexander Wilkie, the Member for Dundee and leader of the Shipwrights Union, advocated an efficient navy. He pleaded eloquently for that superiority in the men behind the guns by which "in the old days we were not afraid of tackling an enemy twice or thrice our strength".<sup>1</sup> That the effectiveness of Labour's opposition to increased armaments was seriously injured by this Party split is indicated by the comments of other Members of the House. Said the

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, Vol.2, pp.1548-1550.

Conservative Member, Arthur Lee, in 1911:

"I have noticed when Members of the Labour Party happen to represent a dockyard or a district in which armaments are created that there are no greater jingoes in the House."<sup>1</sup>

Although the Labour Members were much more united in their support of armament reductions after the war than before, in the 1935 Parliament the contradiction re-emerged. When it became clear that the Government's proposed rearmament programme would benefit workers in many trades, including engineering, mining, chemicals, textiles, shipbuilding and iron and steel, some Labour Members were naturally reluctant to appear the underminer of their constituents or fellow trade unionists' livelihood by opposing the estimates.<sup>2</sup> George Hicks, Labour MP for Woolwich East, and General Secretary of the Building Trade Workers, openly defied the party on the occasion of the Defence White Paper Debate, and offered the Government the co-operation of the trade union movement in its rearmament programme.<sup>3</sup> Conscious of the resulting prosperity and employment, he was anxious to be consulted in the carrying out of the industrial programme involved in order to maintain and better wages, hours and working conditions. It was probably no coincidence that he also represented a constituency where there existed an army barracks, a military academy and an arsenal employing many workers.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Pelling's History of the Labour Party, p.79.

<sup>2</sup> The Times noted "Industrial Labour may not be so bitterly opposed (to rearmament), for it is recognised that there is a time of great prosperity in store for the skilled worker, and that a few trade unions will attain a position of great power and authority in the carrying out of the programme." 4 March, 1936.

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Debates, 10 March, 1936, Cols.2029-30. The Government failed to consult the General Council, Baldwin presumably not taking the offer seriously.

Several rearmlers sat for constituencies where heavy industry existed, particularly engineering or iron and steel works, whose prosperity depended in large measure on orders from the forces. Alexander and Lathan, for instance, represented Sheffield divisions, traditionally an iron and steel centre, while Leslie, MP for Sedgefield, Durham, sat for another area of heavy industry. Other members belonged to trade unions with much to gain from increased arms. Walker, for instance, was a leading figure in the British Iron, Steel and Kindred Trade Association. Similarly Compton, of the Union of Vehicle Builders, Young, of the Amalgamated Society of the Engineers, Oliver, of the Transport and General Workers' Union, and Broad, of the Scientific Instrument Makers, represented organisations with much to gain by co-operating in the Government's rearmament programme.

Out of this general survey, what generalizations as to the background of Labour's rearmlers may be drawn? In the first place, it would appear that they were fractionally older than their colleagues, and there were few who could be described as middle class, the majority being trade unionists and "cloth-cap" politicians of humble origins. Vulnerable seats was not a clear characteristic. In addition, a small number represented constituencies or were officials of trade unions which would benefit from the increased employment and prosperity accruing from rearmament. Finally, one-third approximately, had connections with the Armed Forces and Service Departments, as one would expect in such a grouping.

The decision to abstain, instead of trooping into the Opposition lobby, did not go unchallenged. There existed what Dalton called

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For the importance of the armaments issue in Woolwich politics see P Thompson's Socialists, Liberals and Labour, p.254, and Pelling's Social Geography of British Elections, p.40.



'a very violent feeling among the minority'.<sup>1</sup> The South Wales Miners, led by Jim Griffiths and Arthur Jenkins, attempted to form a Miners' block to oppose the Estimates. Unfortunately for the Welsh miners, MacDonald, who had supported Dalton, was Secretary of the Miners' Group and effectively frustrated their moves. Attlee, when approached by the defeated minority, scrupulously refrained from entertaining a suggestion that another meeting should be held to reconsider the decision. Several MPs however, including Morrison, hastened in public to express their disagreement with the majority decision.

The pacifists were among those who severely criticised the move of their fellow MPs. The Times, in fact, referred to Lansbury as "the leader of opposition to the Labour Party's rearmament plan" when he presided at a National Convention of the Parliamentary Pacifist Group at Central Hall, Westminster on September 18.<sup>2</sup> It was the occasion for Labour's policy to be severely criticised by a number of MPs including Salter, Wilson, McGhee, Messer and Sorensen.<sup>3</sup> Lansbury moved an emergency resolution:

"that the Convention deplores the rearmament policy of the National Government and regrets the acquiescence of the Parliamentary Opposition in these measures."

In support of the resolution Lansbury said that they did not in any light-hearted manner set themselves in opposition to colleagues with whom they were on terms of friendship, which they highly valued and

<sup>1</sup> The Fateful Years, p.136.

<sup>2</sup> The Times, 20 September, 1937.

<sup>3</sup> Sorensen's presence is surprising in view of his attitude in July.



esteemed. Yet they had no option but to refuse to accept the ghastly doctrine that only massed force could bring peace to a distracted world.

Nevertheless the parliamentary party, whatever the real thoughts of some of its members, rallied to the policy change. When the Service Estimates were voted upon on 26-27 July, only 6 Labour MPs - Barr, Salter, Messer, McGhee, Silverman and S O Davies - joined 4 members of the Independent Labour Party and the lone Communist in opposition. Four of the 6 were avowed pacifists, while the other two, Silverman and Davies, were of the Left. "This, in view of the strong feelings of many of our colleagues", commented Dalton, "was a most remarkable display of loyalty and discipline. It was a great disappointment to the Tories in the House. They had been grinning beforehand in anticipation of a wide and open split."<sup>1</sup>

1937, too, saw the real resistance to the change of policy die away.<sup>2</sup> Silverman did move a resolution, at the Annual Conference at Bournemouth in October, instructing the parliamentary party to "vote against the Arms Estimates of the National Government", but this was heavily defeated. Morrison, however, did not raise the question there, as in the first flush of defeat he had threatened. Meanwhile a statement, on International Policy and Defence, was issued by the

<sup>1</sup> The Fateful Years, p.137.

<sup>2</sup> Quibell (the Member for Brigg), for instance, following a central European tour, came to see the considerable effect that Britain's Defence Programme was having abroad. "Throughout the tour I never met anyone who did not glory in the fact of British rearmament against the fear of aggressor countries. They feel there is no-one to whom they can look to check aggression except Britain and other members of the League of Nations." E Dodd, David Quibell, p.105.

National Council of Labour, and it contained the outline of the policy of a future Labour administration. "Such a Government", it said, "must be strongly equipped to defend this country, to play its full part in collective security, and to resist any intimidation by the Fascist Powers designed to frustrate the fulfilment of our obligations. Such a Government, therefore, until the change in the international situation caused by its advent had had its effect, would be unable to reverse the present programme of rearmament." The statement was understood, both within and without the movement, as a declaration in favour of supporting the Government's rearmament programme, though as far as words went it was nothing of the sort.

Thenceforward the Labour Party stood, in the words of Gordon MacDonald, "for all the armaments required to safeguard British interests. We think that disarmament today, with the world as it is, with Germany and Italy in their present state of mind, would be disastrous . . . the best contribution Britain could make for peace in the present circumstances is by arming, but, having armed, let us use those arms for the cause to which the Prime Minister referred on the 24 March - "the hope of averting the destruction of those things which we hold most dear - our liberty and the right to live our lives according to the standards which our national character have prescribed for us".<sup>1</sup>

#### Labour's record on Defence 1935-39

It is easy, considering the party's hesitations over rearmament, to write Labour off as uninterested in defence questions, and yet

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 4 April, 1938, Col.81.

this would be far from the truth. Following the 1935 election the party was increasingly concerned with the condition and effectiveness of Britain's armed forces. This was in part due to the elevation of Attlee to the leadership. Until then the Parliamentary Party had given little or no serious attention to such problems and this was not wholly due to the climate of opinion within the party. Labour had held office in only two short Governments in a period following World War I, when it had been laid down that there was no danger of war and when all emphasis was on disarmament. After 1931 the party, now led by a pacifist, was small with most of those who had been in the Service Ministries going down to defeat. In such circumstances - and at a time when the Disarmament Conference functioned - it was natural that no consideration should be given to technical problems of defence.

The General Election of 1935, however, returned to the ranks of the Parliamentary Party a number of badly-needed recruits with some knowledge of, and interest in, defence questions. Of the 154 newly-elected members 24 had at one time or another seen service in a branch of the Armed Forces. This was 15.6% of the party. Seventeen of this number had been elected or re-elected in 1935, not sitting in the House during the course of the previous Parliament. None of Labour's service members, however, had risen to the position of high-ranking officers, as many of their Conservative counterparts had; the most senior were Wedgwood and Harry Day,<sup>1</sup> both holding the rank of Colonel. A further 10 had had connections with the service ministries, and of these, six did not sit in the previous House. Here Alexander

<sup>1</sup> MP, Central Southwark, 1924-31, 1935-39.

was the only Labour Member with major experience of a service department, dating from the Second Labour Government when he had been First Lord of the Admiralty. The others had held lesser posts such as under-secretary, parliamentary secretary and parliamentary private secretary.

It was not only the influx of 'service' members but Attlee's assumption of the leadership which changed the party's outlook on defence. "When I became leader in 1935", he told Francis Williams, "I determined that we must look at the matter more realistically. I set up a Defence Committee, with people who had experience at the Service Ministries and some, like Dalton, who'd served in the First World War, and we started to look at things pretty seriously. We didn't like what we found."<sup>1</sup> Dalton, too, recorded the getting together of the Defence Committee, noting that they met regularly and sometimes invited to the meetings outsiders who could claim to be expert witnesses. "We had", he wrote, "some useful discussion on the need for a Ministry of Defence and a Ministry of Supply".<sup>2</sup> Membership included Attlee, Dalton, Alexander, Ammon<sup>3</sup>, Lawson<sup>4</sup>, Shinwell and Montague<sup>5</sup>.

Attlee recorded that he was particularly interested in the higher direction of defence. During the debate over the Ministry of Defence Creation Bill, in February 1936, he urged the introduction

<sup>1</sup> Williams, A Prime Minister Remembers, p.10.

<sup>2</sup> The Fateful Years, p.91.

<sup>3</sup> MP, North Camberwell, 1922-31, 1935-44; Parliamentary Secretary to the Admiralty, 1924, 1929-31.

<sup>4</sup> MP, Chester-le Street, 1919-49; Financial Secretary to the War Office, 1924.

<sup>5</sup> MP, Islington West, 1923-31, 1935-47; Under-Secretary for Air, 1929-31.



of such a department.<sup>1</sup> His ideas met with general acceptance in the House, Amery remarking that he "should like to associate himself wholeheartedly with them."<sup>2</sup> Although Attlee's suggestions were not then acted upon, ten years later he introduced into the House a Ministry of Defence Creation Bill which, though slightly modified by experience gained in the Second World War, was in essence, the same proposal he had made in 1936.

In response to demands from Left and Right Baldwin established the office of a Minister of the Co-ordination of Defence. The parliamentary party, or rather the handful of members with an interest in the question, expressed disappointment with the Prime Minister's action, since the powers of the new post fell considerably short of those they envisaged. Furthermore what powers Inskip had were not clearly delineated. "It was a speech", said Lees-Smith on one occasion when he followed Inskip, "almost exclusively of a Minister of Supply, and not, except in a very small part of it, the speech of a Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence Services."<sup>3</sup>

As the Minister was not giving his mind to what he was appointed to survey, Labour began to advocate the establishment of a Ministry of Supply, which the Government eventually created in 1939. One Labour Member of the Defence Committee prided himself that "we were their (Ministries of Defence and Supply) active advocates in the middle thirties when most of the highest authorities were against us."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Attlee, As It Happened, p.99.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 14 February, 1936, Col.1317.

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Debates, 20 July, 1936, Col.202.

<sup>4</sup> The Fateful Years, p.91.

A further measure of Labour's growing sense of reality was the approval by the party leaders, particularly Morrison, in his vital position as Chairman of the London County Council, of the Government's plans for preparing civil defence against air attack. At the Brighton Conference the Executive had prevailed against an attempt to put Conference on record in opposition to Government proposals for civilian air raid practices, which the mover considered "not only futile as a means of protection against aerial attack but a definite attempt to arouse public opinion in favour of the Government's arms policy".<sup>1</sup> Morrison, in a strong speech, replied that "aerial attack . . . is possible, and if it occurs many people will be injured . . . I cannot say there will be no co-operation".<sup>2</sup>

The party leaders' approval of Air Raid Precautions did not go unchallenged within the parliamentary party. Alfred Salter was uncompromisingly opposed to the Government plans and strongly criticised Labour municipalities which co-operated with them. In words reminiscent of the Brighton motion he argued that precautions would be the first step towards persuading the public to accept a costly rearmament programme, conscription and military regimentation. "By helping the Government in these precautions", he wrote, "I am identifying myself with its war preparations and methods. I cannot - I must not."<sup>3</sup> He argued that there was a moral difference between organised precautions in advance and impromptu precautions in an emergency; the former was equivalent to increasing armaments and

<sup>1</sup> Labour Party Conference Report, 1935, p.196.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.200.

<sup>3</sup> Brockway, Bermondsey Story, p.204.

therefore indefensible whereas the latter was a genuine attempt to save life. When his own Borough, in 1936, appointed a special committee to consider what action should be taken, Salter, shocked by the action, bitterly criticised the Council. His criticism had the effect that in December 1937 Bermondsey Council declined to appoint an Air Raid Precautions Committee.

Nevertheless, the Opposition's most important contribution to Britain's war preparations lay in its concentration on the obvious shortcomings in air defence. In this area strong pressures were brought to bear upon the government so that Dalton could claim, with some justification, "that the Labour Party takes some credit, by reason both of our public criticisms and of our private representations to the Prime Minister and yourself (Kingsley Wood), for the great increase and efficiency of the Royal Air Force".<sup>1</sup> Yet Labour's constructive role in the air defence discussions only really dated from a conversation between Attlee and Chamberlain, which took place during the Christmas Recess of 1937-38. Labour's leader told the Prime Minister that he had a number of points he wished to raise about Britain's air preparations, but owing to their nature he did not wish to discuss them in debate. Chamberlain then suggested that Attlee should send him a note of the questions he wished to raise and promised an early reply.

The resulting questionnaire was forwarded to the Prime Minister in January 1938. By drawing attention to specific allegations of incapacity and negligence, which were directed against the administration of the Air Ministry and of the Royal Air Force, it built up a

<sup>1</sup> The Fateful Years, p.273.

case for an inquiry. Ten points were raised, of which the following is a summary. The technical knowledge of the higher officers on the Air Council was questioned, as was their lack of flying experience - if any - in modern aircraft. With vast sums of money being spent in research at Farnborough, why did the principal inventions still come from abroad? Why was it, the questionnaire went on, that although Britain had now changed to the monoplane, aerodromes were still being equipped with high hangers which offered far more conspicuous targets than the low ones of Germany? "Is it true that the officer in charge of aerodrome design did not realise the change-over to the monoplane?" Concern was then evinced about what learning, air-wise, if any, had been gleaned from the conflict in Spain. Was it a fact, the questionnaire continued on a different note, that although the majority of British planes were bombers, they had an effective range insufficient to operate against the aerodromes of Germany? Time, it was noted, was the essence of air defence, but London's air defences were manned by the Territorials, hardly a sound system in the circumstances. As to the question of completed air squadrons "it is stated that we have 200 squadrons; how many of these are really ready?" Attlee also wished to know what percentage of Britain's pilots were capable of flying to Germany and back, and whether it was true that the country's metereological service was very inferior to that of the United States. Finally, he asked if the types of aeroplanes currently being manufactured were really up to date.

In a covering note to the questions Attlee wrote:

"I should like you to consider the suggestion which I made that there should be an investigation by qualified



and independent persons. It would, I think, be the most satisfactory way of dealing with a matter of great delicacy without repercussions of an undesirable kind on the international situation."<sup>1</sup>

Chamberlain speedily gave a detailed and somewhat comforting reply to the questions, but turned down the request for an investigation into the workings of the Air Ministry on the grounds that it would not serve any useful purpose. With disquieting rumours over air production continuing to circulate, Dalton was entrusted with the task of "accumulating material on our air defences, and building a case both critical and constructive".<sup>2</sup> Dalton, regarding the failure of the Air Ministry, and of private enterprise, to produce aircraft as the "biggest single issue at the present moment, both in the national interest and as political dynamite", set about his task without delay, using the research facilities of Transport House as well as the willingness of a few Royal Air Force officers to supply accounts of the serious deficiencies and long delays in the proposed programme.<sup>3</sup>

In the initial stages of the Air Estimates, in March 1938, Labour again requested an independent inquiry into the wasteful procedures of the Air Ministry, but Chamberlain heatedly denied the need for such action.<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, the Prime Minister's assurances did not

<sup>1</sup> Labour Questionnaire on Air Defences, Cabinet Papers, Premier 518.

<sup>2</sup> The Fateful Years, p.165.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Apparently a team of 3 officers brought the same information to various Government critics, one to Dalton, the second to Churchill and the third to Sinclair.

<sup>4</sup> House of Commons Debates, 15 March, 1938, Cols.254-55.

still the Labour criticism, and when the Air Estimates were debated on 12 May the party formed a front with the Liberals and Tory dissidents. The defence of the air programme fell to the lot of Earl Winterton, who had assisted Swinton at the ministry for only ten weeks. The Earl, as we have noted elsewhere, made an unconvincing speech and completely failed to still the criticism of Swinton's stewardship. All this caused such a parliamentary stir that three motions were placed on the Order Paper, including one by Labour. It stood in the names of Attlee, Greenwood, Alexander, Dalton, Cripps and Sir Charles Edwards, and was to the effect that "the growing public concern regarding the state of our air defences and the administration of the departments concerned, calls for a complete and searching independent enquiry conducted with despatch and conditions consistent with the national interest". Before any of the motions could be debated Swinton was sacked, victim of the united barrage of criticism. In mounting this successful attack, the party played a significant role, though the opposition of Tory back-benchers, led by Churchill, was probably as telling.

Although Churchill declined to press an enquiry upon the new Minister, the Labour leadership reasoned that as the "ministerial earthquake" had proved their point, the inquiry should follow.<sup>1</sup> In speaking to the debate, Dalton argued that "on any view of foreign policy . . . in this danger zone that we are now traversing an emphatic inferiority of British to German air power is for this country a most grim and unwelcome relationship". To remedy the situation an inquiry should be held "into our air defences, while

<sup>1</sup> The Fateful Years, p.166.

there is yet time, though not perhaps much time. Is our request to be met in a reasonable spirit, or have we to go drifting on with these weaknesses, perhaps fatal weaknesses, with our air defences unexposed and unrepaired, until, it may be, the tragedy comes and the first bombs fall on this beloved, ill-defended native land of ours."<sup>1</sup>

In attempting to establish the Government's failure, Dalton recalled that Baldwin had opted for air parity in 1934-35, conveniently overlooking Labour's resistance to that course at the time. Chamberlain, however, refused to consider the past as dead, raked over a few embers and then rejected the Labour motion, wanting no part of what he described as a "sort of fishing and roving" investigation, which he contended would distract the Ministry from its essential work.<sup>2</sup>

Soon after the debate, on 5 July, Attlee, Greenwood and Dalton saw Chamberlain and presented him with Dalton's document on Air Defence. This contained not only the charges that Dalton had made public in the debate of 25 May, but much other critical material, some very detailed. The conclusion drawn by Labour's leaders and set out in the memorandum was, naturally enough, that "there has not been that degree of efficiency and speed in the carrying out of air rearmament which it is reasonable to expect in the circumstances; sufficiently so to call for the setting up of a competent, impartial, independent and thorough enquiry".<sup>3</sup> After a brief and none too

<sup>1</sup> The Fateful Years, p.166.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 25 May, 1938, Col.1255.

<sup>3</sup> Labour Party Questionnaire on Air Defences, Premier Papers, 238.

cordial discussion, the Prime Minister said he would ask the Secretary of State for Air, Sir Kingsley Wood, to study the document and discuss it with Labour's leaders at a later date.

The following day the Daily Herald ran an article headed "Air Ultimatum to the Prime Minister". After relating how a statement containing the conclusions of a Labour Party investigation on air defences had been handed to Chamberlain, the article announced that the Government "must set up an immediate inquiry into the state of Britain's air defences, or, in the national interest, the whole truth will be published". The memorandum, in the compilation of which nearly 60 witnesses were cross-examined, "contains many damaging facts and figures concerning the inefficiency, backwardness and general muddle of our air defences". Although inside information was required to write the article, it does not appear that there was any truth in the allegation that if the inquiry was not granted Labour would publish the evidence at their disposal. Neither Dalton, in his memoirs, nor the official papers make any reference to such an ultimatum, and it is unlikely in any case that Labour would have been so irresponsible as to advertise Britain's alleged weaknesses to the world.

Prior to any meeting between Labour's leaders and Kingsley Wood, the Air Ministry examined the memorandum in detail, criticising, not unjustly, the Opposition's past role in air defence:

"The complaint that the expansion of the Royal Air Force has been delayed is not easy to understand when put forward by a party who opposed by voice and by vote any kind of expansion of the air forces of the country. Attlee and the Labour Party voted against the first



scheme of enlargement . . . announced . . . on July 19th, 1934 . . . Attlee and the Labour Party also voted against the measures of acceleration of that programme which were announced on November 28th, 1934. When a further expansion . . . was announced on May 22nd, 1935, Attlee and the Labour Party again voted against the Government's policy . . . the Labour Party was now (1938) recognising facts to which they were then blind. It is fortunate that in 1935 others were less slow and reluctant than themselves to read the writing on the wall and to initiate measures accordingly."

Consequently, the Air Ministry concluded that any reproaches on the speed of air rearmament came with singular ineptness from Attlee, Dalton and their friends, whose counsel, if followed, would have further delayed any expansion.<sup>1</sup>

The Ministry's observations on the memorandum revealed some concern with the Labour Party's sources. It was felt that the conclusions in the memorandum were based on a "multiplicity of detail which has evidently been collected at great labour". Certain of the statements were correct and authentic - and indeed appeared to be taken from documents prepared within the Air Ministry. Obviously "confidential information has reached the person responsible for the compilation". Other portions were derived from less satisfactory sources - possibly retired officers - and the views based on these were of less value, if not misleading. Certain examples were given: the general tendency to exaggerate German front-line strength; the performance of British types was consistently under-estimated; the

<sup>1</sup> Labour Party Questionnaire on Air Defences, Premier Papers, 238.

official figures for service pilots were compared with vague claims by Hitler and Mussolini. On the other hand it was admitted that there were many matters on which the memorandum "quite rightly shows concern", and it was suggested that Labour should be informed of what was being done. Many of the points of criticism had already been appreciated and action being taken to remedy them. Nevertheless, there were other points, raised in the memorandum, that were significant and needed looking into by the Ministry.

As to the question of an inquiry the Ministry frankly admitted that mistakes would be found, but argued that the arrears of achievement in the Government's programme and the shortage of adequate equipment were not primarily due to the "mess and muddle" in the Air Ministry as outlined in the memorandum. Greater results would only have been achieved if the British Government had possessed, and been prepared to exercise, during the last three years, the powers of drastic control over the resources of the country in terms of capital, manpower and materials. An inquiry now, however, was undesirable on two counts. It would be regarded as an admission that there was something in the charges of muddle and mess, which the Government had denied all along. More important, at a time when the international situation was growing increasingly grave, the acceptance of an inquiry would upset the work of the ministry, preventing it from getting on with the vital air programme.

Eventually Kingsley Wood met the Labour leaders to mull over their document, and then with the agreement of his colleagues, Dalton met the Minister frequently, following up points already raised or calling his attention to new information which had reached the Labour Party. The meetings continued until, six months after the war

Wood left the Air Ministry. Although Labour did not get its inquiry, Dalton had no doubt that the improvements in the strength and equipment of the Royal Air Force, and in the organisation of the Air Ministry and of the aircraft industry, followed Wood's appointment and Labour's constant pressure on him.<sup>1</sup> Although it may be said that Labour had taken a belated interest in air defence, even belated attention to Britain's air needs may have made quite a difference in 1940.

#### Contributions to Defence Debates

In order to ascertain which Labour Members were particularly active in the field of defence, an examination was carried out into those contributing to debates connected with service matters in the period November 1935 - September 1939. By recording the number of speeches made by individual members, it is possible to gain an impression as to who displayed the greatest political activity in these matters. Such a quantitative study cannot, of course, be a measurement of the effectiveness of any member as a parliamentarian, but it is of some interest in indicating those who were most frequently party spokesmen.

The following were found to be Labour's most active Members with respect to defence questions;<sup>2</sup> the later columns denote the proportion of total activities devoted to the various branches of the forces:

<sup>1</sup> The Fateful Years, p.171.

<sup>2</sup> Nine, including Dalton, supported the move to abandon opposition to the Government's rearmament programme. There may, of course, have been more. A further six were known members of the party's Defence Committee, constituted by Attlee in 1935.

<u>Member</u>	<u>Total speeches</u>	<u>Air</u>	<u>Army</u>	<u>Navy</u>	<u>Other</u> <sup>1</sup>
R T Fletcher	20	5	2	7	6
G M Garro-Jones	15	6	1	4	4
H B Lees-Smith	15	2	7	-	6
A V Alexander	11	-	-	10	1
J C Ede	11	1	7	2	1
E Smith <sup>2</sup>	11	6	3	-	2
C G Ammon	9	-	-	7	2
C R Attlee	9	2	-	-	7
F Montague	9	7	1	1	-
J J Tinker <sup>3</sup>	9	2	4	1	2
W M Watson <sup>4</sup>	8	-	-	6	2
W T Kelly	7	2	-	1	4
J J Lawson	7	-	7	-	-
J C Wedgwood	7	2	-	2	3
J Parker	6	-	3	3	-
F Bellenger	5	-	3	-	2
S Cocks	5	-	-	4	1
H Dalton	5	3	-	-	2
A Greenwood	5	-	-	-	5
G Hall	5	-	-	4	1

The results show clearly that only a portion of the party took part in debates on defence with any consistency and those who did so were usually members with some sort of service experience, either in the forces or at a service department. Twelve in all had had military experience of one kind or another: Fletcher was an ex-lieutenant commander in the Royal Navy; Garro-Jones served in the army, but

<sup>1</sup> 'Other' includes those debates not connected with an individual service estimate, such as the proposed ministries for defence and supply, conscription, air raid defences and Government White Papers.

<sup>2</sup> MP, Stoke South, 1935-66.

<sup>3</sup> MP, Leigh, 1923-45.

<sup>4</sup> MP, Dumfermline, 1922-31, 1935-50.



soon switched to the Royal Flying Corps, in which he rose to be a captain; Lees-Smith, although not engaging in combat, was an ex-cadet of the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich; Alexander entered the army in 1914, saw service on the Western Front and was gazetted out four years later with the rank of captain; Ede, a sergeant, served with the East Surrey Regiment in the Great War;<sup>1</sup> Attlee, a major, fought at Gallipoli, Mesopotamia, and France, and Montague, a lieutenant, also served on both Fronts; Wedgwood, the most experienced, looked back on a military career that had begun before the Boer War, and only ended in 1918 when he was a Colonel and Assistant Director of Trench Warfare; Bellenger saw active service in France and was subsequently with the Army of Occupation of the Rhine, being demobilised as a captain; Dalton, a lieutenant, served on the French and Italian Fronts; at a more humble level Tinker and Ellis Smith served and remained in the ranks, the latter in the same regiment as Attlee.

A further three had experience of a service department, while four of the above could also be included in the same category: Ammon, Parliamentary Secretary to the Admiralty in both Labour Governments; Lawson, Financial Secretary to the War Office in 1924; Hall, Civil Lord of the Admiralty, 1929-31; Alexander, the only Labourite in the 1935 Parliament with major experience of a service department, First Lord of the Admiralty, 1929-31; Attlee, Under Secretary of State for War, 1924; Montague, Under Secretary of State for Air, 1929-31; Tinker, Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Secretary for War in 1924 and the First Lord of the Admiralty, 1929-31.

The results also revealed that the leader of the party, the deputy-leader, or a member of the executive, in this case Lees-Smith, assumed the leadership in debates of major importance, such as those

<sup>1</sup> Ede: MP, Mitcham, 1923-24; South Shields, 1929-31, 1935-64.

on the White Papers relating to defence.<sup>1</sup> Garro-Jones and Montague were particularly concerned with questions connected with the Royal Air Force, while Fletcher, Alexander, Ammon and Hall were interested in matters relating to the Navy. Lees-Smith, Ede, Tinker and Lawson concentrated chiefly on the Army.<sup>2</sup>

An analysis of the twenty members taking part in defence debates with any consistency revealed an average age of 51 years 7 months, exactly 3 years lower than that of the party. There were only seven elementary educated members in their number, whereas five went to public schools, one was educated privately, four attended colleges of various descriptions and six, university. As to occupation, ten could be classed as professional and two under armed forces, while those remaining had come up through the trade union and co-operative movements. Not only were the twenty, in these respects, unrepresentative of their colleagues in the parliamentary party, but they were also a distinguished grouping. Thirteen had either held ministerial rank or were to hold it in the war-time coalition or post-war Labour Governments, while a further three were at one time or another Parliamentary Private Secretaries. It is also worthy of note that Bellenger and Lawson were to hold the post of Secretary of State for War, Alexander and Hall that of First Lord of the Admiralty, Dalton, Minister of Economic Warfare, and Montague and Garro-Jones that of Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Aircraft Production.

That the General Election of 1935 returned to the ranks of the party a number of badly-needed recruits with some knowledge of and

<sup>1</sup> See the high figures for Attlee, Greenwood and Lees-Smith under 'Other'.

<sup>2</sup> That members specialised on the Army etc can be related to their experience in the Armed Forces or at a Service Department.

interest in defence questions is evident from the twenty's parliamentary record. Thirteen were elected or re-elected in 1935, not sitting in the previous House, and of the remainder Greenwood had entered the Commons as a result of a by-election. Between them the twenty delivered a total of 179 speeches, and of this number 132 were made by the 13 absent from the House in the 1931-35 Parliament.

Such figures indicate that the members returned in 1935 were to make amends for the party's weakness on defence in the previous Parliament, and perhaps, in part, explain why Labour, after 1935, travelled a considerable distance along the path of national defence, emerging from what has been described as a "web of sophistries and conflicting emotions".<sup>1</sup> It was discovered that the party could not continue to advocate a foreign policy based on the League and collective security while its attitude to defence problems ignored the implications of how potential aggressors could best be resisted. The scrapping of opposition to rearmament, which implied tacit acceptance of rearmament under a National Government, the advocacy of the Ministries of Defence and Supply, and, above all, the attention to the shortcomings in air defence were to do much to bridge this gap between the party's defence and foreign policies. Nevertheless, the rejection of the Military Training Bill, in April 1939, was to reopen the divide between the two.

### The Liberal Party

Roy Douglas has written that the Liberal Party "may properly claim to have shown an early appreciation of the danger of the European situation coupled with a frank acceptance of distasteful

<sup>1</sup> Bullock, The Life of Ernest Bevin, Vol.1, p.532.



measures in order to combat it, long before any other party".<sup>1</sup>

There is considerable truth in this. Significantly the parliamentary party made an important policy change in 1935; during the spring it was decided that Liberals should now vote in favour of the defence estimates. Hitherto the party had united with Labour in criticising proposed arms increases. When, in February 1934, Churchill had painted a picture of the dangers for London of inadequate aerial defence, Samuel, at that time party leader, had described him as standing for "anarchy" and a world in which "all go rattling down to ruin together".<sup>2</sup> Relying on the "false" impression given by Baldwin concerning the strength of the Royal Air Force, the Liberals felt that Britain was adequately prepared to meet any contingency. Then, in the spring of 1935, came the news that Germany had attained parity with the Royal Air Force, and immediately the party changed course. On 22 May Sinclair agreed "with deep reluctance - I would even say with repugnance - that the case for an expansion in our air armaments has been made out" and declared that the party would now support the measures envisaged.<sup>3</sup> Samuel later informed the Commons:

"I do not believe this nation would ever consent to an avowed inferiority in its defences compared with its neighbours in Europe . . . if the danger did become actual and if the House had rejected the proposals which were laid before it by the Government how could any of us have justified to our consciences the votes we would have given on that occasion."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The History of the Liberal Party, p.239.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 7 February, 1934, Col.1206.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 22 May, 1935, Cols.393-94.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 31 May, 1935, Col.1421.



From that time on, the Liberal standpoint, unlike Labour which laid itself open to the charge of unwillingness to provide armaments to defend the country, was clearer and open to little misunderstanding. Liberals, too, felt that the Government's foreign policy was ill-conceived but they did not oppose defensive measures - the nation, even as then governed, deserved armaments. Their tactics, as explained by Geoffrey Mander, were to support "consistently the Army, Navy and Air Force votes, though they have opposed the Foreign Office and other Departments in order to emphasize their disagreement on policy".<sup>1</sup>

At the General Election of 1935 the Liberals went to the country supporting the view that any weaknesses that had arisen in Britain's defence preparations should and must be made good. Sir Francis Acland informed his constituents:

"As to armaments, I accept the fact that we must have adequate defences, and must remain in a position to play our part in a system of collective security under the League of Nations. I shall speak and vote with a feeling of deep responsibility, for I have been, as a Member of the Army Council, for many years a responsible Minister in a Defence service."<sup>2</sup>

His son, Richard, standing at Barnstaple, echoed the view that "if there are proved to be gaps in our defences I will agree to the filling of them", but added the proviso that the nation "ought not to be asked to endorse enormous expenditure on a rearmament policy,

<sup>1</sup> Quarterly Review, September 1936, article entitled 'The Session'. Mander: MP, Wolverhampton East, 1929-45.

<sup>2</sup> Election manifesto. Acland: MP, Richmond, 1906-10; Camborne, 1910-22; Tiverton, 1923-24; North Cornwall, 1932-39; Financial Secretary to the War Office, 1908-11; Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs, 1911-15; Financial Secretary to the Treasury, 1915.

the details of which are not disclosed".<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Megan Lloyd George argued "Our national defence must be kept in an efficient state, but this necessity must not be made an excuse for a new armaments race."<sup>2</sup>

Filling gaps in Britain's defence preparations was not enough, however. The Liberal Party consistently maintained that the only possible justification of any measure of rearmament would be that if it formed "part of a policy which aims at increasing collective security".<sup>3</sup> Clearly Liberals - like Churchill - had sensed that the moral climate of the time was turning against arms races, the balance of power and imperial greatness. If rearmament was to be attained and the risk of war undertaken, it had to be in the name of a higher cause, that of the League of Nations and its offspring, collective security. "I do not believe", wrote Mander, "that the people of this country will ever be prepared to enter into the old-fashioned obsolete, all-against-all, war of the 1914 type, but I do believe they would respond and risk all if it were clear that they were making for the organised maintenance of world peace through the League of Nations."<sup>4</sup>

There was, however, one notable dissenter from the party's support of rearmament. David Lloyd George once again opposed the

<sup>1</sup> Election manifesto.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Sinclair, speech at the National Liberal Club, 12 February, 1936. Liberal Magazine, March 1936.

<sup>4</sup> Contemporary Review, May 1936.

party line and vigorously attacked the Government's rearmament programme. One such occasion was a speech at the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, in October 1936, when he said there was no need for British rearmament because the world's most powerful armies were the French and the Russian and the world's two most powerful fleets were the British and the French. Air power in itself could not be decisive, and Russia and France certainly had air preponderance over Germany. It was not rearmament that was wanted but the consolidation of the power of the League of Nations, collective security and all-round disarmament. Fortunately for his party's standing in the country little attention was focussed on Lloyd George's aberration, and he shortly abandoned his opposition to rearmament.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike many of Labour's League idealists, who tended to emphasize the more optimistic aspects of the Covenant, the Liberals looked equally to definite provisions for collective defence in order to establish a realistic scheme of mutual security. That they advocated a strongly armed system of collective defence was clear from speeches and official statements. These called for the British Government to organise within the League such a concentration of resources, economic and military, which would be "so strong and certain in action that it would deter any potential aggressor from the use of force".<sup>2</sup> To create such a system of mutual defence, countries, said a statement issued in 1936, should be "invited to state what military naval or air force, if any, they are prepared to contribute for the maintenance

<sup>1</sup> A J Sylvester, Life With Lloyd George, p.158. Lloyd George: MP, Caernarvon, 1890-1945; President of the Board of Trade, 1905-08; Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1908-15; Minister for Munitions, 1915-16; Secretary for War, 1916; Prime Minister, 1916-22; Chairman of the Liberal Party, 1924-31.

<sup>2</sup> From a speech by Sinclair at the opening session of the Liberal Convention in Kingsway Hall, London on 18 June, 1936. It was later published in pamphlet form.

of the public law in specific areas. This is the only sound basis for regional pacts, which must be strictly within the framework of the League, and be supplementary to the general obligation. The vital thing is that the plans concerted for the restraint of aggression should be thought out beforehand and be certain in their operation".<sup>1</sup>

The National Government, too, spoke of collective security, arguing that any increase in armaments was made for the purpose of defending the League system. Yet in the opinion of Liberals such vague references to the League and the collective system were intended only to keep the administration right with public opinion. "It would be much easier", argued the deputy-leader Sir Francis Acland, "for those of us who find difficulty in attuning our minds to the Government's defence policy if the Government, in referring to that policy, did not always use what seems to me to be a wholly false and misleading phrase as things are at present, that it is a contribution to pooled security. Whenever I hear that phrase I am reminded of that official, well known to the British Constitution, the Judge Advocate-General, who is neither a judge nor an advocate nor a general. Similarly, if we call our Defence Policy a contribution to pooled security, I would say that there is at present no contribution, there is no pool and, in consequence, not a great deal of security."<sup>2</sup>

It was on these grounds, and not, as has been argued by Quintin Hogg, because "they opposed the rearmament of the country", that Liberals objected to the Defence White Paper of 1936.<sup>3</sup> "We on these

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Geoffrey Mander's We Were Not All Wrong, pp.59-60.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 17 March, 1937, Col.2014.

<sup>3</sup> The claim was made in The Left Were Not Right, p.69.



benches", Mander informed the House, "voted against the White Paper . . . because we distrusted the policy associated with it."<sup>1</sup> Their objections were clearly set out in a motion tabled in the names of Sinclair<sup>2</sup>, F Acland, Graham White<sup>3</sup>, Harris<sup>4</sup> and Gwilym Lloyd George<sup>5</sup>, and read:

"This House reaffirming its belief in the system of collective security, regrets that His Majesty's Government's proposals for defence do not include any definite plan to secure, by consultation with other nations, that the increase in British armaments shall be related to those of other nations pledged with us to the principle of security under the League of Nations."<sup>6</sup>

The motion further regretted the Government's reluctance to take other necessary steps to establish real security:

"His Majesty's Government, while declaring its adherence to the policy of international disarmament, makes no definite proposals for stopping the world race in armaments nor for removing the causes of war by international discussion and conference."

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 17 March, 1936, Col.288.

<sup>2</sup> MP, Caithness, 1922-45; Liberal Whip, 1930-31; Secretary of State for Scotland, 1931-32.

<sup>3</sup> MP, Birkenhead East, 1922-24, 1929-45; Member, Council of Royal Institute of International Affairs; Member of the Executive Committee of the League of Nations Union, 1923-24, 1930.

<sup>4</sup> MP, Harborough, Leicester, 1916-18, Bethnal Green South West, 1922-45; Assistant Director, Volunteer Service, War Office, 1916-18; Chief Liberal Whip, 1935-45. He had the distinction of travelling round the world three times.

<sup>5</sup> MP, Pembrokeshire, 1922-24, 1929-50; Parliamentary Secretary, Board of Trade, 1931, 1939-40.

<sup>6</sup> Notices of Motions, Questions and Orders of the Day, 9 March, 1936.

Thus effective security - and here the Liberals were not alone in their convictions - could only be accomplished by the reduction of armament levels, and the removal of the economic causes of war, which destroyed overseas trade, blocked migration, and created unemployment, impoverishment and discontent throughout the world.

Like Labour the Liberal Party, while challenging the underlying basis of the Government's handling of the international situation, also concentrated attention on the shortcomings of Britain's defence preparations. The party backed the widespread call for a Minister of Defence to co-ordinate the principles of naval, military and air force strategy into one strategic doctrine, to which the three services would make their appropriate contributions. To carry out such a vital role, argued the Liberal Member for the Isle of Ely, James Armand de Rothschild, "a watchdog of the finest breed" was required. One was at hand in Churchill, although Rothschild confessed he had scant hope on that score, as he was conscious of the Government's need for "a good humoured mastiff" who would not be troublesome.<sup>1</sup>

Neither was the party satisfied with the scope of the new department. The design of the post, Sinclair told the Commons, revealed a lack of authority "to fuse the strategic doctrine of each of the three Services into one combined strategy".<sup>2</sup> Sinclair's critique of the Minister's limited powers closely followed that of Churchill's, with whom he "worked closely . . . in his study of defence problems".<sup>3</sup> Their association in fact was one of longstanding.

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 9 March, 1936, Col. 1909. Rothschild: MP, 1929-45.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 21 May, 1936, Col. 1412.

<sup>3</sup> Forty Years In and Out of Parliament, p.138.

Sinclair had been personal military secretary to Churchill, 1919-22, when the latter was successively Secretary of State for War and the Colonies. More recently Sinclair belonged to Churchill's 'Focus' group and was involved, with him, in the Arms and the Covenant Movement.

The party also "persistently and consistently advocated the creation of a Ministry of Supply".<sup>1</sup> What was envisaged was a ministry, presided over by a minister responsible to Parliament, having executive powers over all matters relating to the supply and manufacture of arms and munitions. On 10 November, 1936 the parliamentary party raised their proposals in an amendment to the Address, moved by Frank Kingsley Griffith.<sup>2</sup> He argued that the Government "should assume complete responsibility for the arms industry of the United Kingdom, and should organise the regulate the necessary collaboration between the Government and private industry; that this responsibility should be exercised through a controlling body presided over by a Minister responsible to Parliament". That Minister would be a Minister of Supply "having executive powers in peace-time and in war-time". Rather than repeat the experience of the last war, when, at very short notice, the Government was forced to take complete control - and the nation was indeed fortunate that it had at its disposal at that time for that purpose a "man of genius" - it had better set up a machine which could be manipulated by ordinary men.<sup>3</sup> Seconding,

<sup>1</sup> Forty Years In and Out of Parliament, p.130.

<sup>2</sup> Griffiths: MP, Middlesborough West, 1928-40.

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Debates, 10 November, 1936, Cols.715-16.



David Evans, drew attention to the considerable dislocation in ordinary peace-time industry that had already been caused by the rearmament programme. By creating a Ministry of Supply the industry for peace purposes could be carried on successively:

"It is only by the method of co-ordination, by Government determination of priority that the ordinary trade and manufacture of the country can be carried on today."<sup>1</sup>

But the Prime Minister rejected the proposal as unnecessary.

The Government was achieving results through the work of the Service departments, aided where necessary by the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence. It would therefore be wrong at this stage to attempt to arrest the ordinary industries of the country. With the Government stubbornly resisting, the Liberal Amendment was defeated by 337 votes to 131, the Opposition Parties uniting in support of action.

Further appeals for a Ministry of Supply were made during the course of the following two years, occasionally with the support of Churchill. As these pleas fell on deaf ears, in November 1938, Sir Hugh Seely<sup>2</sup> and Major Goronmy Owen<sup>3</sup> moved a similar amendment to the Address, regretting that "although deficiencies both in military and civil defence are admitted by Your Majesty's Ministers as well as a serious delay in the execution of the programme of rearmament stated to be necessary by the Service Departments for national safety,

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 10 November, 1936, Cols.722-23. Evans was MP for Cardiganshire, 1932-45.

<sup>2</sup> MP East Norfolk, 1923-24; Berwick, 1935-41; Squadron Leader Auxiliary Air Force, 1937-40. Dingle Foot remembered Seely's close attachment to the Liberal leader and described him as being more like an eighteenth century Whig than a twentieth century Liberal. "He was a wealthy man and, together with de Rothschild and Harcourt Johnstone, he largely financed the Liberal Party during the thirties and forties." The Times, 8 November, 1973.



no mention is made in the Gracious Speech of the creation of a Ministry of Supply, both to secure efficiency and prevent waste and profiteering".<sup>1</sup> It was the occasion when Churchill intervened to admit "indebtedness to the Liberal Party for having brought the House of Commons squarely up to the fence" and to call upon members of the Conservative Party to stand up and be counted on this issue. However, only a handful ventured into the opposition lobby and the Amendment was defeated by 326 votes to 130, despite the appeal of Sinclair that:

"every vote cast tonight against our Amendment will be a vote against acceleration and against the enlargement of a programme which leaves us in an inferiority to Germany in the air. I ask the House, by passing our Amendment tonight, to assert the will and to provide the means which are necessary to defend our honour and freedom."<sup>2</sup>

Following the occupation of Prague, Sinclair again pressed the Government to consider whether the time had not now come to re-consider the question of a Ministry of Supply.<sup>3</sup> Chamberlain replied that the matter had not yet been considered, but that it certainly would be.

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MP, Caernarvon, 1923-45; Liberal Chief Whip, 1931. Owen dismissed the reasons advanced by the Prime Minister against a Ministry of Supply as "completely unconvincing", and suggested the real reason was his inability to find a suitable man for the job, as all the ablest among his supporters are to be found criticising his policy. "The best man for the job is ineligible, because he dissents from and criticises the Prime Minister's policy."

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 17 November, 1938, Col.1087.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Col.1193.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 29 March, 1939, Col.2055.

Three weeks later, in reply to a question by Graham White, the Prime Minister announced that a Bill would be introduced as soon as possible to set up a Ministry of Supply under a Minister who would be a member of the Cabinet. The Ministry came into being on 1 August, 1939.

The Liberal Opposition also concentrated much of its attention upon the shortcomings in air defence. As early as March, 1936, Mander informed the House that there had been a very considerable delay in the carrying out of a number of Air Ministry contracts, and expressed alarm that Great Britain had fallen a long way behind Germany despite the Government's parity pledge.<sup>1</sup> Thenceforward members of the parliamentary party regularly raised the issue in the House, questioning the Government again and again as to reports of serious deficiencies and long delays in the proposed Air Ministry programme. Sir Hugh Seely on one occasion remarked that Britain had not "really got (adequate) striking power. You say it is coming along. Yet we were told that last year and the year before."<sup>2</sup> "I ask again", announced an impatient Sinclair, after informing the House that he had not received a satisfactory reply to his questions about Britain's progress in aerial rearmament, "is the production of aircraft in this country catching up with that of the strongest air force within striking distance of our shores? That is the only question which matters when we are considering air affairs."<sup>3</sup>

In fact it was the Liberal Party that initiated the memorable debate on air defences on 12 May, 1938. Seely, already a squadron

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 17 March, 1936, Col.291.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 15 March, 1938, Col.261.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 27 February, 1939, Col.951.

leader in the Auxiliary Air Force, and soon to be an Under Secretary of State for Air, opened the debate by moving a reduction in the salary of the Air Minister, whom he held responsible for misleading the House and the country into a false sense of security. After several reassuring speeches the Minister's announcement that Britain was to buy aeroplanes in the United States had come as a shock. Information might be withheld if it was against the public interest to disclose it, but now one was beginning to see that it was not in the interest of the Air Ministry to disclose certain facts which would have proved that they were not carrying out what they said they were doing, and, what was even more serious, would prove that they would not be able to carry out in the future. The production of planes was vital in a situation where "we are dealing today with Germany. Whether we like it or not she has an enormous number of aeroplanes. I believe she has some 8,000 machines . . . and has the power to produce 400 or 500 a month. Nor is she working at full capacity. That is the serious matter we have to face. . . . What are the Government trying to do in order to achieve parity?"<sup>1</sup>

Though Seely's motion, fully supported by speeches from Sinclair and Mander, was defeated, the stewardship of the Air Ministry remained an open question and the Liberal Party decided to table a motion expressing "grave concern at the condition of our defences", and calling for the "appointment of a Select Committee to investigate the problem of aircraft supply, anti-aircraft defence, and air raid precautions". It stood in the names of Sinclair, Harris, Seely, Gwilym Lloyd George and Mander. By pressing for an inquiry the Liberal Party completed a solid front of opposition with Labour and dissident

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 12 May, 1938, Cols.1752-53.

Conservatives, and within days Swinton and his colleagues were removed from their posts. In mounting this successful attack the Liberal Party played a significant role, though the opposition of Labour and Tory back-benchers, led by Churchill, was probably as, if not more, telling.

#### Contributions to Defence Debates

In order to ascertain which Liberal parliamentarians were particularly active with respect to defence questions, an examination was carried out into those participating in debates connected with defence matters in the period November, 1935, to September, 1939. Thus the same process, used for Labourites and National Government supporters, has been applied to the Liberal Party. The results were as follows:

<u>Member</u>	<u>Total Number of Speeches</u>	<u>Air</u>	<u>Navy</u>	<u>Army</u>	<u>Other</u>
Acland, F	3		1	2	
Acland, R	1				1
Evans, D O	1				1
Evans, E	1			1	
Foot, D	1				1
Lloyd George, D	2				2
Lloyd George, G	6	1	5		
Lloyd George, M	1				1
Griffith, F K	1				1
Harris, P	3				3
Mander, G	10	5	2	2	1
Owen, G	1				1
Roberts, W	2				2
Rothschild, J	1				1
Seely, H	11	7		2	2
Sinclair, A	12	2	2	1	7
White, H G	2			1	1
Bernays, R H	1			1	



The results show clearly that the majority of the party took part in debates on defence, though not with any consistency.<sup>1</sup> Nine, in fact, intervened on one occasion only. As with the other parties, those intervening regularly were usually members with service experience, either in the forces or at a service department. Five of those speaking on three or more occasions had had military or service department experience of one kind or another: Francis Acland had been Financial Secretary to the War Office, 1908-11; Gwilym Lloyd George had joined the Royal Artillery in 1914, rising to the rank of major; Harris served at the War Office, 1916-18, as Assistant Director of Volunteer Service; Seely had been a lieutenant with the Grenadier Guards, 1917-19, and from 1937 headed an Auxiliary Air Force Squadron; Sinclair, after training at Sandhurst, served with the Life Guards, 1910-21, attaining the rank of major.

With these members to the fore, the Liberal Party, too, played a responsible and constructive role in the defence discussions prior to the outbreak of war. Perhaps - and this holds true of the other Opposition element - Swinton was condemned unfairly and the complacency and self-deception of the Government exaggerated. Nevertheless, in the vital area of air defences strong pressures were brought to bear upon the administration. When coupled with the demands for a Ministry of Supply and a Minister of Defence, it becomes apparent that Liberal efforts in the direction of war preparation were also commendable; the party was not only prepared, but concerned with how to combat actual aggression.

<sup>1</sup> In all a total of 18 Liberal Members intervened in defence debates. This represented 85.7% of the Parliamentary Party and says much for their determination to remain a national party concerned with national issues.

## C H A P T E R   I I I

### THE APPROACH TO FOREIGN AFFAIRS

#### Conservatives sharing misgivings over recent developments in Germany

Within the ranks of the Conservative Party and its political allies there existed serious misgivings as to the character and methods of those governing Germany. That is not to say that the predominantly Tory National Government and its supporters grasped the significance of what was happening in Germany. Indeed, as Harold Macmillan, MP for Stockton-upon-Tees, wrote of his colleagues during the Rhineland crisis, "in the House of Commons nearly all my friends . . . on the Right . . . seemed comparatively undisturbed."<sup>1</sup> It was a mere handful of the body of National supporters, members like Vyvyan Adams, Amery, Katherine Atholl, Boothby, Robert Bower,<sup>2</sup> Bracken, Cartland, Austen Chamberlain, Churchill, Anthony Crossley,<sup>3</sup> Paul Emrys-Evans, Grigg, Oliver Locker-Lampson, John McEwen, Harold Macmillan, Harold Nicolson and Sandys, that were alive to the dangers from Nazi Germany and were beginning to diverge from the prevailing attitude towards that country.

<sup>1</sup> Macmillan, Winds of Change, p.461.

<sup>2</sup> MP, Cleveland, Yorkshire, 1931-45. Bower was somewhat abrasive and not at all popular with his colleagues. Channon wrote of him: "Bower is a pompous ass, self-opinionated, and narrow, who walks like a pregnant turkey. I have always disliked him, and feel justified in so doing since he once remarked in my hearing 'everyone who even spoke to the Duke of Windsor should be banished - kicked out of the country'. Diary entry 4 April, 1938, Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.154. In April, 1938, Bower was involved in an unfortunate incident with Shinwell, see page 361.

At an early stage in the prelude to what was to become the Second World War these members openly expressed their suspicions of the men then controlling affairs in Germany. They were not "German-haters"; they drew a distinction between Weimar and Nazi Germany, regretting the failure to treat the former fairly. Vyvyan Adams, MP for West Leeds, put it thus:

"There is a current of opinion running through this country which is roughly expressed in the notion that Germany has not had a square deal. I am one of those that in 1932 and early in 1933 urged the giving of equality to Germany by the qualitative disarmament of the victorious Powers down to her own level. In those days Germany was impotent, vanquished and democratic."<sup>1</sup>

But things had changed. Germany, since Hitler's accession, had become "heavily armed, ruthless and totalitarian; to all her neighbours she causes terror, and to most of them she may constitute a danger . . . I wish . . . to emphasise the danger implicit in the

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MP, Stretford, Lancashire, 1931-39; killed in an air crash in August, 1939. Channon recorded that he sat next to Crossley on the occasion of Chamberlain's announcement of the Munich Conference: "I was next to that ass, Crossley . . . and whenever there was any remark deprecating the Germans he cheered lustily, 'That's the way to treat them' - once when the tide was going with him, he turned scoffingly to me and said 'Why don't you cheer?' - again he asked 'How are your friends the Huns now?' Diary entry 28 September, 1938, The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.171.

<sup>1</sup> Adams: MP, West Leeds, 1931-45; Member, Executive League of Nations Union, 1933-46; Vice President, New Commonwealth Society; foreign affairs were his special study.



Nazi system in Germany. Never to my mind has there been a danger more manifest than that which Nazi Germany today presents to Christendom."<sup>1</sup>

Katherine, Duchess of Atholl, the Member for Kinross and West Perthshire, recorded that she felt frightened when a man as unbalanced as Hitler became the leader of a great nation like Germany.<sup>2</sup> Hitherto she had confined herself to domestic and imperial matters but the advent of the Nazis to power marked the beginning of her rapidly growing interest in foreign affairs. Her alarm was further increased when she was shown certain passages in Mein Kampf:

"In them he (Hitler) had made clear his policy was an unashamedly aggressive one. I had just read a recently published English translation of the book, and I was horrified to find that it was only about one-third the length of the original, and that all the bellicose passages had been watered down as to have lost their meaning."<sup>3</sup>

Convinced that Mein Kampf still represented the aims of Hitler she contributed to a series of pamphlets, published by a Labour member, giving a translation of the more alarming passages in the book. It was to be the first step along the path that led to the sacrifice of her political career.

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 21 May, 1936, Cols.1034-35.

<sup>2</sup> A Working Partnership, p.101. Atholl: wife of the Eighth Duke of Atholl; MP, 1923-38; Parliamentary Secretary, Board of Education, 1924-29; Delegate to the Assembly of the League of Nations, 1925; She has been described by Eleanor Rathbone's biographer as a "one-time anti-suffrage right-wing Conservative . . . she opposed cruelty with a consistency which bred indifference to the political colour of its perpetration. She was thus prepared to welcome the victims of Russian tyranny, and of German racialism and of Fascist Nationalism to the flowing hearth of her indignation, ensuing for herself, according to the affiliations of her critics, the alternative titles of "Red Duchess" and "Fascist Beast".  
M D Stocks, Eleanor Rathbone, p.218.

<sup>3</sup> A Working Partnership, p.101.



Harold Nicolson, National Labour Member for West Leicester, had had first-hand experience of National Socialism.<sup>1</sup> His last years in the diplomatic service, from 1927-30, had been as Counsellor at the British Embassy in Berlin, where he had seen the Nazis in action. Authoritatively he could tell Henry Channon, the Conservative Member for Southend:

"We represent a certain type of civilized mind, and that we are sinning against the light if we betray that type. We stand for tolerance, truth, liberty and good humour. They (the Nazis) stand for violence, aggression, untruthfulness and bitterness . . . I love Germany and hate to see all that is worse in the German character being exploited at the expense of all that is best."<sup>2</sup>

Such was the strength of his feelings about the Nazis that he consistently refused to visit or even travel through Germany after 1933.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the young Member for Lambeth, Duncan Sandys, had worked at the British Embassy in Berlin, where he had been third Secretary to the Ambassador, Sir Horace Rumbold. For five months of

<sup>1</sup> Nicolson: joined Foreign Office 1909; served on the British Delegation to Peace Conference, 1919; League of Nations, 1919-20; MP, 1935-45; prolific author including Peacemaking 1919, Curzon, and Diplomacy.

<sup>2</sup> Diary entry, 20 September, 1936, Diaries and Letters, p.273.

<sup>3</sup> On one occasion Nicolson attended a dinner party and sat next to a German woman who tried a little Nazi propaganda. "Poor wretch, she did not know that she had a tiger lurking beside her. 'Do you know my country, Sir?' she said. 'Yes, I have often visited Germany.' 'Have you been there recently, since our movement?' 'No, except for an hour at Munich, I have not visited Germany since 1930.' 'Oh, but you should come now. You would find it all so changed.' 'Yes, I should find all my old friends either in prison, or exiled, or murdered.' At which she gasped like a fish." Diary entry 12 June, 1936. Diaries and Letters, p.265.

Hitler's rule Sandys was actually on the scene and quickly made up his mind that the new regime meant troubles ahead for Britain. In June, 1933, on Rumbold's retirement, Sandys returned to the Foreign Office in London to work in the Central Department, and there he expressed his fears on a despatch. In late 1933 he urged the Government to think ahead. The Rhineland was clearly a potential problem. The Germans, when they felt strong enough to do so, would seek to re-militarize it. Britain and France must decide what their attitude would be when Hitler's troops marched into the Rhineland. If they intended to do nothing, it was better to concede the point to the Germans before they took it. If this were handled properly, some quid pro quo might be obtained. But if the Western Allies were determined to resist re-militarization they should make their determination quite clear to the Germans. They should also work out some plan of action with France should Germany decide to move. A firm stand by the two Governments would impress the Germans and deter them. The absence of any agreed plan for joint Anglo-French action would encourage the Germans to take advantage of Western indecision. Sir John Simon, the Foreign Secretary, was unimpressed and commented on Sandys' minute "we cannot consider hypothetical issues".

Realising that he could not hope to exercise any influence from his lowly position inside the Government machine, Sandys resigned from the Foreign Office to go into politics, hoping to infuse the Government with the gravity of the situation.<sup>1</sup> Two years later, at a by-election, he entered the House, where he paid particular attention to foreign and imperial affairs.

Another MP sharing their misgivings, Paul Emrys-Evans, had also served an apprenticeship in the diplomatic service, both in London

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in The Appeasers, by Gilbert and Gott, pp.33-4.

and in the Embassy at Washington.<sup>1</sup> Entering the Commons in 1931, as Member for South Derbyshire, he specialised in foreign affairs, and was soon of the opinion that Germany would shortly pose the greatest threat ever presented to the British Empire. He informed the Commons:

"We are facing a nation which is chloroformed and which is deaf and blind to anything but Nazi doctrines. Everywhere there is marching and everyone is preparing for war. They are utterly opposed to our ideals . . . As Germany only believes in force, so she will only respect strength. We are like someone walking through a jungle. Those who are around us cannot appreciate anything about us except the rifle in our hands."<sup>2</sup>

Owing to his experience in the field of foreign relations Emrys-Evans held the important back-bench post of Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the supporters of the National Government. However, his strong views on the international situation were to lead to his forced resignation in 1938.<sup>3</sup>

Sir Austen Chamberlain, erstwhile Foreign Secretary, had been a frequent critic of the Nazi regime since its emergence in 1933. That year, in a speech to the House of Commons which brought him the "largest correspondence" he had had on any subject for a considerable time,<sup>4</sup> he asked:

<sup>1</sup> Emrys-Evans: Foreign Office, 1917-23; MP, 1931-45.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 23 June, 1936, Col.149.

<sup>3</sup> Harold Nicolson was Vice-Chairman of the same Committee.

<sup>4</sup> Copy of a letter from Austen to E R Canning, 25 April, 1933, found in the Austen Chamberlain Papers, 40/4. Part of his increased post-bag was due to his reference to the persecution of the Jews, for many had taken the trouble to write and thank him for mentioning the plight of their "nationals". "The spirit which inspires this campaign against the Jews", commented Austen to Canning, "is the spirit which inspired the attempts of Germany to dominate the world before the Great War. It fills me with anxiety for the future."



"What is this new spirit of German nationalism?

The worst of all Prussian Imperialism, with an added savagery, a racial pride, an exclusiveness which cannot allow to any fellow-subject not of a 'pure Nordic birth' equality of rights and citizenship within the nation to which he belongs."<sup>1</sup>

Chamberlain was convinced that although Germany had undergone two revolutions since the Great War little had changed. The brutality and provocation which characterized the Nazi regime, the conscription, the massive rearmament, were to him but a modern variation of Prussia's past history, replete with the same methods and the same tenacious goal of universal domination.

The root of the trouble, as he saw it, was that Germany's well-established educational system was directed towards producing a race of militarists. Every child was taught that the proudest fate which could overtake it was to die on the field of battle, that war was the noblest of man's ends, and that Germany must rely upon her armaments.<sup>2</sup> Inevitably a war spirit was thereby nurtured which, as in the years preceding 1914, was now being plainly demonstrated.

Such was the strength of his feelings on the German issue that, like Nicolson, Chamberlain consistently refused to visit Germany while the Nazis remained in power. On one occasion when he was a guest on a yacht moored in a German river, he still refused to 'put foot on German soil'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 13 April, 1933, Col.308.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 26 March, 1936, Col.819.

<sup>3</sup> Diary entry, 8 August, 1936. The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.108.



It has been argued by H B Gotlieb that as Chamberlain based his interpretation of the Nazi regime upon what may at times have appeared to be rather meaningless analogies, he was of little use to the basically sane educational campaign which was waged by the anti-Nazis. Gotlieb goes on to suggest that his speeches could even have been detrimental to their activities.<sup>1</sup> In fact his name could not but have helped their cause, but there is some truth in this statement. All too often Chamberlain lapsed into references to Prussian militarism and pre Great War German history, which must have seemed not only far fetched but almost anti-German to his listeners. There is no evidence, however, of his being a German-hater - the close relationship with Streseman is testimony to that. Nevertheless his intemperate language could give that impression. Small wonder Chips Channon attacked him for criticising Germany with unreasoning violence and being "ossified, tedious and hopelessly out of date".<sup>2</sup>

A close associate of Chamberlain's, indeed his erstwhile Parliamentary Private Secretary, was Commander Oliver Locker-Lampson. On repeated occasions, according to the historian of the Focus Group, he fearlessly attacked the activities of the Nazis, both within and without Germany. Yet he was conscious that these attacks produced no positive results, except to make him unpopular with the Government and discredit him with his party.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> H B Gotlieb, England and the Nature of the Nazi Regime: A Critical Assessment of British Opinion, 1933-38, (Ph.D Thesis) p.89.

<sup>2</sup> Diary entry, 27 July, 1936, The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.73.

<sup>3</sup> E Spier, Focus, p.49. Locker-Lampson: Commander, Royal Navy, 1914-18; MP, Handsworth, 1910-45; Parliamentary Private Secretary to Sir Austen Chamberlain, 1919-22; accompanied Chamberlain to Versailles; a leading member of Focus and Arms and the Covenant.

Apparently his most notable criticism of the Nazis, and Government policy to them, was when Sir Samuel Hoare expressed delight at the great possibilities of Britain's future association with Nazi Germany, from which he visualized eternal benefits for the human race and the coming of a Golden Age. Locker-Lampson branded his statement as 'blatant insanity', and an 'ugly betrayal of democracy, endangering the very existence of our democratic institutions'. To speak of a Golden Age, he continued, amounted to nothing less than a recognition of the Nazi terror regime, with a record of more than fifteen years of continuous acts of perjury, foul murder, tearing up of treaties, imprisoning and torturing to death of hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women and children without any charge or trial.<sup>1</sup>

Boothby was another Unionist who became early aware of the threat posed by Nazi Germany. In the course of 1933 he paid a prolonged visit to the continent and upon his return delivered a warning to his constituents in Aberdeenshire, at Tarriff, on 19 October. Germany, he announced, was in the grip of something very like war fever.<sup>2</sup> The following year, after a similar visit, he wrote and circulated a confidential report, warning of the massive German rearmament and mentioning how children were "taught that might is the only Right, that the noblest life is that of the warrior, and that the highest honour to which a men may aspire is death in the service of the Fatherland".<sup>3</sup> Boothby's warnings became more and more insistent as he repeatedly took the opportunity to pass comment on the German situation. On 24 October, 1934 at Strichen, he declared

<sup>1</sup> Focus, p.145.

<sup>2</sup> R Boothby, I Fight to Live, p.124.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.127.

that the life and soul of democracy and the freedom of the individual were being challenged as they had not been challenged for 2,000 years. "The issue which will shortly confront the British people is whether they are prepared if necessary, to fight for freedom and liberty; or submit to tyranny and force."<sup>1</sup>

Similarly Ronald Cartland, the boyish member for Kings Norton, had visited Germany after the Nazi conquest of power.<sup>2</sup> Like Boothby his impressions were very clear cut. According to his biographer, Cartland was convinced that the Germans hated the English; that they would annex Austria; that ultimately, and sooner than anyone expected, they would fight Great Britain.<sup>3</sup> In his writings he put forward the view that the challenge of National Socialism lay not simply in the force of arms but through the force of ideas. Therefore Britain should be vigilant on two fronts, and be prepared to defend the democratic way of life in both word and deed.<sup>4</sup>

Cartland was influenced in his views, as were several of the dissentients, by Churchill. His sister recorded the great admiration

<sup>1</sup> R Boothby, I Fight to Live, p.129.

<sup>2</sup> Cartland: MP, 1935-May, 1940; a social reformer; he made his maiden speech in May, 1936, on the Distressed Areas, some of which he had visited. "There is a very general feeling", he declared, "that the Government is not facing up to this problem." He often returned to this theme during the next three years, and criticised the Government for inertia. In November 1936, he and three other Tories, of whom Harold Macmillan was one, voted with the Labour Party against the Government on this issue. Owing to his votes and speeches in the House he got into considerable trouble with his Constituency Association. The Labour leader, Dalton, apparently was encouraging him to join the Labour Party but that point was never reached owing to his untimely death. The Fateful Years, p.163.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Cartland, p.101.

<sup>4</sup> R Cartland, The Common Problem, p.27.



and growing affection he began to hold for Churchill, and how on one occasion a fellow member had said, "Let me give you a word of advice, Ronnie. Winston is no good to a young man. Keep away from him."

The icy reply was to the effect that he would "choose his own friends".<sup>1</sup>

Similarly of Nicolson, it has been written, "he was coming more and more under the spell of Churchill, who held no office at the time but used his immense influence to persuade the House that if Germany were not stopped now, it would be much harder to stop her later."<sup>2</sup>

Harold Macmillan also admitted that he would doubtless "have shared the general complacency of public opinion had I not by now come to be more frequently in Churchill's company".<sup>3</sup>

In the same way Bracken's biographer, Andrew Boyle, put his anti-German views down to Churchill, whom he "fell in nonchalantly behind".<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Cartland, p.181.

<sup>2</sup> Nicolson, Diaries and Letters, p.248.

<sup>3</sup> Macmillan, Winds of Change, p.165. MP, Stockton, 1924-29, 1931-45. His later career should not blind one to the fact that in the '30s he was, in Lord Kilmuir's phrase, "a lone independent gun barking on the left of the Conservative Party". Political Adventure, p.45. He was a persistent rebel, an intellectual and essentially solitary. Another of his colleagues wrote of him: "Macmillan is no ordinary man. He votes as he feels inclined, treating Parliament not as a playground for parties but as an assembly where men must speak and act as they think . . . he is quite fearless . . . He has often been expected to join the Labour Party." V Adams, What of the Night?, p.152. His political path and Churchill's very rarely converged until the end of 1936, but even then he could not be described as one of Churchill's adherents until later. In his attitude to defence and foreign affairs, as in domestic matters, Macmillan made his own decisions.

<sup>4</sup> Poor, Dear Brendan, p.207.



In fact, Churchill, as early as 1932, was disturbed by the revival of the 'war mentality' in Germany. In his visit to Bavaria in the summer of that year to see the battlefields of Marlborough's campaigns, he gained an unpleasant impression of "bands of sturdy Teutonic youths, marching through the streets and roads of Germany, with the light of desire in their eyes to suffer for their Fatherland".<sup>1</sup> When Hitler came to power in 1933 the European situation, for Churchill, was transformed, with the danger of a new war with Germany becoming a future prospect.

It has been claimed that the internal critics of the Government, in particular, Churchill, were opposed to Germany "for traditional not ideological reasons".<sup>2</sup> This view has been supported by A J P Taylor, who wrote of Churchill's conduct of the Second World War:

"He was only fighting a nationalist war against Germany, not an ideological war against Fascism . . .

It is true Churchill was only interested in overthrowing Hitler. He had no desire to disturb Franco in Spain nor much in overthrowing Mussolini."<sup>3</sup>

Credence is given to such statements by Churchill's unfortunate outburst in Rome, in 1927, when he declared to assembled Fascists:

"If I had been an Italian, I am sure I should have been entirely with you from the beginning to the end of your victorious struggle against the bestial appetites and passions of Leninism."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Article dated 23 November, 1932, Arms and the Covenant, p.38.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, p.220.

<sup>3</sup> English History 1914-45, p.560.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Salvemini's The Fascist Dictatorship, p.20.

And to this can be added Churchill's equivocal stand over Mussolini's aggression in Abyssinia, when he: clearly dreaded the move of Italy from one side to the other; voiced hopes of a compromise solution; doubted whether Great Britain ought to have taken the lead in sanctions; and willingly acquiesced to their abandonment, in the hope that Fascist Italy might once again be persuaded to participate in the containment of Germany. Consequently he "applauded" the January 1937 Anglo-Italian Agreement of friendship and goodwill and "hoped that the antagonism created between the two western democracies and Italy, by the Abyssinian conquest, may gradually be mitigated".<sup>1</sup>

It seems, therefore, that as far as Italy was concerned Churchill had made the mistake of forgetting the wide gulf that divided Britain, a liberal and free Parliamentary democracy, from Fascism. Yet with Germany, if one takes Churchill's views at their face value, ideology - a recognition that Nazism's code of ethics and standards of conduct were not those of Britain - was an important factor in his thinking. Thus in 1933 he warned Members of the character of the new Germany, and drew attention to its departure from accepted standards:

"We watch with surprise and distress the tumultuous insurgence of ferocity and war spirit, the pitiless ill-treatment of minorities, the denial of the normal protection of civilised society, the persecution of large numbers of individuals solely on the ground of race - when we see all that occurring in one of the most gifted, learned, and scientific and formidable nations in the world, one cannot help feeling glad that the fierce passions that are raging in Germany have not yet found any other outlet but upon themselves."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Step By Step, pp.116, 94.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 23 March, 1933, Col.352.

What are we to make of this contradiction? The above seems to show that traditional interests played the decisive role in Churchill's view-point. And yet is this too cynical a view of Churchill? It might be argued that he may have been led, through an early conviction of the German danger to Britain's interests, into an awareness of the ideological differences separating the western democracies from National Socialism, and, more gradually, Italian Fascism too, although remaining of the opinion that Hitler's threat was so much greater to Britain than Mussolini could ever be. Such a view, however, would be difficult to substantiate. There is no evidence whatsoever that he later equated the two regimes together. Rather the reverse was true. As late as March 1938, after twenty months of Italian-German co-operation in Spain, he could still write, if somewhat doubtfully:

"If Mussolini is willing to separate from Hitler, to take his stand with France and Britain, and help sustain the independence of Austria, there will be an undoubted gain."<sup>1</sup>

There remains a further question to be answered. If traditional interests were central to his opposition to Nazism, why, then, did he make so much of the ideological divide between Britain and Germany? It may be that Churchill found it expedient to use this additional argument against Germany, as it was more fashionable, in an ideological age, than traditional reasoning. This is quite feasible in that a more idealistic approach might gain him some of the support he so needed to awaken the Government to the reality of the Nazi challenge. Certainly this was so in the case of rearmament, which he deliberately linked with the cause of the League of Nations in the programme

<sup>1</sup> Article dated 4 March, 1938, Step By Step, pp.220-221.



'arms and the covenant'.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever the reason for Churchill's opposition - and the evidence appears to favour the traditional interests view - there were others, including Austen Chamberlain and Bob Boothby, who shared the contradiction, as will become apparent.<sup>2</sup> But before one generalises and assumes, along with Hugh Thomas, that the critics of the Government as a group were solely influenced by international power political consideration, it is well to remember the views expressed by Adams and Macmillan - and alluded to in these pages. These require a conclusion that both traditional interests and ideology shaped the thinking of the dissidents.

Although Churchill had expressed relief that the "fierce passions" raging in Germany were only finding an outlet internally, both he and the other dissidents soon noticed that the regime was proving as aggressive abroad as it had already shown itself at home. "They give the greatest assurances," Boothby said on the occasion of the Rhineland coup, "and smooth everybody down, and when everybody is feeling happy and nobody is looking, they pounce."<sup>3</sup> It was this state of affairs which worried the future anti-appeasers, for it was impossible to base European civilisation, as the Government seemed to be attempting, on a system in which treaties bound the parties only so long as it suited their convenience. If European peace could only be founded on confidence, and as long as treaties

<sup>1</sup> See Churchill's remarks to Hankey, p.255.

<sup>2</sup> Apparently Eden thought that Austen (and Neville) Chamberlain had a "certain sympathy for dictators (Mussolini and Primo de Rivera are mentioned) whose efficiency appealed to him". Harvey Papers, diary entry for September 22, 1937.

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Debates, 26 March, 1936, Col.1609.



continued to be broken with impunity time and time again by the same Power, how was it possible to have confidence in the future in any new treaty that might be made?<sup>1</sup>

An analysis of the National Members acutely aware of the potential danger from Nazi Germany produced some interesting conclusions. Their average age was 44 years 11 months, 4 years 5 months younger than the party as a whole. The most notable public schools were very strongly represented, as were Oxford and Cambridge Universities. The most striking feature, however, was the overwhelming professional armed forces and official services slant to the group. Four, in fact, had once belonged to the diplomatic service, and Chamberlain had been Foreign Secretary. Of the others there is sufficient background evidence to indicate that they had travelled widely and in this way come into contact with foreign interests. Turning to the constituencies, a different pattern emerges from that of the defence critics of the Government, with which there was a certain amount of overlapping; less than one-third had majorities in excess of ten thousand votes.

It is necessary to add that it would be misleading to think that this handful of members addressed themselves single-mindedly to the deteriorating German situation. On the contrary, there were many other questions of a foreign and domestic nature, which ranked extremely high on their order of priorities, and on many of these matters, as we shall see, they followed the Government loyally. All endorsed Chamberlain's efforts to restore a fair degree of prosperity to the nation's trade, while a majority were to agree to the lifting of sanctions against Italy, in June 1936, and were

<sup>1</sup> See Churchill's article, 'Stop It Now', 3 April, 1936, Step By Step, pp.17-20.

to approve Eden's endeavours to preserve neutrality in the Spanish Civil War. Churchill, in fact, was so impressed with Eden's performance as Foreign Secretary that he was able to associate himself fully with Government foreign policy, at least until February 1938. Indicative of this was a speech that he made the previous summer, to his constituents:

"During the last year we have grown in strength and in reputation. We have more friends in the world: we are more closely united to our old friends; we have not abandoned the principles of the Covenant of the League of Nations; we have never been on terms of greater goodwill and understanding with the United States. The vital thing now is not to change policy."<sup>1</sup>

Thus Churchill and those sharing his views on Germany were much nearer the majority of their party than has been generally recognised or that they admitted.<sup>2</sup> Nor were they yet, and not all of them were to belong to, coherent groupings within the National Government's ranks but rather individuals who, lacking unanimity of thought, tended to act as such when a crisis struck.

### The Rhineland Coup

While most of the British Press, with The Times and the Daily Herald in the van, expressed their belief in the sincerity of Hitler's offer, several of the aforesaid members, including Chamberlain, Grigg and Churchill, proclaimed the opposite view, endeavouring to acquaint

<sup>1</sup> The Times, 5 July, 1937.

<sup>2</sup> See the article by R H Powers, 'Winston Churchill's Parliamentary Commentary on British Foreign Policy 1935-38', Journal of Modern History, 1954.

the Government and the nation with the real significance of the coup. Austen Chamberlain's first reaction was guarded, for although he wrote to his sister, Ida, describing the news as 'grave', he added that he had not yet committed himself on the matter.<sup>1</sup> Four days later, however, speaking at the annual dinner of the Cambridge University Conservative Association, he sharply denounced the action of Germany in violating the Treaty of which he had played so great a part in framing. He emphasised that Locarno was not a dictated Treaty. Hitler, he said, had on more than one occasion drawn attention to the distinction between a dictated peace, which he felt free to break, and the negotiated voluntary treaty, which he pledged himself to observe. The German Government had considered the demilitarised zone a contribution to the appeasement of Europe. That contribution had now been withdrawn without negotiations, without consultation, by an act of brutal force. "Is any treaty", he asked, "with Germany more than a scrap of paper?" He concluded:

"With my mind quivering at this moment with the events that led up to the Great War; impressed by the similarity of Germany's policy today to the policy which rendered the Great War inevitable; that is as passionless and as objective a statement as I can make of the history of this question."<sup>2</sup>

Despite the colourful language, Chamberlain did not want war. What he had in mind was a symbolic German withdrawal while the International Court discussed the Franco-Soviet treaty, the avowed pretext for Hitler's move.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Austen to Ida Chamberlain, 7 March, 1936, Austen Chamberlain Papers.

<sup>2</sup> The Times, 12 March, 1936.

<sup>3</sup> Austen to Ida, 16 March, 1936.

With no action forthcoming, either from Germany to withdraw or from the League Powers to pressurize Germany to do so, Austen, in a letter to his sister, confessed that public affairs and public opinion made him very unhappy. That had happened "against which we guaranteed France, and Press and Public seek excuses for evading our pledge. The Government . . . hesitates to keep its solemn engagement." As to Germany, her army would now be "much stronger, the Army chiefs will not again seek to hold him (Hitler) back, every country in Europe will feel that England is a broken reed and the end can only be the complete triumph of Germany and I fear our own ultimate ruin. And our Government has no policy. As far as I can make out it is as much divided as Asquith's Cabinet on the eve of the Great War. My confidence is rudely shaken."<sup>1</sup>

Sir Edward Grigg, another National backbencher early aware of the potential danger from Nazi Germany, also outspokenly denounced Hitler's move. In a speech to his constituents he declared: "The breach of the Treaty of Locarno is only the latest of many acts of violent self-assertion characterising German policy during the last three years". He went on to bewail the fact that "our only care is to avoid war", ruling it out as a feature of international life.<sup>2</sup> Like other critics Grigg was to spend much time and energy in the run-up to 1939, drawing attention to Germany and the need to prepare. In 1938 he published a book, Britain Looks at Germany, in which he depicted the reality of the German threat against the deficiencies of Britain's preparations.

In fact Churchill was probably the most clear-sighted of those voicing alarm at the German action. To him Hitler's violation of the

<sup>1</sup> Austen to Hilda Chamberlain, 15 March, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> The Times, 14 March, 1936.



Rhineland marked the opening strategic moves of a second world war and ought as such to be challenged. France, the aggrieved party, had appealed to the League of Nations for justice and it remained for that body to enforce the law upon the treaty-breaker. Churchill regarded this confrontation with Germany as the League's 'supreme trial' and its 'most splendid opportunity'.<sup>1</sup> His thinking was quite simply the assembly of overwhelming might in support of international law, and as the forces at the disposal of the League were four or five times as strong as those of Germany the chances of a peaceful settlement, so he believed, were good. Faced with superior strength Hitler would be forced to withdraw, his pretensions would be given a resounding check.

Unfortunately for Churchill, with political opinion in England complacent, there was little likelihood that the British Government, so soon after the Hoare-Laval fiasco, would allow itself to be persuaded to take action against Germany. Predictably Baldwin's inclination was matched by the mood of the majority of his followers and that of the Opposition Parties, a mood gauged accurately by Nicolson. The latter recorded in his diary two days after the Rhineland move: "General mood of the House of Commons is one of fear. Anything to keep out of War." And the following day: "The country will not stand for anything that makes for war. On all sides one hears sympathy for Germany. It is all very tragic and sad."<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly the Council of the League of Nations met in London and Flandin, the French Foreign Minister, attended its sessions. During his stay in London private dinners were arranged, such as those

<sup>1</sup> From the article, 'Britain, Germany and Locarno', 13 March, 1936, Step By Step, p.13.

<sup>2</sup> Diary entries, 9 and 10 March, 1936, Diaries and Letters, pp.248-49.

organised by Churchill and Louis Spears, as forums for Flandin to say exactly what he thought about the crisis to an audience of British politicians, journalists and industrialists.<sup>1</sup> Boothby and Nicolson recalled attending Spears' luncheon and both were impressed by Flandin's apparent firmness: "We know that Hitler is bluffing and that if you (Britain) remain faithful to your engagements we shall be able to obtain satisfaction".<sup>2</sup> Churchill, too, was taken in by the Foreign Minister's hard-line attitude: "Flandin . . . came to my flat in Morpeth Mansions. He told me that he proposed to demand from the British Government simultaneous mobilisation of the land, sea, and air forces of both countries, and that he had received assurances of support from all the nations of the 'Little Entente' and from other States. He read out an impressive list of the replies received. There was no doubt that superior strength still lay with the Allies of the former war. They had only to act to win." In fact Flandin was greatly exaggerating the determination of French Government and people to see the matter through to a successful conclusion, let alone the resolution of her allies. Perhaps Churchill sensed as much when writing the story of these years: "These were brave words; but action would have spoken louder".<sup>3</sup>

Although Churchill had admitted to the French Minister there was little he could do in a "detached private position", he promised him any assistance in his power. Undoubtedly he did his best to reinforce Flandin; but Neville Chamberlain informed Flandin that public opinion

<sup>1</sup> Spears: Brigadier-General; Head of the British Military Mission in Paris, 1917-20; MP, National Liberal, Loughborough, 1922-24; Conservative, Carlisle, 1931-45.

<sup>2</sup> Nicolson, letter dated 17 March, Diaries and Letters, p.251. See also I Fight to Live, p.136.

<sup>3</sup> The Gathering Storm, pp.171-72.

would not support any form of sanctions.<sup>1</sup> Baldwin also told him as much: "If there is even one chance in a hundred that war would follow from your police operation I have not the right to commit England."<sup>2</sup> Flandin, perhaps not too unwillingly, thereupon let negotiations replace 'action'.

The crisis provoked anxious debates in the Foreign Affairs Committee of the supporters of the National Government. On the evening of 12 March the position was fully discussed at a meeting of the Committee when the speakers included Austen Chamberlain, Churchill and Hoare, until recently Foreign Secretary. No official report of the proceedings were issued but The Times commented that the impression among those that attended was that quite three-quarters of those present were prepared to support France in her demand that the number of German troops in the demilitarised zone should be reduced, and that Germany should in some way prove to the world that future treaties would be observed. "Everyone felt that the breach of the Locarno Treaty must not be condoned by the British Government; but there was also general agreement that every effort must be made to find a peaceful solution of the deadlocks."<sup>3</sup> Five days later, on the 17, the discussion was resumed when nearly 200 MPs attended the Committee.<sup>4</sup>

The following day reports of a split in the Government ranks began to reach the newspapers. Thereupon the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs

<sup>1</sup> Feiling, The Life of Neville Chamberlain, p.279.

<sup>2</sup> The Gathering Storm, p.173.

<sup>3</sup> The Times, 13 March, 1936.

<sup>4</sup> According to Tom Jones, "In two meetings of back-benchers last week, the first, addressed by Austen and Winston, was on the whole pro-French; but two or three days later opinion had swung round to a majority of perhaps 5 to 4 for Germany". Diary entry, 4 April, 1936. A Diary With Letters, p.185. The Committee's about-turn was doubtless in part responsible for the forthcoming rumours of splits and divisions.



Committee, J de V Loder found it necessary to write a letter to The Times in order "to remove some of the misapprehensions which may have been created by certain accounts in the Press of yesterday's meeting". He discounted the idea that the proceedings were held in a "highly inflammable atmosphere, that a bellicose pro-French faction stood out against a pacifist pro-German faction, that secrecy was enjoined in order that a fundamental rift in the ranks of the Government supporters should be concealed, and that a possee of Parliamentary Private Secretaries, Whips and Junior Ministers stood ready to put a black mark against the name of any speaker who might dare to criticise official policy". The facts were quite contrary. Not only was there a perfectly calm atmosphere but there was an evident consensus of opinion that treaty obligations must be maintained and violent methods avoided. "Differences of opinion, of course, emerged, but they represented not so much rival policies as varying interpretation of the intention of foreign Governments, and of the effect of particular actions."<sup>1</sup>

Split there may not have been but marked divergencies of opinion, inevitably reflecting differing lines of future - both immediate and long-term - policy, there certainly were, divergencies skated over in Loder's letter. Katherine Atholl recalled that "two points of view emerged. One side for accepting the position; the other, headed by Churchill, stood out for a firmer line. I sided with Churchill."<sup>2</sup> The differences were also noted by Nicolson who remembered Victor Raikes urging that sanctions in any form against Germany would "mean war and that the country is not prepared to

<sup>1</sup> The Times, 20 March, 1936. Loder shortly succeeded to the title of Lord Wakehurst and his place as Chairman of the Committee was taken by Emrys-Evans.

<sup>2</sup> A Working Partnersnip, p.201.



fight for France. I reply by saying that while we must restrain France from any rash demands we must never betray her."<sup>1</sup>

It was not until the 26 March that the House of Commons debated the Rhineland question, almost three weeks after Hitler's move. Clearly nothing that Churchill and company could then say would reverse the situation, a conclusion reflected in their speeches that day. Nicolson, in fact, looked ahead to future difficulties, advocating a close association with France - an attitude common to those National backbenchers critical of the Nazi regime. Believing that what he was about to say flew in the face of a "great wave of pro-German feeling at this moment sweeping the country", he bewailed the fact Britain did not give the encouragement which she should have tendered to Weimar Germany in order "to build up all that is best in German life and character". Now "when Germany is strong, we fall upon our knees, we bow our foreheads in the dust, and we say "Heil Hitler"." While Britain could count on France not possibly recommending an aggressive war, did they know the same about Germany? "Is there any Member in the House who believes that Germany is no war danger?"<sup>2</sup>

Austen Chamberlain attempted to broaden the issue from the "small matter of the demilitarisation of the zone" to the great issues at stake at that moment. After strongly condemning German standards of conduct and German ethics he announced that the "real issue before us and Europe is whether in future the law of force shall prevail or whether there shall be substituted for it the force of law". European civilisation could not be based on a system in

<sup>1</sup> Diary entry for 17 March, Diaries and Letters, p.252. Raikes was the Member for South East Essex.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 26 March, 1936, Cols.1471-72.

which treaties bound the parties only so long as it suited their convenience. European peace could only be founded on confidence, and as long as this continued to be broken with impunity time and time again by the same Power, how could there be any confidence in the future in any new treaty that might be made?"<sup>1</sup> In a letter to his sister two days later he confessed that what he had said did not represent public opinion at present, "but what I say needs saying and can better be said by one like me, who will never again hold office, with a freedom and a plainness that Ministers and potential Ministers would be unwise to use."<sup>2</sup>

Boothby, Spears and Emrys-Evans also tried to call the attention of the House to the seriousness of the situation and the significance of what had happened three weeks before. None of them put much faith in Hitler's promises, and each saw the future need for resolute action on the part of Britain and other European countries. "We have to consider", said Emrys-Evans, "where we will draw the line . . . When she (Germany) finds a treaty inconvenient she is going to break it." The solution to the problem of Germany lay in making the League of Nations an effective body, but if that could not be, as Boothby more or less assumed, Britain might be forced back into a policy of alliances.<sup>3</sup>

Churchill, the last of the future anti-appeasers to speak, claimed that Nazi regime had gained an "enormous triumph", the repercussions of which were grave for Britain:

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 26 March, 1936, Cols.1482-87.

<sup>2</sup> Austen to Hilda Chamberlain, 28 March, 1936, Austen Chamberlain Papers.

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Debates, 26 March, 1936, Col.1509.

"the violation of the Rhineland is serious from the point of view of the menace to which it exposes Holland, Belgium and France. It is also serious from the fact that when it is fortified . . . it will produce great reactions on the European situation. It will be a barrier against Germany's back-door, or front-door, which will leave her free to sally out eastward and southward by the other doors."

In the company of the above members Churchill called for an alliance of the peace-loving countries to resist any further aggression collectively and within the framework of the League of Nations: "we should endeavour now with great resolution to establish effective collective security".<sup>1</sup>

But opinion in the country and the House was not with Churchill and company, and speculation over the Rhineland move soon faded away, as did Britain's interest in the diplomatic comings and goings that marked the aftermath of the Rhineland Coup. The centre of interest, much to the chagrin of the handful of aforementioned members on the Government benches, shifted from Germany back to Mussolini's venture in Abyssinia and its consequent effects on the future working of the League of Nations.

#### The Division of Opinion over How to Combat Germany

The Government's policy, so the critics felt, was one of mere drift, as if things would settle themselves if they were left alone. The conception of a strong and forceful direction to foreign policy seemed wholly alien to its way of thinking. Macmillan witheringly

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 26 March, 1936, Cols.1523-30.

attacked the men he held responsible:

"Drift is fatal - and drift is the habit which the two elder statesmen - the Prime Minister and the Lord President - seem to have adopted as a policy - almost a creed."<sup>1</sup>

Ironically it was not long before they were to lament what they had called for, a strong and forward line in foreign affairs, but provided by Chamberlain in what was considered the wrong direction.

With Baldwin's Government, the critics felt, it was quite uncertain what action Britain would take if trouble broke out anywhere in Europe: what Britain's attitude would be, for example, in the event of Austrian or Czech independence being threatened was unclear. This situation was an encouragement to Nazi Germany. Thus it was imperative to inform her at what point Britain intended to say enough, or as Nicolson put it, "let Europe and the world know exactly what we intend to do".<sup>2</sup> What was required was for the Government to take up a line and say to Germany, "We are not going to let this happen, you have got to stop."

Although the dissidents were agreed on the necessity for a clear and firm policy towards Germany, agreement on the actual details of the proposed policy was far from complete. Basically the differences revolved around two interlinking issues: the re-establishment of good relations with Italy, thereby preventing her falling into the German orbit; the utilisation of the League of Nations and the collective security provisions of the Covenant.

<sup>1</sup> The Star, 20 March, 1936. The reference is to Baldwin and MacDonald.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 26 March, 1936, Col.1039.



Leo Amery was a firm advocate of Anglo-Italian friendship and co-operation, the key to his solution of the German problem. He was convinced that there could be "no danger to compare with that of a German menace to the heart of the Empire coinciding with a Japanese attack on the whole of the Commonwealth east of Suez, while a hostile Italy barred our free passage of the Mediterranean and threatened the Suez Canal. If ideology was increasingly drawing the dictators together, history and geography alike made it all against Italy's interests to bring Germany down to the Brenner and to make an enemy of what was still the world's most formidable naval power."<sup>1</sup> Therefore he hoped that it would be possible to build a Four Power basis for peace in which Britain's part would be limited to the Locarno Treaty and friendly support of France and Italy in keeping Germany within bounds and preserving Austrian independence. Such were the views that Amery continued to expound, both in Parliament and the country, until Austria fell in March, 1938, the date he finally abandoned hope of restraining Hitler. Nevertheless he still clung, then more than ever, to that elusive Italian friendship.

To establish the policy that Amery advocated required the calling off of the folly of sanctions and a return to what for fifteen years had been the Tory conception of the League. This was the view he put to Baldwin, on 15 October, 1935, when he led a delegation of both Houses of Parliament to urge the Prime Minister to make a declaration that it would neither advocate nor be a party to any sanctions that could lead to war.<sup>2</sup> "British policy", he contended, "over the Italo-

<sup>1</sup> The Unforgiving Years, p.192.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson sets the delegation to Downing Street at "almost a hundred members"; The Anti-Appeasers, p.78. In fact there were only 23, including the following MPs: Sandeman Allen, R Blaker, Craven-Ellis, C Emmott, A Knox, A T Lennox-Boyd, T Levy, F Sanderson, W Smiles, C Taylor, J Walker-Smith, A Wilson, A R Wise and H G Williams.

Abyssinian dispute since the spring had been a complete and inexplicable reversal of what it had been since Austen Chamberlain made his statement at Geneva in 1925 rejecting the Geneva Protocol, and with it the whole sanctions system". The Locarno method had then been adopted instead, and by the spring of that year British foreign policy had been on the "verge of happy fruition" (a reference to Stresa). But now the Government had been pursuing a Peace Ballot policy, despite the fact that earlier that year Simon had criticised the ballot and the Conservative Central Office would have nothing to do with it. Baldwin made a short reply to the effect that he would give consideration to their views, but added that "there were obviously great difficulties in saying now in public exactly how far one would go". Small wonder Amery commented in his diary that the delegation went away "depressed and angry", convinced that the "whole thing figured in his mind as a useful aid to the General Election, and that he had no idea of its repercussions outside".<sup>1</sup> The sequel proved Amery's fears to be correct, casting doubts upon the sincerity of the Government's conversion to a League policy.

Apparently the idea of a delegation had been hatched at a meeting, convened by Amery, which met at the Constitutional Club on the 11th. Those present corresponded with the Imperial Policy Group of National Members, plus one or two others including Amery, although there were others not there who concurred with their point of view. It appears, from what the secretary, A R Wise, later made clear, that the Group endorsed the latter's views but "regarded him as a rather late convert to their policy of rearmament and withdrawal from the League of Nations. Also they rather suspected him of some ulterior

<sup>1</sup> Diary entry 15 October, 1935, The Unforgiving Years, p.176.

design", although exactly what was not stated.<sup>1</sup> When on the 23 October Amery further developed his views in the House of Commons just before it was dissolved for the general election, one member of the delegation, Sandeman Allen, was moved to write to the Prime Minister disassociating himself from the views expressed by Amery.

Amery continued to be the most outspoken opponent of the Government's course prior to the raising of sanctions. In February, 1936, he informed the House that it was time to get away from the "arid pedantry which would deal with great international issues on the principles of a stipendary magistrate's court, and would fine a great nation 40s. and costs for having started a public brawl".<sup>2</sup> By reforming the League's constitution, by making clear that it existed for conciliation and better understanding between nations, and that it neither claimed nor pretended to be a world justice of the peace nor a world policeman, it would be possible to "bring back to the League the nations that are now outside" and in the process renew the "precious friendship with the warm-hearted, gifted Italian people".<sup>3</sup>

As 1936 progressed Austen Chamberlain, too, questioned the wisdom of continuing sanctions against Italy. This appeared to be a complete reversal of the attitude he had adopted the previous year when, through his membership of the League of Nation's Union executive, he had seemed a leading supporter of collective security and was noted for his seemingly stalwart pro-League pronouncements. In July, 1935, for example, he told the House:

<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister's Papers, Premier 177.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 24 February, 1936, Col.382.

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Debates, 24 February, 1936, Col.984.



"What is at stake is the system of collective security. We cannot be a policeman of the world - that is an impossible position - but we ought to take our fair share in promoting security in co-operation with other members of the League particularly with those who in a particular case can give the most effective support and are best situated to uphold its authority. We ought to do that only after discussion in the Council, and if it can be obtained with that authority. But if we do not live up to these obligations, then the whole collective system is gone. It is not merely that it has failed to protect Abyssinia; it is that it is a broken reed for any European Power to rely upon."<sup>1</sup>

In fact Chamberlain had never been a confirmed League of Nations's man and had always held grave doubts about the efficacy of collective security, doubts that are quite apparent from a cursory reading of his private papers.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, like the Government, he had come down in favour of a League policy over Abyssinia, albeit after considerable soul-searching, as he remained convinced that Germany posed a more serious threat to the peace, and had hitherto hoped that Italy would continue to help to restrain her. Even then, however, he did not give up hope of restoring good relations with Italy, by reaching an honourable settlement of the conflict, and then return to the Stresa policy of holding Germany in bounds.

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 11 July, 1935, Col.567.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson has shown how Austen was persuaded by party leaders to join the League executive in order to keep the appearance that Conservatives were not wholly unfavourable to the League. Apparently Chamberlain thought the executive was composed of "some of the worst cranks I have ever known". The Anti-Appeasers, p.37. On February 9, 1935, he wrote to Ida remarking that he had had a cold that day but had pursued his work, "infecting I hope most of the members of the I.N.U. Executive Committee".



This inability to plump convincingly for either policy explains Chamberlain's attitude throughout the Abyssinian crisis and is best illustrated by the debate over the Hoare-Laval proposals. On 18 December, at a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Government supporters, Austen defended the agreement as the best of several bad alternatives. As the feeling was strongly against him he immediately changed course and raised the temperature by a speech of high moral indignation at the betrayal of the League.<sup>1</sup>

Again with the cracking of the Abyssinian resistance in the new year and Hitler's march into the Rhineland, Chamberlain swung away from sanctions back to a Stresa Front policy. Together, he hoped, Britain, France and Italy could come to terms with Germany or, if not, fortify peace against her. Thus, on 6 May he urged the Government to end sanctions on the grounds that they had failed to force Mussolini to withdraw from Abyssinia. The keynote of his speech was "Europe has been occupied with Abyssinia. It is true that only prolongation of the situation brings the peril of Europe daily nearer and nearer".<sup>2</sup>

Four days later he wrote that his speech had brought him a "shoal of abusive letters. I really did not want to make it but I felt it would be cowardly to shirk saying what I thought and that it might help Eden and the Government if I belled the cat. They are in an extraordinary difficult position with a public opinion that is all sentiment and passion and will not face realities. I wish that I could see any issue from our troubles, but I don't see my way at all clearly. That is not because I don't know my own mind but because I

<sup>1</sup> Templewood, Nine Troubled Years, pp.186-87.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 6 May, 1936, Col.958.

don't believe public opinion will at present allow us to pursue the only wise policy which is to call off sanctions and restore what is called the Stresa Front and then to sit down seriously to try to come to terms with Germany if possible and to fortify peace against her if it is not. But how is this to be done when the country is irritated with France and so determined to have no dealings with Italy? I am in fact very gloomy and unhappy."<sup>1</sup>

The following month he resigned his seat on the Executive Committee of the League of Nations Union, and his membership of the Union, in consequence of his disagreement on the sanctions issue. In his letter of resignation he wrote that the Union was committed to "a policy in which I can have no part . . . To continue sanctions, still more to increase them, would be futile for the purpose for which they were designed, and fraught with peril for the peace of Europe, already so dangerously threatened".<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless it must be stressed that he was not completely cynical about the League of Nations, unlike some of his National colleagues. Chamberlain was much attached to the underlying concept of the League, referring to it on one occasion as "the greatest hope that humanity had before it for the peaceful future of our common civilisation". At present, however, its action was slow and uncertain where swiftness and certainty were essential. Its imperfection involved great risks for those countries which, like Britain, based their policy on support of the League. He went on:

"If some day the League could realize, even imperfectly the conception of its founders, then they would have indeed the greatest instrument for preventing war from arising

<sup>1</sup> Austen to Hilda Chamberlain, 10 May, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> The Times, 29 June, 1936.

and for stopping war if the peace was broken, that the human mind has ever conceived."<sup>1</sup>

Boothby also shared Chamberlain's reaction to what had been the party's traditional attitude to the League of Nations' security provisions. At one time Boothby, no lukewarm supporter of the League, had been one of the tiny minority of Conservatives that had urged the application of oil sanctions against Italy. However the Government, in his view, had not pursued a League policy, nor even a non-League one, but was simply "dithering along, hoping for the best".<sup>2</sup> When it became clear that Abyssinia was collapsing he called for the ending of sanctions and the avoidance of more bloodshed. Like Chamberlain he hoped that Italy would once again side with Britain in keeping Germany within bounds: "I still had a sneaking hope that Mussolini would never tolerate German troops on the Brenner."<sup>3</sup>

Whereas Amery, Chamberlain and Boothby looked to a restoration of good relations with Italy in order to forestall Germany, most of those acutely aware of the German threat viewed the League, perhaps containing a reconciled Italy, as the necessary instrument. Neville Thompson is therefore incorrect in assuming that after the "Abyssinian fiasco most of the National Government's internal critics were too convinced that the League had failed to expect an effective barrier to German expansion to be created within its framework".<sup>4</sup> Although

<sup>1</sup> Speech at the Hotel Metropole, The Times, 2 April, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 9 April, 1936.

<sup>3</sup> I Fight To Live, p.145.

<sup>4</sup> The Anti-Appeasers, p.100.



considering the continuance of sanctions as inefficacious, they did not write the League off but saw its role as more localized, confined to Europe. With this in mind Katherine Atholl wrote in her resignation letter to the Edinburgh branch of the League of Nations Union:

"I observe that the President (Lord Cecil) is appealing to the branches of the Union to put pressure on the Government and on Parliament to maintain, and, if need be, increase the sanctions imposed by the League on Italy . . . In view of the grave dangers threatening the peace of Europe, I am of the opinion that sanctions should now be called off, and that efforts should be concentrated on building up an effective system of mutual assistance against aggression in Europe."<sup>1</sup>

The Duchess was growing increasingly anxious about German foreign policy. If German activity was causing concern in Western Europe what about the smaller states in the East?<sup>2</sup> When therefore, in November 1936, after thirteen years as a member of the House, she made her maiden speech on foreign affairs she stressed the importance of remembering Britain's obligation under the Covenant of the League to such countries as Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Rumania, earnestly begging the Government to regard it as "their first endeavour to keep alive and to strengthen the principle of

<sup>1</sup> The Times, 13 June, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, in an article published in April, 1937, she gave voice to a fear which became fact in 1938. "Czechoslovakia", she wrote, "may seem far removed from Great Britain, but, unless there is prompt collective action by the League in the event of Germany attempting to incorporate in the Reich the three million German subjects of Czechoslovakia, a democratic state . . . the integrity of which has been guaranteed by the League, may be unable to withstand Germany's superior military force and favourable strategic position." New Outlook, April, 1937.



mutual assistance within the League, at any rate for Europe".<sup>1</sup>

Within weeks of her speech Atholl was deluged with letters and telegrams from Eastern Europe, thanking her for the stand she had taken in the House of Commons. Among them were invitations to visit their countries. Atholl consulted Sir Robert Vansittart who encouraged her to go, stressing how these countries were being continually cajoled and threatened to throw in their lot with Germany. To offset this an immense amount of good could be done by Britons showing the flag and taking an interest in them. At length, in the early months of 1937, Atholl, accompanied by Eleanor Rathbone, the Independent Member for Combined University, paid a highly successful visit to Eastern Europe.

Winston Churchill's mind was working along similar lines. Toward the end of March 1936 he addressed the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Supporters of the National Government.<sup>2</sup> He told the assembled Members that for 400 years the foreign policy of England had been to oppose the strongest, most aggressive, most dominating Power on the continent. "It seems to me that all the old conditions present themselves again, and that our national salvation depends on our gathering once again all the forces of Europe to contain, to restrain and if necessary to frustrate German domination." Germany was arming in a manner which had never been seen before, and was led by a handful of triumphant desperadoes. Very soon they would have to choose on the one hand between economic and financial collapse or internal upheaval, and on the other a war which would have no other object, and which if successful could have no other result, than a Germanised

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 5 November, 1936, Col.563.

<sup>2</sup> The Gathering Storm, pp.182-86.

Europe under Nazi control. "It is at this stage that the spacious conception and extremely vital organisation of the League of Nations presents itself as a prime factor . . . it harmonises perfectly with all our past methods and actions . . . in the fostering and fortifying of the League of Nations will be found the best means of defending our island security". In summing up he set out his three main propositions: "first, that we must oppose the would-be dominator or potential aggressor; secondly, that Germany, under its present Nazi regime, and with its prodigious armaments, so swiftly developing, fills unmistakably that part; thirdly, that the League of Nations rallies many countries, and unites our own people here at home in the most effective way to control the would-be aggressor".

This was to be Churchill's continual theme in the later thirties. In July, at the University of Bristol, of which he was Chancellor, he appealed for a League of Nations to be created in Europe which would confront a potential aggressor with overwhelming force.<sup>1</sup> And again, in a newspaper article he wrote the month before:

"safety will only come through a combination of pacific nations armed with overwhelming power . . . there must be a Grand Alliance of all the nations who wish for peace against the Potential Aggressor . . . Let all the nations and states be invited to band themselves together upon a simple, single principle: 'who touches one, touches all'."<sup>2</sup>

Privately he informed Sir Maurice Hankey that he would hammer away at the League for a complete encirclement of Germany. The various

<sup>1</sup> The Times, 6 July, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Step By Step, article dated 12 June, 1936, p.38.

countries of the Baltic, Holland, Belgium, France, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, the Balkan States, Russia and Poland, must all, as Members of the League, be induced to make such an effort as to deter and, if necessary, stop an aggression by Germany. As part of this plan Churchill had the "fantastic" idea, so Hankey thought, of sending to the Baltic a sufficient part of the British Fleet to ensure superiority over Germany in that sea. Its mere arrival, with its menace to German communications, would, he suggested, be a severe shock to German opinion and put a stop to further mischief.<sup>1</sup>

In the light of these statements it is interesting to note that W R Rock, in his study of the eighteen months following Eden's resignation, has assumed that Churchill on 14 March, 1938, put forward a "new policy", described as the 'grand alliance', which gave "definite form to the vague Labour-Liberal demand for a return to collective security". He writes that "after the German occupation of Austria, Winston Churchill proposed to the House of Commons his 'grand alliance' - a number of nations gathered together in a solemn treaty for mutual defence against aggression".<sup>2</sup> In fact there was nothing 'new' about the grand alliance for it was part of Churchill's stock in hand after, but including, 1936. And the Labour-Liberal call for a return to collective security by March 1938 was not 'vague' - save for that of a small number of Labourites - but had taken the precise shape that Churchill was also advocating.

In effect Churchill, Atholl and a majority of those alarmed at German policies saw in the League the machinery to secure a European

<sup>1</sup> Cabinet Minutes. Conversation between Hankey and Churchill, 21 April, 1936. Cab 21/435. Hankey commented that "all this seemed to be very fantastic and to ignore many realities".

<sup>2</sup> Appeasement on Trial, p.X, 322.

coalition against Hitler.<sup>1</sup> What their beliefs boiled down to was the simple, old-fashioned formula which Britain had followed for so long - the maintenance of the balance of power. As Emrys-Evans put it: "We will never allow in the future as we have never allowed in the past only one nation to become predominant on the Continent of Europe. We have always gravitated towards those Powers which will oppose the hegemony of any one nation."<sup>2</sup> In this way, collective security, or an understanding with those European powers whose interests were congruent with Britain's own, had been a principle of British foreign policy for generations. Support of a localized League therefore was not altruistic but "corresponded to our own vital interests" for in "defending the League we defended our own shores".<sup>3</sup>

The practical conclusion to be drawn from this was that Britain should become more involved in European affairs and direct its efforts to building a front to contain Germany. Yet this was exactly the course the National Government was reluctant to follow, for it would mean opposing German expansion in the east and dividing Europe into two armed camps, like those which had lurched into war in 1914. Rather they saw the situation as requiring a different approach, the path of reconciliation with Germany, which would offer an escape from the necessity and the inherent danger of the above.

The critics' conception of the League laid great emphasis on the overwhelming force that had to be assembled to make the institution effective. During the June debates on the abandonment of sanctions

<sup>1</sup> At the same time they hoped that by such a policy the sympathy, and ultimately the help, of the United States might most easily be enlisted.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 23 June, 1936, Col.785.

<sup>3</sup> Austen Chamberlain, The Times, 2 April, 1936.



Nicolson and Wolmer pinned their faith on the construction of a new League from the ruins of the old. "One of substance", said Nicolson, "not shadow, and of practice not theory. It is by the organisation, the co-ordination and the planning of force that the new League of Nations must be built."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, but more graphically, Wolmer told the Commons:

"There must be the employment of the policemen's truncheon against the gangster . . . unless there is that force behind the League, that power of armaments in the hands of those nations who are loyal supporters of peace, then the authority of the League can never be what nearly every member of this House wants it to be."<sup>2</sup>

Though this was a more realistic conception of the League, it was largely restricted to the preservation of the European status quo. Churchill clearly made the distinction. The League, he said, was "the best means of defending our island security, as well as maintaining grand universal causes with which we have very often found our own interests in natural accord."<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, the attitude of Churchill and those of likemind to the extra-European problem of Abyssinia, something which ranked as a 'grand universal cause', was equivocal. There was a natural aversion against involvement in an area where Britain had no real interests. They also knew Germany to be a far greater danger to the peace of the world than Italy, and in their hopes of keeping

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 23 June, 1936, Col.746.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Col.765.

<sup>3</sup> The Gathering Storm, p.184.

the peace they had no wish to drive Mussolini into the arms of Hitler.

It has even been suggested that Churchill remained out of the country during the autumn of 1935 so as to avoid having to pronounce for or against Italy.<sup>1</sup> This is not strictly accurate. Churchill's hopes of a League to restrain Germany decided him to endorse the Government's policy towards Italy, but it is true that he remained seriously disturbed at the situation. He dreaded the movement of a first-class power, as Italy was then rated, from one side to the other, and did not think that Abyssinia was a very reputable state. He regretted that it had ever been admitted to the League. These misgivings he expressed in a letter to Austen Chamberlain:

"I am very unhappy. It would be a terrible deed to smash up Italy, and it will cost us dear . . . I do not think we ought to have taken the lead in such a vehement way."<sup>2</sup>

Such apprehensions were clearly apparent in his first parliamentary speech on Abyssinia, on 24 October, before the dissolution, when he made clear his support of the Government although wondering at its rashness. He was not brief, but, in essence, said that the bounds of caution had been over-stepped. The Government had tried Mussolini sorely. Members were asked to remember that the original error had been the admission of Abyssinia to the League, and now a war had been risked for a barbarous State. He urged the Government not to abandon hopes of an acceptable compromise, trusting that the hope "of a satisfactory settlement being reached" was not completely dead. Then casting off gloomy misgivings, if not changing course, he declared

<sup>1</sup> Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War, p.123.

<sup>2</sup> The Gathering Storm, p.152.

that the crisis had made the League into a living organism, and ended with a tremendous eulogy of the new-born League:

"The League of Nations has passed from shadow into substance, from theory into practice, from rhetoric into reality. We see a structure always majestic, but hitherto shadowy, which is now being clothed with life and power, and endowed with coherent thought and concerted action."<sup>1</sup>

Churchill did in fact remain out of the country during the Hoare-Laval storm. His reason for remaining in Barcelona, prolonging a holiday planned prior to the election, was fear of doing himself harm politically. An immediate return to England, so his friends warned him, would be regarded as a personal challenge to the Government. In retrospect he thought he ought to have come home. "I might have brought an element of decision and combination to the anti-Government gatherings which would have ended the Baldwin regime. Perhaps a Government under Sir Austen Chamberlain might have been established at this moment."<sup>2</sup> This exaggerates the determination and numbers of those angered by the Hoare-Laval proposals, for on Amery's count, if

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 24 October, 1935, Col.741. Thompson has written that Chamberlain "was in the House during the debate but rather surprisingly took no part in it. Perhaps he was deterred by the difficulty of trying to reconcile his contradictory inclinations in order to present a coherent argument". The Anti-Appeasers, p.84. In fact Chamberlain did account for his non-involvement in the debate. In a letter to his sister Ida, dated 26 October, Chamberlain explained that he had had a cold and a woolly head "which was one of the reasons why I did not speak in the debate - the others being that Hoare's and Eden's speeches both put the case very well while Winston in his admirable speech on the last day said the only things which I desired to add."

<sup>2</sup> The Gathering Storm, p.162. From his papers it appears that Chamberlain was more attracted by the prospects of the Foreign Office, the bait that Baldwin dangled before him in order to ensure his support. See Thompson pp.91-95.



the Government had persisted in its course, only a score of Conservatives would have voted against the Government while a few more might have abstained.<sup>1</sup> Even Chamberlain's celebrated outburst at the Foreign Affairs Committee, Amery was informed, had never meant to imply that he or any other Conservative would vote against the Government.<sup>2</sup> More to the point, was Churchill in any position to lead a revolt over the Hoare-Laval proposals? Like Chamberlain, he had pressed the Government to find a compromise settlement to the Abyssinian conflict and only by standing on his head could he have been in a position to lead irate League supporters against the Foreign Secretary's agreement. Seen in this light Churchill's friends were correct to advise him to stay away as he clearly would have further tarnished his already weak reputation for consistency.

Churchill's position on Abyssinia is well illustrated by reference to the after-dinner conversation he had with Hankey in April 1936. At one point he advocated the deliverance of an ultimatum informing the Italians that unless they agreed to come to terms with the League the Suez Canal would be closed. "He talked", Hankey noted, "of delivering heavy bombing attacks on Italy which showed he had not thought out how it was to be done, from what bases or with what aircraft".<sup>3</sup> Later on in the discussion Churchill, somewhat contradictorally, mentioned the possibility of inducing Italy, as a member of the League, to prevent an aggression by Germany. The conclusion to be drawn from the Hankey memorandum is that the Abyssinian episode

<sup>1</sup> The Unforgiving Years, p.185.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.185.

<sup>3</sup> Cabinet Papers, 21 April, 1936. A seemingly impulsive statement by Churchill, comparable to his suggestion of sending part of the British Fleet into the Baltic.



was something of an embarrassment to Churchill and of little moment compared to the threat emanating from Germany.

In June Churchill and a majority of those who shared his views were to support the Government against the vote of censure moved by the Opposition and thus to acquiesce in the abandonment of sanctions. An analysis of the division list showed that only two Conservative MPs, Macmillan and Adams, took the serious step of voting in the Opposition lobby. Macmillan, however, accepted 'the logic of abandoning sanctions' but opposed the Government on the grounds that he could not see "how I could honourably go back upon those who had voted for me".<sup>1</sup> After some reflection he wrote to the Prime Minister that "although I am still in favour of a National Government in these difficult times, and shall probably be found in the great majority of cases in the Government Lobby . . . I am unable to give the Government the support which it has, perhaps, the right to expect from those receiving the Government Whip. It occurs to me, therefore, that it would perhaps be more satisfactory if I was no longer regarded as being among the official supporters of the present administration." Baldwin replied formally to the effect that he regretted the decision which Macmillan "thought it necessary to take".<sup>2</sup>

By contrast Adams did not accept the 'logic' of abandoning sanctions, nor a limited concept of European collective security. His was the pure doctrine of the Covenant, an all-embracing collective security, touching all Members of the League:

<sup>1</sup> Winds of Change, p.458.

<sup>2</sup> Winds of Change, p.459. Macmillan, as MP for Stockton-on-Tees, was the holder of a vulnerable seat where the League's 'vote' counted. The same could be said of Leeds West which Adams represented.

"If we do not today make a reality both in Europe and in North East Africa of the principle of collective security, if we, in a word, do not dedicate the strength of all to the defence of each, we are deferring a collision whose momentum may be increased by the postponement."<sup>1</sup>

Here was no 'grand universal cause', as Churchill had put it, nor a quixotic impulse, but the protection of British interests in the maintenance of those of other nations.<sup>2</sup> Doubtless Adams was influenced in his thinking by his membership, throughout the thirties, of the Executive Committee of the League of Nations Union. Despite his profound disagreement with the Unionist party he did not resign the whip, nor was he deprived of it.

These two apart, the critics acquiesced in the Government's abandonment of sanctions although it was another damaging blow to the effectiveness of the League, the institution on which they placed their hopes. The contradiction between advocating collective security against Germany while resigning themselves to the most flagrant violation of the Covenant by Italy, did not occur to them. Moreover, as to the hopes, which some of them held, of renewed friendship with Italy, Labourite Price saw through them:

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 21 May, 1936, Col.1039.

<sup>2</sup> As was his indicated by another speech, made to the Commons the same month: "Does not the League of Nations exist to protect our interests no less than those of other nations? To put it at the very lowest, it is the worst patriotism to ignore the danger to Egypt and to our communications with the East." The Member for East Surrey, Charles Emmott: "A Tory after all!". Adams: "That is the first time that it has ever been alleged against me that I am not a member of the Conservative Party". House of Commons Debates, 29 May, 1936, Col.2484.

"What they are now envisaging is the possibility of buying off Mussolini, settling him in the Eastern Mediterranean and bringing him back to the Stresa Front, using him as a make-weight against Hitlerite Germany . . . They think that they can buy off these aggressors one against the other, but these dictators are no fools. They will play us off one against the other. That is what they are doing."<sup>1</sup>

Although the National Government's internal critics can be criticised for their ambivalent attitude throughout the Abyssinian dispute, Thompson goes too far when he attributes the "end of collective security" to their "failure to put pressure on the Government to continue the course on which it was embarked".<sup>2</sup> And again he writes:

"By failing to press the administration to stand by the policy it had announced in September, 1935, the back-benchers were not only in a weak position to demand resistance to Germany but they were also largely responsible for breaking the instrument which could have been used to restrain Hitler."<sup>3</sup>

They were in a weak position and, failing to put pressure on the administration, in part responsible for the breakdown of the collective security system. But to attribute a major portion of the blame to a handful of back-benchers, excluded from office, is stretching

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 18 June, 1936, Col.1438.

<sup>2</sup> The Anti-Appeasers, p.78.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.100.

credibility too far. Baldwin and the National Government were the main arbiters of Britain's fate and it is at their door that one must place the prime responsibility for the consequences of the policy pursued over Abyssinia.

### Support for the League

Churchill's support of the League of Nations was not merely to secure the encirclement of Germany. He favoured, according to Hankey, "continued support of the League and was very down on Conservative MPs who he said were widely criticising our League policy. He himself has no illusions about the weakness of the League, but sees that the British people will not take rearmament seriously except as part of the League policy."<sup>1</sup> By linking rearmament with the League of Nations, Churchill hoped, the public would readily accept the most rapid large-scale rearmament of Britain.

The twin policy of 'arms' and the 'covenant' was to be the name given to the movement which sprang up in the autumn of 1936. Churchill saw this as a "great drawing together of men and women of all parties in England who saw the perils of the future, and were resolute upon practical measures to secure our safety and the cause of freedom, equally menaced by both the totalitarian impulsion and our Government's complacency. Our plan was the most rapid large-scale rearmament of Britain, combined with the complete acceptance and employment of the authority of the League of Nations. I called this policy 'Arms and the Covenant'."<sup>2</sup> In fact

<sup>1</sup> Cabinet Papers. Conversation between Hankey and Churchill, 21 April, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> The Gathering Storm, p.191.



Churchill's title may have been retrospective, for Sir Walter Citrine, a leading figure in the movement, had no recollection of it, nor are there any contemporary references to it. It is probable as Citrine recalled, that the organisation was known as Defence of Freedom and Peace, to which there are allusions in newspapers of the thirties.<sup>1</sup>

Arms and the Covenant or Defence of Freedom and Peace appears to have been the fruit of an association of two groups, the World Anti-Nazi Council and Focus. Neville Thompson has these organisations muddled as he refers to the 1936 movement as Focus for the Defence of Freedom and Peace, which were in fact two entities, although the latter was in part made up of the former. To give the World Anti-Nazi Council its full name it was the Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi Council to Champion Human Rights, and had been formed in America by an eminent lawyer, Samuel Untermyer. As its title suggests it was designed to be a non-sectarian and non-political body whose membership was open to anyone who subscribed to the principles of democracy and freedom. When Citrine, in the spring of 1936, paid a visit to the United States, the idea was conceived, out of a conversation with Untermyer, of the establishment of a British section of the Council, both to awaken the British public to a realisation of the German menace and to take "lawful measures to boycott German goods until such times as complete freedom of belief and all civil rights are restored to all German subjects without distinction".<sup>2</sup> In practice the latter activity involved two things: persuading wholesalers and retailers to buy

<sup>1</sup> Letter dated 16 November, 1972, from Lord Citrine to author.

<sup>2</sup> Information derived from the Rathbone Papers. Citrine was the President of the Council, George Lathan, Member for the Park Division of Sheffield, was Chairman, and its membership included Vyvyan Adams.

British and not German goods: mobilising public opinion to boycotting German goods in the shops.<sup>1</sup> To such ends pamphlets were published, information circulated and public meetings organised. One such meeting, given extensive press coverage, was a lunch organised on 19 April, 1936, at which Citrine, Norman Angell and Wickham Steed spoke strongly about the "new savagery" in Germany putting the clock back to the Dark Ages.<sup>2</sup>

As 1936 progressed the Committee of the Council felt that it needed the presence of some prominent personalities at its series of meetings in order to arouse the public to an understanding of the threat Germany constituted to the peace. Churchill's name was suggested, and at length an approach was made which resulted in the association of the Anti-Nazi Council with Focus. The latter body has been described by one of its leading members as a "small group of likeminded individuals swimming against the tide - not only of government policy but of the prevailing public attitude and mood".<sup>3</sup> The aim of this grouping, as was apparent from Churchill's address to the inaugural meeting, was to educate the nation as to the nature of the Nazi regime, building up a public ground-swell of feeling strong enough to force the British Government into active opposition to Hitler.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The TUC, which was associated with the Council, instituted a boycott of German goods and services, but Citrine later confessed, "it was not very successful". Men and Work, p.356.

<sup>2</sup> Daily Herald, 20 April, 1936.

<sup>3</sup> Lady Violet Bonham Carter, Foreword to Spier: Focus, p.9.

<sup>4</sup> D C Watt, Personalities and Policies, p.133.

It held its first meeting at the Victoria Hotel in June, 1935, when 16 persons had attended including Churchill, Sinclair, Locker-Lampson, Wickham Steed and Violet Bonham Carter. Churchill spoke after the lunch, beginning with "some general references to the unsatisfactory state of our defences compared with the all-out effort being made by the Nazis. The Government was just shutting its eyes to these disquieting facts. Virtually the whole population of Germany was being turned into a gigantic war-machine and the individual German was being denied every personal right and freedom, reduced to a mere cog in the wheel of destruction . . . At present the British public and press are very much the victims of the Nazi Ministry of Information and its lies. . . . The task of this assembly is thus as difficult as it is indispensable and urgent. We must make an all-party effort, create a source from which unbiased and objective information will constantly flow to the government and to the whole country. We must spare no effort to enlist the support of our community irrespective of party, creed and class." At the end of his speech he urged that the group should issue a manifesto and attempt to recruit members, and a drafting committee for this purpose was set up, with Steed as its chairman.<sup>1</sup>

The existing members proceeded to make contact with a number of prominent and representative individuals, many of whom expressed agreement with their aims and principles. But when it came to getting actual support "we discovered to our distress that most of those who had expressed their agreement with us, drew a sharp distinction between their personal views and an official statement

<sup>1</sup> Focus, pp.20-21.

with which they would be prepared to be publicly associated".<sup>1</sup>

Such an association might lead people to believe that these were the views of the party or organisation to which they belonged. In order to overcome the difficulty it was decided that the group should not become formalized, but should describe itself as "a 'focus' for defence of freedom and peace, and to have neither rules nor members".<sup>2</sup>

Those connected with Focus included 17 Members of Parliament: Unionists - Atholl, Cartland, Austen Chamberlain, Churchill, Emrys-Evans, Sandys, Locker-Lampson and John McEwen<sup>3</sup>; Labourites - Cocks, Fletcher, Arthur Henderson and Noel-Baker; Liberals - Dingle Foot, de Rothschild and Sinclair; Independents - Eleanor Rathbone and Sir Arthur Salter.<sup>4</sup> There were also distinguished outsiders such as Lord Cecil, Kingsley Martin and Professor Gilbert Murray.

<sup>1</sup> Focus, p.24. Dalton is a case in point. In his memoirs he confessed to being in sympathy but taking no overt part in it, a fact that Thompson found revealing considering that the Labour Party's "apologists maintain that armed collective security was orthodox doctrine by the end of 1936". The Anti-Appeasers, p.130. Most apologists would put a later date than 1936, and Thompson's censure underestimates Labour politics and the weight of Dalton's explanation: "We should have lessened our influence within our party, if, on this controversial question, (arms) we had publicly associated with members of other parties". The Fateful Years, p.111.

<sup>2</sup> Focus, p.25.

<sup>3</sup> McEwen: Diplomatic Service, 1920-29; MP Berwick and Haddington, 1931-45.

<sup>4</sup> Salter: General Secretary Reparation Commission, 1920-22; Director Economic and Financial Section, League of Nations, June 1919 - January, 1920, and 1922-31; Professor of Political Theory, Oxford University, 1934-44; MP Oxford University 1937-50; Parliamentary Secretary to Ministry of Shipping, 1939-41.



As the membership increased so did confidence. It was decided to work out a detailed programme of activity, of which the main feature was a public meeting in the Albert Hall. This was planned in conjunction with Citrine and the World Anti-Nazi Council, and was intended to be the first of a series, in which leading representatives of the main political parties and the distinguished outsiders would put forward the case for strengthening the League of Nations and British defences.<sup>1</sup> Originally it was hoped to hold the meeting in April but Churchill pressed for a postponement, as he indicated in a letter to Lord Cecil:

"After our talk I told Mr Richards of the Anti-Nazi Council that I thought it would be absurd to have an Albert Hall meeting against the dangers of the German dictatorship on April 29 within a few days of your Albert Hall meeting of May 8 against the Italian Dictatorship, and that it must be put off till later in the year. This has accordingly been done."<sup>2</sup>

It is apparent from the same letter that Cecil and "his friends", as one would expect, tended to favour the League as opposed to the defence plank, so that Churchill was moved to argue:

"Once you and your friends have formulated your principles you must face 'ways and means'. You need a secular arm. I might help with that.

It seems a mad business to confront the dictators without weapons or military force, and at the same time to

<sup>1</sup> Churchill (The Gathering Storm, pp.195-96) gives the incorrect impression that the Albert Hall gathering was the culminating meeting of the campaign, when it was in fact the beginning of it. Boyle has it that Bracken "planned" the meeting, Poor, Dear Brendan, p.215. He did not.

<sup>2</sup> Churchill to Cecil, 9 April, 1936. Cecil Papers.

try to tame and cow the spirit of our people with peace films, anti-recruiting propaganda and resistance to defence measures. Unless the free and law-abiding nations are prepared to organise, arm and combine, they are going to be smashed up. This is going to happen quite soon. But I believe we still have a year to combine and marshall superior forces in defence of the League and its Covenant."<sup>1</sup>

It is possible that Cecil's associates expressed fears concerning the future of the League of Nations' Union. At any rate, in October, Churchill felt moved to write another letter reassuring Cecil that there was "no question of the eclipse of the New Commonwealth Society nor the League of Nations Union, but only for the fusion of practical working effort and for united advance".<sup>2</sup> In the event the Albert Hall meeting was held under the auspices of the League of Nations Union, as were later gatherings that were staged around the country in the later 1930s, which explains why they were so frequently attributed to the Union.

Prior to the meeting at the Albert Hall, finally set for December, the objects and principles of Defence of Freedom and Peace were announced:

#### "Objects

To unite British citizens, irrespective of politics or creed;

In defence of Freedom, secured by democratic government and public law;

<sup>1</sup> Churchill to Cecil, 9 April, 1936. Cecil Papers.

<sup>2</sup> Churchill to Cecil, 21 October, 1936.

In resistance to all efforts to diminish or destroy this freedom by violence at home or attack from abroad; and  
In support of our international duty to join with others in preserving peace and withstanding armed aggression.

### Principles

The cause of ordered freedom is in danger. Peace itself is in jeopardy. The foes of both are vocal, organised and strong. "Defence of Freedom and Peace" offers common ground to all who hold that without peace, freedom cannot be sure; and that without freedom there can be no true peace.

The central mass of temperate, tolerant humanity must not be found feeble in action and leadership. Parliamentary governments of self-ruling peoples need, therefore, to know they are upheld by the resolute will of citizens who are ready to stand for the rights of man and for justice among the nations.

The ideals enshrined in the League Covenant and the Kellogg Pact grew out of man's bitter need after uncountable sacrifice. Those ideals alone must stand between the world and nameless woe. Great Britain must be strong to bear her part in banning war from the life of nations, so that well-guarded peace may lighten the burden of the peoples and offer to states great and small just redress for proved wrong.

British leadership and action may yet save peace and civilisation. The aim of 'Defence of Freedom and Peace' is to prosper this work."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Focus, pp.75-6.

On 2 December, the eve of the great meeting in the Albert Hall, Churchill wrote to Lord Cecil indicating the line he would be taking in his speech, the hopes he had for the future, and the fears he held regarding potential Tory supporters:

"At the present time the improved attitude of Poland and the Little Entente give me hopes that these four countries in more or less good relations with Russia, will form an Eastern insurance group similar to that which exists in the west between England, France and Belgium. In my speech tomorrow I shall be indicating that the mutual association of these groups through the League of Nations and under the Covenant give the League for the first time a very great nucleus of solid strength against at least one potential aggressor. Nothing could give better hope of preventing a war. Any undue stressing of Russia would simply drive an overwhelming amount of Tories into violent opposition to the League of Nations cause. But I think on the whole matters are moving in the direction you wish, and the League may well become more powerful."<sup>1</sup>

Although Churchill's assessment of the Tory reactions to the stressing of Russia was realistic, that of Russia's good relations with Eastern European countries was not. For them there was little to choose between Germany and Russia, and this was to prove a formidable obstacle in 1939.

The following day the Albert Hall meeting went ahead as planned. Citrine was in the chair, while leading members of the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Parties, the League of Nations Union and the trade

<sup>1</sup> Churchill to Cecil, 2 December, 1936. Cecil Papers.



union movement were present on the platform.<sup>1</sup> Looking back on this remarkable gathering Macmillan has written that those involved might, given favourable circumstances, "have been able to force a change of policy or of government or of both".<sup>2</sup> It is remarks like this, and similar sentiments expressed by contemporary political commentators, that have probably led Thompson into writing that Defence of Freedom and Peace was a "move to put Churchill at the head of a Popular Front", and of Churchill failing to "achieve office as the leader of the collective security forces".

Whatever the hopes of a number of those involved, it would do many of the participants less than justice to assume that as a body they were forging a new political alliance and endeavouring to secure office for Churchill. Citrine directed most of his opening remarks at the meeting to clearing up that sort of "speculation about our purposes". "We have been described", he went on, "as a group who have come together for the purpose of forming a popular front or a centre party, or some new political combination. There is not a vestige of truth in any of these statements. None of us would be associated with any such manoeuvre."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Over 20 Members of Parliament appeared on the platform: Unionists - Atholl, Boothby, Churchill, C K Entwistle, Oscar Guest, Emrys-Evans, Locker-Lampson, Moore-Brabazon, Sandys and Wolmer; Liberal Nationals - Bernays and William Mabane; Labourites - Haden-Guest, Joseph Henderson, Wedgwood and John Wilmot; Liberals - Richard Acland, Kingsley Griffith, Harris, de Rothschild and Sinclair; Independent - Rathbone. Messages of support were also received from Austen Chamberlain, Clynes, Seely, Adams and Cartland.

<sup>2</sup> Winds of Change, p.479.

<sup>3</sup> Daily Herald, 4 December, 1936.

Nor were they there, Citrine insisted, as representatives of groups, parties or organisations. Everyone who spoke from the platform did so in his or her personal capacity. "All of us in our own separate ways have come to the conclusion that our people must be brought to a recognition of the grave danger to peace and freedom through which the world is passing."<sup>1</sup>

Churchill, however, was the main speaker and got "a tremendous reception" indicative of the way his stock had been rising.<sup>2</sup> The keynote of his speech was that of "arms and the covenant":

"If we wish to stop this coming war - if coming it is - we must in the year that lies before us - nay - in the next six months - gather together the great nations, all as well armed as possible and united under the Covenant of the League in accordance with the principles of the League, and in this way we may reach a position where we can invite the German people to join this organisation of world security; where we can invite them to take their place freely in the circle of nations to preserve peace, and where we shall be able to answer them that we seek no security for ourselves which we do not extend more freely to them.

We should rally and unite under the League of Nations the greatest number of strongly armed nations that we can marshall. Let us invite Germany to take her part among us. Then we should be sincerely believed, having done not only our best but having succeeded in warding off from the world

<sup>1</sup> Focus, p.62.

<sup>2</sup> Lady Violet Bonham Carter, Daily Telegraph, 11 March, 1965.

calamities and horrors the end of which no man can foresee."<sup>1</sup>

The Albert Hall meeting took place at the very moment the Abdication crisis was upon Britain. Although not permitted to voice a few words of sympathy for Edward at the meeting, he subsequently pleaded, in the House of Commons, for time and deliberation to see whether a way out could not be found.<sup>2</sup> His intervention was ill received and he was denied a proper hearing. Such taunts as 'Drop it', 'Twister' were hurled at him.<sup>3</sup> Winterton has described this episode as "one of the angriest manifestations I have ever heard directed against any man in the House of Commons".<sup>4</sup>

"In five minutes", noted Nicolson, "he had undone . . . the patient reconstruction work of two years".<sup>5</sup> All the effect of the Albert Hall meeting was destroyed - first by the Abdication and secondly by the catastrophic fall in Churchill's prestige. Churchill himself recorded that all the forces he had "gathered together in 'Arms and the Covenant', of which I conceived myself to be the mainspring, were estranged or dissolved, and I was myself so smitten in public opinion that it was the almost universal view that my political life was at last ended".<sup>6</sup> Kingsley Martin, a member of 'Focus', reinforced this verdict:

<sup>1</sup> The Times, 4 December, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Citrine refused to chair the meeting if Churchill alluded to the Abdication Crisis. "But though Winston was obliged to bow to Citrine's ultimatum, I could see how much he minded being over-ridden". Bonham Carter, Daily Telegraph, 11 March, 1965.

<sup>3</sup> Diary entry, 7 December, 1936. The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.95.

<sup>4</sup> Orders of the Day, p.223.

<sup>5</sup> Letter dated 9 December, 1936. Diaries and Letters, p.284.

"I think that Churchill's growing reputation has been damaged; that if he held an Albert Hall meeting now Citrine would hesitate to take the chair for him and that people who were rallying round him are beginning to mutter again about his notorious 'lack of judgement'."<sup>1</sup>

Churchill has suggested that but for the Abdication crisis the Arms and the Covenant Movement would not only have gained respect for its viewpoint but have become dominant. "Here", Amery commented, "wishful thinking bore little relation to reality. My own recollection is that the movement never showed any sign of influencing the main body of the two leading Parties."<sup>2</sup> Even if Amery's impressions were incorrect, which it is unlikely, Arms and the Covenant could not have continued much longer in its existing form. The Labour and trade union members, particularly Citrine, were finding it increasingly difficult to maintain their association with Churchill in the face of widespread criticism. An example of this was when John Marchbank, General Secretary of the National Union of Railwaymen, confessed in the Union's Journal to a "sense of relief in hearing that it has been decided to reconstitute in the House of Commons the trade union group of Labour Members which existed in previous Parliaments. The object is to concentrate the influence of the trade union members of

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The Gathering Storm, p.192. Churchill shared this view. Meeting Beaverbrook in Paris, he said that his political career was over and that the time had come for him to retire. Taylor, Beaverbrook, p.488. Churchill also told J C C Davidson that "his political career was finished". Memoirs, p.415.

<sup>1</sup> New Statesman and Nation, 12 December, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> The Unforgiving Years, p.180.



Parliament in the counsels of the Party and the work of Parliament."<sup>1</sup>  
 His hope was that trade union MPs would come down firmly against any entanglements with members of other parties, like that with Churchill in Arms and the Covenant.<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to note that Naylor has argued that "the effect of the failure of the campaign was to divert the pro-rearmament activities back to the conversion of the parliamentary party to the acceptance of rearmament. In that sense the failure of Arms and the Covenant conceivably was a boon to the Labour Party".<sup>3</sup> There is little evidence however to support such a view. Few of Labour's rearmers took part in the campaign as they were probably conscious, as Dalton was, that they might thereby have undermined their influence for rearmament within the party. In this sense the failure of Arms and the Covenant had little effect either way on the Labour Party.

Although the forces assembled in Arms and the Covenant were dissolved, Focus continued to function until the outbreak of war - "fighting against this Nazi danger and to enlighten the public both at home and overseas, and the British government."<sup>4</sup> Public meetings were held in Manchester, Hull, Sheffield, Birmingham and other towns, and were moderately successful, but they were relatively few in number

<sup>1</sup> The Times, 27 November, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> See also Dalton's comments, p.259.

<sup>3</sup> Labour's International Policy, p.172.

<sup>4</sup> Focus, p.84. The Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi Council also survived, organising meetings, issuing pamphlets etc. See Labour Party Conference Report, 1937, p.16.

and were inadequately reported in the press, if they were noticed at all. This can, in part, be ascribed to the failure of the group's more important members to lend their oratorical presence after the meeting in December 1936 at the Albert Hall. Eugen Spier, however, blamed the lack of press coverages on the control exercised, on the one hand by Dawson through The Times and, on the other hand, by the press lords, Beaverbrook and Rothermere. But it is odd that no reports were carried by the Daily Herald, the News Chronicle, the Manchester Guardian or the Daily Telegraph, all of whom were to some degree at least anti-appeasement.

Focus Pamphlets such as Churchill's The Truth about Hitler and Amery's Hitler's Claim for Colonies were published and were issued on request.<sup>1</sup> Group lunches also continued, and Nicolson recorded attending one. In a letter to his wife, he wrote: "I went to such an odd luncheon yesterday. It is called 'the Focus Group', and is one of Winston's things . . . I was made to make a speech without any notice and was a trifle embarrassed . . . Don't be worried, my darling. I am not going to become one of the Winston brigade."<sup>2</sup>

Overall Focus did not, in itself, achieve very much. As one of its members concluded: "It may be said, and with some justice, that we strove in vain. Although I believe we helped to turn the tide of public feeling, it turned too late to keep pace with events or to arrest their course . . . we had lost the race with time."<sup>3</sup> In effect the group was never able to penetrate the administration, nor convert any of its leading figures to their recommendations, and at

<sup>1</sup> Focus, p.78-9.

<sup>2</sup> Letter dated 2 March, 1938, Diaries and Letters, pp.327-28.

<sup>3</sup> Bonham-Carter, Foreword to Focus, p.11.

no time did they mobilise anything like the public pressure required to induce the Government to take notice of their contentions. Their major role perhaps was to disseminate information on the pace of German rearmament and the development of Nazi plans against Austria and Czechoslovakia, but to counter the widespread sympathy for Germany they needed time and access to the organs of publicity which was denied to them.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Focus was of importance in another context, for it brought together men and women with very different political backgrounds, thereby providing a platform for Churchill, and, at a time when most needed, helped to keep his "flag flying".<sup>2</sup>

Focus, and the movement in Defence of Freedom and Peace, were not the only symptoms of Churchill's interest in the League of Nations. In June 1936 he accepted an invitation from Lord Davies, the Chairman of the New Commonwealth Society to become President of its British section.<sup>3</sup> The Society, an international movement founded in 1933, was dedicated to the strengthening of the League of Nations by the creation of an international police force to make aggressive war impossible and to compel respect for international law. It also advocated the establishment of an Equity Tribunal for the peaceful settlement of all disputes. Each of the member sections attempted to propagate and popularise these ideas, in particular that of an international police force.

In November Churchill delivered his first presidential address to the Society, at a luncheon held in the Dorchester Hotel. Thompson

<sup>1</sup> Personalities and Policies, p.133.

<sup>2</sup> Focus, p.138.

<sup>3</sup> The Times, 8 June, 1936.

has described the occasion as a "major political and social event", which it was certainly not.<sup>1</sup> Judged by the lack of newspaper coverage and general interest shown, the New Commonwealth Society was not, and was never to be, in the mainstream of British politics in the 1930s.

Although Churchill privately confessed that he did not feel "bound by all their views",<sup>2</sup> on this occasion he immediately associated himself with the organisation's aims:

"Nothing is easier to mock at than the plan of an international force, to carry out the decisions of a European or, if possible, of a world council. Nothing is easier than to marshal and magnify the obvious difficulties which stand in the way. But no one can dispute that the achievement of such an ideal and its acceptance simultaneously by many countries would be the greatest blessing that could come to mankind."

Nevertheless, as this aim was not yet practical politics, it was expedient that peoples and governments should rely on their own means of defence and the covenant:

"All true members of the League of Nations in Europe must play their part and each must do his share and it must be proved quite plainly that there are enough when added together to restrain, to overawe, and in the last to overcome the aggressor, from within the League or from without."

Without that, collective security would be a fraud and only a disastrous means of deceiving well-meaning pacific communities into

<sup>1</sup> The Anti-Appeasers, p.127.

<sup>2</sup> Churchill to Cecil, 21 October, 1936, Cecil Papers.



putting themselves at the mercy of predatory governments. "We do not want", he concluded, "to have the kind of collective security we see in a flock of sheep on their way to the butcher."<sup>1</sup>

Six months later, at another society dinner at the Dorchester, Churchill spoke again. He claimed that they were one of the few peace societies that advocated the use of force, if possible overwhelming force, to support international law. Central to their thinking was a strong Britain, playing its part with other peace-resolved, well armed nations in building up a system of efficient resistance to aggression. Taking his argument one step further than usual he envisaged a universal system of collective security:

"to prevent the horrors of another war we must work towards a larger synthesis and the permanent organisation, first of Europe, but as soon as possible of the whole world, to redress legitimate grievances and to overawe aggression."<sup>2</sup>

Affiliated to the New Commonwealth Society was a Parliamentary Group, which included members of all parties. It was this body that had appealed to Churchill to become President of the Society.<sup>3</sup> The Group met regularly to hear addresses on matters connected with the League or the Society's own policy, as when General Sir Frederick Maurice spoke on 'Aspects of the Organisation of an International Police Force'.<sup>4</sup> Government supporters that were members of the Group

<sup>1</sup> 'Mr Winston Churchill and the New Commonwealth', New Commonwealth, December, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> The Times, 26 May, 1937.

<sup>3</sup> Daily Herald, 8 June, 1936.

<sup>4</sup> The Times, 17 April, 1936.

included: Adams, Boothby, Cyril Entwistle,<sup>1</sup> Sir Patrick Hannon,<sup>2</sup> Henry Haslam,<sup>3</sup> Dudley Joel,<sup>4</sup> Macmillan, Henry Morris-Jones,<sup>5</sup> Nicolson, Sir Walter Smiles<sup>6</sup> and Sir John Withers. Those drawn from the Opposition benches were: Cocks, Grenfell, Mander, Wilf Roberts, Sinclair and Wedgwood.

The Daily Herald commented that "the grouping is so entirely different from the Tory diehards with whom Churchill is normally associated that it is bound to create particular interest", while yet another mouthpiece of the Left, the New Statesman, paid tribute to the New Commonwealth's president, describing him as the National Government's "most effective opponent" who "has no use for their pretence about collective security".<sup>7</sup> Both comments are indicative of Churchill's new standing in quarters from which he was traditionally poles apart. Tom Jones noted this when he wrote that Churchill "has commended himself to the Labour Party by his support of the League in his recent speeches and articles".<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Liberal MP South West Hull, 1918-24; Unionist, Bolton, 1931-45.

<sup>2</sup> General Secretary of the Navy League, 1911-18; MP Moseley, Birmingham, 1921-50.

<sup>3</sup> MP Parts of Lindsey, Horncastle, 1924-45.

<sup>4</sup> Member of the Eden Group, 1938-39; MP for Dudley, 1931-41.

<sup>5</sup> Liberal MP Denbigh, 1929-31; Liberal National, 1931-50; Assistant Government Whip, 1932-37; a Lord Commissioner of the Treasury, 1935-37.

<sup>6</sup> MP Blackburn, 1931-45.

<sup>7</sup> Daily Herald, 8 June, 1936; New Statesman, 13 June, 1936.

<sup>8</sup> Letter dated 20 March, 1938, A Diary With Letters, p.397.

Although the Society continued to do some useful work in trying to popularize the idea of an international police force and providing Churchill with a platform for his twin themes of Arms and the Covenant, politically it cannot be said to be significant. Only one attempt, and that in March 1938, following Eden's resignation, appears to have been made to get away from the study group cum international generalities image, and that resulted in complete discord. On 23 March the Parliamentary Committee of the New Commonwealth group met to endeavour to frame a policy to meet the situation. There were however, wide differences of opinion and a resolution which had been prepared was not put to the vote, so that the meeting broke up without anything agreed.<sup>1</sup> As with other inter-party movements of the thirties, the New Commonwealth's membership was loosely connected and for the most part unwilling to commit itself too far to amount to much politically.

A more important pre-League organisation than either the New Commonwealth Society or Arms and the Covenant was the League of Nations Union. The Union, as set out in its Royal Charter, existed to educate and organise public support for the League within the United Kingdom. It was a democratic organisation and was governed by a General Council, elected by members of the Union, and an Executive Committee elected from the Council. From the period of the 1935 General Election to the outbreak of war a total of 17 supporters of the National Government occupied positions on the Executive Committee of the Union. They were Adams, Atholl, Cartland, Cazalet,<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Times, 23 March, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> MP Chippenham, 1924-43; travelled extensively in Europe, Africa, Middle, Near and Far East.

Austen Chamberlain, Viscount Cranborne, Crossley, Grigg, Gunston,<sup>1</sup> Jack Hills,<sup>2</sup> Daniel Lipson,<sup>3</sup> Loder, Nicolson, Gerald Palmer, Patrick, Sir John Power<sup>4</sup> and Spears.

Thus thirty-six supporters of the National Government can be distinguished, by their participation in the League of Nations Union, the New Commonwealth Society and Arms and the Covenant, as firm advocates of the League of Nations.<sup>5</sup> Doubtless there were others, but they did not make their views known by actively engaging in a pro-League organisation. An analysis of the 32 Unionists in their number revealed some interesting conclusions. Although their average age, 47 years 9 months, was close to the party's (a difference of 1 year 7 months), in education and occupation the figures showed a marked variance. There was a higher percentage of members attending public school and university, and whereas the numbers under land and professions stayed roughly the same, those engaged in business slumped by almost 20%, and armed forces and official services rose by virtually the same amount. Thirteen had majorities in excess of 10,000, while 19, or 59.3%, occupied seats that could change hands at the result of a general election. Twelve of the latter had

<sup>1</sup> MP Thornbury, Gloucester 1924-45.

<sup>2</sup> MP Durham, 1906-22; Ripon, Yorkshire, 1925-38; Financial Secretary to the Treasury, 1922.

<sup>3</sup> Independent National, Cheltenham, 1937-50.

<sup>4</sup> Founder Royal Institute of International Affairs and Treasurer, 1920-43; MP Wimbledon, 1924-45.

<sup>5</sup> It should be remembered, however, that only two of their number voted against the raising of sanctions in June 1936. All the others, as an examination of the division list revealed, sided with the Government.



majorities of 4,000 or less, seats which were hardly immune to a minor swing, and of these, five Guest, Gunston, Lipson, Macmillan and Spears were elected on a minority of the votes cast. It is possible, of course, that some members with slender majorities favoured the League, or were selected by their constituency partly because of their pro-League views, in order to appeal to the 'liberal' or floating vote at election time.

For the most part there appears to be a link between support for the League and the more progressive brand of Unionism. Boothby, Macmillan, Sandys and Cartland belonged to the Conservative Members Special Areas Committee set up to press for Government action in the depressed areas. Two other organisations committed to securing action by Parliament to get the economy moving in the interests of the unemployed were the Next Five Years Group and the Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction. Pro-League members of these organisations included Adams, Crossley, Entwistle, Hills and Joel. Furthermore, Austen Chamberlain, Grigg, Spears and Bernays, with Mabane and Morris-Jones of the non-unionists in the group, had all in the past been influenced by some form of liberalism. Similarly Emrys-Evans, Lipson and Power could be termed liberal or progressive in outlook.

That is not to say that some of the pro-League Nationals were not drawn from the councils of the Tory Right Wing. Atholl, Churchill, Smiles and Wolmer had opposed the Government's proposals for the constitutional future of India.<sup>1</sup> Others, from the beginning of the

<sup>1</sup> Neither Wolmer nor Churchill fit neatly into the "true blue" pattern. Wolmer was in fact the Chairman of the Special Areas Committee whereas Churchill was one of its first members. Ronald Cartland, p.82.

Spanish Civil War, supported the cause of General Franco. Both Cazalet and Hannon made known their sympathies for the Spanish leader and his cause, while McEwen and Wolmer belonged to the Committee of the United Christian Front which "fought to prove . . . that General Franco was fighting the cause of Christianity against anti-Christ".<sup>1</sup> Of the remainder neither Locker-Lampson nor Moore-Brabazon could be referred to as progressive in their views.

A number of those who were distinguished by their having joined or associated themselves at some time with one or other of the League-supporting organisations were to oppose the foreign policy of Neville Chamberlain and were to abstain either on the occasion of Eden's resignation or at the time of Munich.<sup>2</sup> These were Cranborne, Gunston, Hills, Joel and Patrick. To their number, in opposition to Government policy, can be added those who, over a number of years, had held serious misgivings as to the character and methods of those governing Germany, and although a majority of this group were staunch supporters of the League of Nations, other, such as Amery and Keyes, dismissed the security provisions.<sup>3</sup> The latter when invited to attend a youth peace rally organised by the Portsmouth branch of the League of Nations Union, indicated his views of both League and Union in no uncertain terms:

"The misguided efforts of the League of Nations  
Union are a menace to the security of the Empire and

<sup>1</sup> The Chairman of the Front, Captain A H M Ramsay, in a letter to the Free Press, February, 1939.

<sup>2</sup> Others including Cazalet, Entwistle and Moore-Brabazon, drifted into the orthodox policy of appeasement. It was one thing believing in the potential of the League but another to push their differences with their leaders and front bench spokesmen too far.

<sup>3</sup> There was, of course, as names have indicated, a considerable amount of overlapping between those alarmed at what was afoot in Germany and those who might be described staunch supporters of the League of Nations.

world peace and unfair to the League of Nations. It is deplorable that the youth of Britain should be misled into imagining that the policy of the Union can contribute anything towards the preservation of peace."<sup>1</sup>

The views of Keyes, when contrasted with those of Churchill or Adams, reveal something that is often overlooked, that within the small numbers of members who criticised the Government's foreign policy there existed very important differences of view.<sup>2</sup> While expressing serious disagreement with the Government's course the dissidents nevertheless presented a picture of confusion, advocating irreconcilable points of policy. In such circumstances the most vigorous prosecution of an alternative line in foreign affairs, naturally dependent on the unity of the critics, was not possible and not even the crisis resulting in Munich rallied all the dissidents to a completely clear and firm policy towards Germany.

#### Participation in Foreign Affairs Debates

By recording the number of speeches bearing on international relations made by individual supporters of the National Government it is possible to gain some idea as to who displayed the greatest political activity in this field. From November, 1935 to September, 1939 the following were the most active members, on the Government side of the House, with respect to international affairs:

<sup>1</sup> Daily Herald, 9 January, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> See Rock's comments on the Tory dissidents, Appeasement on Trial, p.15.

<u>Member</u>	<u>Number of Speeches</u>
Chamberlain, N	37
Eden, A	35 (10) <sup>1</sup>
Churchill, W	19
Cranborne, R	19 (3)
Butler, R A	17
Croft, H P	13
Nicolson, H	12
Southby, A	12
Amery, L	11
Simon, J	11
Adams, V	10
McEwen, J	10
Atholl, K	9
Boothby, R	9
Wise, A	9
Crossley, A	8
Emrys-Evans, P	8
James, A	8
Raikes, V	7
Chamberlain, A	6
Sandys, D	6
Spears, E	6
Strauss, H	6
Balfour, H	5
Lennox-Boyd, A	5
Wardlaw-Milne, J	5

The results show clearly the significance of the members who might be termed realists with respect to Germany. In all, 11 of the 26 listed fall into this category. Of the others a further two, Eden and Cranborne, both shortly to resign office, were also to oppose Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement of Nazi Germany. Together they

<sup>1</sup> The figures in brackets are the speeches made by Eden and Cranborne in the period following their resignations.



accounted for 158 interventions out of a total 303. If one excludes the speeches made from the Government front bench, including those of Eden and Cranborne during their period of office, the results are even more impressive, 117 out of 197.

Taken as a body the 25 Unionists, that is excluding the National Labourite Nicolson, were over four years younger than their counterparts. In education they were equally unrepresentative, for a higher percentage had attended public school and university. It is in occupation, however, where the most striking difference occurs: there was an overwhelming professional/armed forces and official services slant to the group. Eighty per cent fell into this category, with a mere 12% under commerce, as opposed to 40.9% of the Conservative Party at the time of the General Election.

Arthur Ponsonby had remarked on Parliament before the war that:

"Those Members who take any interest in foreign affairs will almost all be found to have lived abroad, to have travelled, or in some way to have been placed in close relations with particular foreign interests"<sup>1</sup>,

and the background of the members listed in the table certainly verifies this observation. Nine were connected with the Foreign Office, 5 in a ministerial capacity and 4 as diplomats, while A R Wise belonged to the Colonial Service and is known to have resided abroad for a number of years. Not only did the remainder possess the education, wealth and leisure essential to the cultivation of interest in foreign lands through travel or study, but there is evidence that many of them did just that.

<sup>1</sup> Democracy and Diplomacy, p.50.

LabourForeign Affairs - a Minority Interest

From its inception there existed within the Labour Party a sense of detachment from world affairs - that what happened abroad was of little importance, and home policy could be framed as if Britain lived in a world of her own. This attitude was due to the community of purpose upon which the party rested, which was directed towards an alteration, not of the international situation, but of the domestic environment, attaining thereby a greater measure of social security and justice for the working man. M Phillips Price wrote:

"It all goes back to the fact that the Labour movement as a whole was born in the middle of the prosperous mid and late Victorian times, when the problem was to secure for the working classes some share of the prosperity . . . . The background of the Labour movement was not such as to make foreign affairs a first class issue, as the struggle for better wages, shorter hours and improved conditions at home were."<sup>1</sup>

When the Parliamentary Party was organised in 1906, shortly after the election that brought 29 Members into the House, it became evident that the representatives reflected the movement's emphasis on domestic matters that bore directly on the conditions of life. There were a number of MPs who were well equipped to deal with particular issues such as coal mines, local government, unemployment assistance, health and so on. Such matters were bread and butter subjects to members who had derived from pit or factory via the trade union connection. By

<sup>1</sup> Letter to the author, dated 25 February, 1969.

contrast there were comparatively few whom the party could rely on to debate international policy - the average Labour member possessing neither the education, wealth, nor leisure essential to the cultivation of interest in foreign land through travel or study.

It was not until the First World War, which brought home the relation between conditions abroad and welfare in Britain, that Labour began to take any practical interest in foreign affairs. Earlier, of course, Labour had given lip service to international brotherhood, believing that foreign questions could be settled by arbitration and war could be averted by an international general strike of workers. Such views reflected the movement's vague aspirations for peace, justice and friendship of the working classes.

Surprisingly a stream of recruits from the badly divided Liberals were attracted by just this - what they believed to be Labour's idealism in foreign affairs in contrast with the short-sighted diplomatic outlook of the Liberal-Conservative coalition. Lees-Smith, Liberal MP for Northampton, wrote in a newspaper, indicting the 'blind vindictiveness' of the Peace Terms imposed by Lloyd George and declared that Labour's attitude showed it to be "sensitive to the moral appeal" and "open to the impulse of the ideal".<sup>1</sup>

The Liberal recruits, important not in numbers but influence, talent and, in some cases, wealth, came to be associated with the Labour Party through the Union of Democratic Control. This had been formed on the day after Britain's entry into the war from the remnants

<sup>1</sup> Article entitled "Why I have joined the Independent Labour Party", Labour Leader, 3 July, 1919.

of those that had opposed it. The founding members, Trevelyan, Angell, Morel, Ponsonby, and MacDonald, had been shocked by the revelation of secret commitments that had previously been denied and were anxious to ensure that the diplomatic blunders which had, in their opinion, caused the war should never be made again. Their twin demands throughout the war were for an ending of the conflict by negotiation, to be followed by the establishment of open diplomacy. Attracted by these views were a number of Liberal internationalists, who until the war had found themselves at home in the Liberal Party, and members of the Independent Labour Party, the main anti-war organisation in Britain. These Union contacts, once established, were instrumental in making possible the eventual association of the small band of Liberals with the Labour movement.

By the end of the war the Liberal dissenters were thoroughly disgusted with the Liberal Party, one section of which had fully supported, while the other had done nothing to oppose the war. Unable to carry on effective political work independently the group joined the Labour Party, which by now adhered to the foreign policy ideas developed by the Union.<sup>1</sup> The socialism they came to profess was "defined in terms of internationalism, open diplomacy and the democratic control of foreign affairs, coupled with a deep interest in social reform".<sup>2</sup>

The Labour Party, despite some misgivings here and there, welcomed the adhesion of men who had established their reputations, through constant speaking or writing, in what was still the relatively obscure

<sup>1</sup> See M Swartz, The Union of Democratic Control in British Politics during the First World War, p.199.

<sup>2</sup> Miliband, Parliamentary Socialism, p.46.



field of foreign affairs. Recognised as leading authorities on international questions, it was inevitable that such a group would intensify the movement's interest in, and knowledge of foreign relations, as well as play a large part in the formulation of future policy. In effect they furnished information, offered advice, aided in the preparation of literature and took a leading role in the foreign affairs debates, thus raising the prestige of the Labour Party both in Parliament and the country. One historian has written that the influence of these members on the Labour movement "in the early post-war years would be difficult to exaggerate".<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to note that the attitude of the Liberal recruits towards their Labour colleagues appeared to be conditioned by a conviction of their own superiority. An outburst in this vein appears in a letter from Morel to Count Max Montgelas, the revisionist historian:

"I can well understand your irritation with British Labour. But I have much more cause to be irritated with it than you have . . . It has never contained among its leaders intellectuals of even second-rate or third-rate type . . . It has been with, as I say, the exception of the small Socialist - I.L.P. movement within it, a purely Trade Union manual labourers' movement, seeking one thing and one thing alone - increased wages and betterment of industrial conditions. And the only influence since the war broke out which is "intellectualising" - in the international sense - this vast mass of ignorance is the influence welded by our small group . . . We are educating it daily, and have been . . . But even so, we are only touching the fringe. That

<sup>1</sup> H R Winkler, "Labour Foreign Policy in Great Britain, 1918-29", Journal of Modern History, 1956, p.249.

fringe, of course, leavens gradually the mass. But you have no conception of the enormous difficulties we have to face."<sup>1</sup>

The post-war years accordingly witnessed a developing Labour foreign policy. It included restoration and reconciliation in Europe, a peace policy based upon the democratic control of foreign policy, agreed disarmament, and the use of the conciliation machinery of the League of Nations. Nevertheless the emergence of a foreign policy and the existence of alert and distinguished parliamentarians interested in foreign affairs did not prevent its opponents accusing the party, prior to its taking office in 1924, of being solely interested in wages and employment, and with being lamentably incapable of conducting foreign affairs as a government.

Ten years later, following two Labour Governments and their conduct of international relations, the Tory Member for Duddleston, Oliver Simmonds, could still chide the party of being ignorant of conditions and feelings in Europe:

"I sometimes wonder when I listen to speeches of right honourable and honourable Gentlemen opposite whether they have ever taken the trouble to familiarise themselves with conditions and feelings on the continent of Europe. How many honourable Gentlemen opposite have been in Europe during the last three months or even during the last year? Some, I dare say, who speak volubly on the European situation have not been outside these islands at all. That is a matter of regret and it would be an excellent thing if all honourable Members in this House were obliged to spend a

<sup>1</sup> Dated 24 May, 1921. Found in the E D Morel Papers but quoted in Winkler, p.249.

certain number of months each year abroad, and then there might be better international understanding and less chance of war."<sup>1</sup>

The following speaker, the Reverend G S Woods, described it as "absurd to think that because we sit on the Labour Benches we are not as interested in the world and international affairs as are honourable Members opposite".<sup>2</sup> The fact remained, however, that the international scene, of such overwhelming importance in these years, remained remote to the average Labour Member. The examples of two Labour MPs are revealing. T M Sexton, the Member for the Barnard Castle Division of Durham, announced on the occasion of Eden's resignation that it was with a "certain amount of diffidence that I intervene in this Debate. My main concern since I became a Member of this House has been for domestic affairs, and foreign affairs have seemed to be far away from most of the topics on which I have spoken in the House. My time has been spent very largely in looking after the Special Areas . . . I am principally what might be called a homer."<sup>3</sup> Aneurin Bevan, too, had "only rarely in the House of Commons . . . strayed beyond the frontiers of his main domestic argument".<sup>4</sup> In fact Bevan's official biographer had to establish his general approach to the foreign scene from speeches made outside the House and his political upbringing! Small wonder James Griffiths, then Labour MP for Llanelly, recorded that while the Labour benches of later years were

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 17 March, 1936, Col.382.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Col.387.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 22 February, 1938, Col.292.

<sup>4</sup> M Foot, Aneurin Bevan, p.207.

richer in academic talent those of the thirties were "richer in the character moulded in life's struggles".<sup>1</sup>

This detachment from foreign affairs, and defence for that matter, cannot be over-emphasised. The party had come into being in response to a desire for a greater measure of social security and justice for working men and this continued to be its chief concern. Ten months before Munich the political correspondent of The Times wrote:

"Some of the backbench Labour MPs and particularly those who represent trade unions are being forced to the conclusion that their supporters are growing weary of incessant debates on foreign affairs in the Commons to the apparent exclusion of domestic matters, such as the rise in the price of living, in which they are more directly interested. One Labour MP declared last night his constituents were far more interested in the cost of living than the struggle in the Far East. He expressed an opinion which is widely held, and which may be echoed in the policy of the parliamentary party."<sup>2</sup>

As foreign affairs was a minority interest in Labour - on a scale far greater than that of the other major parties - an attempt has been made to discover which members made up that minority and why they, as opposed to the bulk of the party, were concerned with the international scene. To this end the same process used for the supporters of the National Government has been applied to the Labour Party. From November 1935 to September 1939 the following were

<sup>1</sup> Pages From Memory, p.54. Griffiths himself as an MP for three years before he "ventured" to speak on foreign affairs, *ibid*, p.65.

<sup>2</sup> The Times, 9 November, 1937.



Labour's most active members with respect to foreign policy debates:

<u>Member</u>	<u>Number of Speeches</u>
Attlee C	29
Henderson, A	27
Noel-Baker, P	21
Wedgwood, J	17
Fletcher, R	16
Dalton, H	14
Bellenger, F	14
Greenwood, A	13
Wilkinson, E	12
Grenfell, D	11
Cocks, S	10
Alexander, A	9
Lansbury, G	9
Price, M	7
Cripps, S	7
Ede, J	7
Morrison, H	6
Benn, W	5
Lees-Smith, H	5
Pethick-Lawrence, F	5
Riley, B	5

A number of the above may be said to have sprung from humble, working class origins. Some of these had had to fight against every economic and social obstacle to gain their later position. Grenfell, for instance, started work in the mines after leaving school at eleven years of age. On the other hand, Sir Stafford Cripps was the son of a peer, Wedgwood Benn the son of a baronet, and Wedgwood descended from a long line of makers of famous pottery.

A detailed analysis of the twenty-one, each intervening on five or more occasions, revealed that while the average age, 53 years 3 months, was close to that of the party, in education and occupation they were totally unrepresentative. This is borne out by the following table:

	<u>Parliamentary Labour Party</u>	<u>21</u>
<u>Education:</u>	%	%
Elementary only	53.5	23.8
Public School	9.1	42.9
University	18.2	57.1
<u>Occupation:</u>		
Trade Unionists	59.1	14.3
Professions, Services, Commerce, Land	28.6	71.4

The general impression gained is that the parliamentary party's effective leadership in foreign affairs possessed, that is in the majority of cases, a good education and a non-manual occupation. In short, the prerequisite for a Labour member's consistent intervention in foreign affairs debates appears to be membership of what is loosely termed the "middle class".

In terms of parliamentary distinction they were a significant grouping. Excluding Attlee, sixteen had risen or were to rise to ministerial rank, and several, including Dalton, Alexander, Cripps, Ede, Morrison and Noel-Baker, were to occupy the major offices of state. A further two became Parliamentary Private Secretaries, while only two were to remain on the back-benches for the duration of their parliamentary careers.

Cocks, Lees-Smith, Pethick-Lawrence and Wedgwood had belonged to the Union of Democratic Control, and their interest in the foreign scene can be traced back to Britain's entry into the Great War. Connected with this is the fact that Cocks, Lees-Smith, Price, Wedgwood, Wedgwood Benn and Fletcher were converts from the Liberal Party. In all Benn, Fletcher, Lees-Smith and Wedgwood had sat as Liberal MPs, while Price had contested an election in the Liberal Party's interest.

Three others had links with Labour's last foreign secretary, Arthus Henderson: Dalton, Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, 1929-31; Noel-Baker, Henderson's Parliamentary Private Secretary and personal assistant thereafter at the Disarmament Conference; Arthur Henderson, son of the foreign minister, who, judging by the number of speeches made, closely followed his father's interest in international affairs. In addition, Dalton, Noel-Baker, Attlee, Cocks and Greenwood were all members, throughout the thirties of the Labour Party's Advisory Committee on International Questions, set up in 1918 in order to keep the party well informed on foreign matters.

The characteristic most common to them all was foreign travel, either in a private or official capacity. Attlee, Cocks, Grenfell, Noel-Baker and Wilkinson are all recorded as visiting Spain during the course of the civil war to study the situation there.<sup>1</sup> Grenfell, Riley, Dalton and Pethick-Lawrence toured the Soviet Union, forming part of a small party invited by the New Fabian Research Bureau to carry out a general investigation into conditions in that country.<sup>2</sup> Those known to have travelled extensively on the Continent included Attlee, Dalton, Grenfell, Pethick-Lawrence, Riley, Wilkinson, Alexander, Cripps, Lansbury, Lees-Smith, Morrison, Noel-Baker, Wedgwood and Price. The latter complained bitterly of the insularity of the parliamentary party which "naturally did not appeal to me who had seen quite a bit of the world by the time I was thirty-five".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Information derived from Republican literature circulated in Great Britain.

<sup>2</sup> Visit recorded in E Dodd's David Quibell (Labour MP Brigg, 1929-45), p.101.

<sup>3</sup> Price, My Three Revolutions, p.255.

Some of their number had been delegates to international labour and socialist conferences or to gatherings of foreign labour and socialist organisations. In fact Attlee and Dalton, successive front-bench spokesmen on foreign affairs, and Greenwood and Morrison, frequently attended conferences in the European capitals. "Before the war", Attlee recorded, "I had little or no contact with foreign socialists except for hearing prominent leaders speak at meetings and conferences, but now I began to take part in international gatherings. In May, 1932, I attended a conference at Zurich . . . Thenceforward I visited the Continent once or twice every year."<sup>1</sup> At such international conferences they met the chiefs of the continental parties, many of whom in the 1930s were in positions of power.

Travel then, including attendance at conferences, was a factor of large importance in determining their pre-occupation, as indicated by the number of their speeches, with international questions. Labour's travellers would return from an excursion to Spain, a meeting in Eastern Europe, or wherever else it might be, and speak with an interest, an intimate knowledge and an air of authority that those who stayed at home could never claim. In fact what they said was accepted within the parliamentary party as authoritative. "The Labour MP", wrote W P Maddox, "who travelled abroad to attend international or foreign conferences, or who accompanied an investigative commission to a foreign country, or who had journeyed widely in a private capacity, found that his utterances on foreign affairs had greater weight because of the reputation of his wider experience and more intimate knowledge of international conditions".<sup>2</sup> In practice this meant that the Party,

<sup>1</sup> Attlee, As It Happened, p.89.

<sup>2</sup> Foreign Relations in British Labour Politics, p.74.



on a scale greater than that of its rivals, followed the lead of a relatively few individual Labour MPs, who were in fact the custodians of the party's foreign policy.

### Abyssinia and the League of Nations

Almost prophetically, Labour - particularly its Left - at the election of 1935, had maintained that the Government would not stand by its newly-proclaimed obligations to the League. A month later came the discreditable Hoare-Laval agreement, which allotted almost half of Abyssinia to Italy, together with special rights in the remainder. The agreement was negotiated by Hoare in Paris, and, never likely to be acceptable to the League or the emperor, was leaked to the press, to the discomfort of a Government which had not been fully consulted by the Foreign Secretary. Immediately Labour vehemently condemned what it felt to be the desertion of Abyssinia and the flouting of the League, and on 19 December the party brought in a motion of censure that "the terms put forward by His Majesty's Government as a basis for an Italo-Abyssinian settlement reward the declared aggressor at the expense of the victim, destroy collective security, and conflict with the expressed will of the country and with the Covenant of the League of Nations, to the support of which the honour of Great Britain is pledged; this House, therefore, demands that these terms be immediately repudiated" and gave the Government a very bad day.<sup>1</sup> Baldwin, noting the country's strong reaction, assured the Commons that the proposals were obviously dead.<sup>2</sup> His Government were going to make no attempt to revive them. In view

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 19 December, 1935, Col.2013.

<sup>2</sup> Part of the credit for stirring the country against the proposals belongs to the Parliamentary Labour Party, whose leaders campaigned the country drawing attention to the principles involved.

of this assurance, the House of Commons defeated Labour's motion, 397 votes to 165.

An analysis of the Division Lists reveals that 141 Labour MPs voted, plus two tellers. Eleven MPs are unaccounted for: Brown, Grenfell, Hayday, John, Johnston, Lansbury, M K Macmillan, Parker, Pritt, Shinwell and D Williams. The eleven, however, represented all shades of opinion within the party, not solely a Left or a pacifist viewpoint. The parliamentary party had united to denounce the Government's about-turn in its Abyssinian policy, but it cannot be said that it was agreed on an alternative policy.

Thereafter the party urged the intensification of sanctions, with specific mention of oil, iron and steel, without which Italy would not have carried on the war. The will, however, was lacking, primarily on the part of a deliberately obstructive France - something seemingly ignored by Labour, which attributed the malaise almost solely to the Government - and Eden, backed by a Government now in favour of an intensification made little headway at Geneva. Time was now running out and the Abyssinian cause all but lost; the Ethiopian Army was crumbling in the face of bombardment and continued subjection to poison gas. At the beginning of May Haile Selassie fled to Jerusalem, declaring the war at an end, and within three days Italian troops occupied Addis Ababa.

On the 6 May the House met to discuss Supply for the Foreign Office and Dalton used the occasion to charge the Government with having discredited the League of Nations and the whole idea of collective security, and "we charge them with having betrayed the trust of millions of electors who were foolish enough to vote for them at the last Election in the belief that they were going

effectively to support a League of Nations policy".<sup>1</sup> At the same time the National Council of Labour met to object to Italy's conquest; sanctions should still be intensified, it urged, and the League vindicated. But the Government thought otherwise, mindful of the fact that Abyssinia was lost to the League, and hopeful of preventing Mussolini - with whom they felt there was still a risk of war - from moving closer to Hitler, with all the danger that that implied for the peace of Europe. Thus on 18 June Eden announced that as Britain had taken the lead in pressing for sanctions she should take the lead in bringing them to an end.

In response Labour leaders bitterly attacked the Government at public meetings up and down the country, and a great protest meeting was held at Hyde Park the following Sunday. At Westminster the party angrily tabled a motion of censure, which was couched in the following terms:

"His Majesty's Government, by their lack of a resolute and straightforward foreign policy, have lowered the prestige of the country, weakened the League of Nations, imperilled peace, and thereby forfeited the confidence of the House."

In amidst the spirited attacks on the irresolution of the Government there were fresh demands for the intensification of sanctions or, at the very least, the maintenance of existing ones. Behind the agitation lay the recognition that the failure to prevent the Italian conquest of another League member was a cruel blow to the League and to Labour's foreign policy which was based upon it.

Naylor has argued that failure over Abyssinia "lay not in the irresolution of the British Government in 1936 but in their proclaimed

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 6 May, 1936, Col.1032.

resolution of 1935 that they would not use force in settling the dispute". This is a strange comment to make as he maintains elsewhere that the French, not the British Government, must bear the main individual responsibility for the failure of collective security, while earlier he concluded that Britain "had to reap the harvest of her irresolution".<sup>1</sup> And he continues that "at the time of that declaration (not to use force), with which Labour sympathised, neither government nor opposition had foreseen that non-military sanctions, imperfectly applied, would not deter an aggressor". This is another puzzling comment in that - as he himself maintains - Labour had stood full square behind effective economic sanctions, including that of the vital commodity, oil, as the means of deterring Mussolini. Moreover, the whole basis of Labour's case against the Government, throughout the dispute, was that the imperfectly applied sanctions were not deterring Italy. Naylor is correct, however, in his assessment of Labour's position as regards military sanctions, for as we have seen, the party's majority view inclined to the belief that economic sanctions would be sufficient to force Italy into line.

One question remains to be tackled - would Labour, given office, have prevented the conquest of Abyssinia and vindicated the League, the very things they now accused the Government of failing to do? Labour, of course, would not have been as irresolute as the Government, and there would have been no wavering in the form of the Hoare-Laval Pact. It is also likely that Labour would urgently have pressed for the intensification of sanctions, but the party would have had to deal with the same unyielding opposition of the French which so

<sup>1</sup> Naylor, Labour's International Policy, pp.137 and 127.



frustrated Eden's attempts.<sup>1</sup> It is probable that Labour might well have been forced to act unilaterally in the application of the crucial oil sanction and in the possible closing of the Suez Canal to Italian shipping. Yet whether such moves would have deterred or frustrated Italy's dictator it is impossible to say, but certainly Labour continued to recommend them to the end.

The Abyssinian episode was to affect Labour's outlook on foreign affairs, until war broke out in 1939. Labour was thereafter thoroughly convinced that, in the General Election of 1935, the Government had used the collective security theme as just one more electoral trick. Consequently much of the party lost what little confidence it had in the Government's word and more than ever it stood exposed in Labour's eyes as caring little for morality in international affairs. Nowhere was this more true than on Labour's Left, where the conclusion was drawn that imperialism dictated the Government's course in foreign affairs. "I do not know how better you can describe the proposals which were made to Italy and Abyssinia than as an imperialist deal", announced Cripps, "the very thing which ministers were disclaiming so vociferously for the purposes of the Election and immediately before it."<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the distrust engendered by the Government's Abyssinian policy did nothing to ease the ambiguity of Labour's defence and foreign policies. The party could not easily cross over to rearmament on any terms, and it was hardest of all when support

<sup>1</sup> According to D C Watt, "The Secret Laval-Mussolini Agreement of 1935 on Ethiopia", The Middle East Journal, 1961, France gave a free hand for Italy in Abyssinia, in return for close Italian co-operation in military affairs with France against Germany.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 19 December, 1935, Col.2067.

for the rearmament meant arming a Government which had shown its lack of faith in the League and which, it was argued, could by no means be trusted not to turn the arms it was asking for against, say, a colony instead of Italy. A L Rowse summed up this feeling, present in all sections of the party, over rearmament:

"After that (Abyssinia) coming after the experiences of 1931 and 1924 no Labour man would take anything from a Tory . . . I well knew the atmosphere of complete and justified distrust. I thoroughly understood it and shared it . . . The tragedy of all this was that after 1935 no Labour man would accept anything that came from the Tories - even when they were right. And this is where I criticise the Labour Party. In spite of everything, when danger threatened, we ought to have pocketed our humiliation, our pride, our distrust, everything for the sake of the country and all that depended upon it."<sup>1</sup>

Labour's other dissident grouping, the pacifists, were also fortified in the views they held at Brighton. Not only had nothing been done to restrain Mussolini, so that the League was a broken reed, but one of the last independent states left in Africa had been brutally enslaved. Nor was the danger over. The continuance of sanctions, the pacifists felt, would lead to war and such a war would extend to Germany, all Europe, the world. Their alternative - as we have seen - was to take action which would remove the reason for Italy's aggression and for all similar imperialist aggression. The nations of the world should agree to pool the earth's economic resources and

<sup>1</sup> Rowse, End Of An Era, p.12.

then there would be no need for any nation to seek new territories and the raw materials which they could provide. Successive aggressions up to the outbreak of war and beyond, witnessed Labour's pacifists consistently advocating this panacea for the world's ills - the international conference.

In spite of the Left and pacifist inclined members being confirmed in their suspicion of a League approach many Labourites clung persistently to their ideal, the whole emphasis of their defence and foreign policies remaining on a pure League system. In effect they shied away from the question, what was to be done now that the League had been decisively weakened. Thus Morgan Jones, the Member for Caerphilly, informed the Commons in July 1936:

"I have never been able to feel sure that the Government mean the same thing as we do when they use the phrase 'collective security'. My conception of collective security is that if any member of the League is attacked by another member of the League or any aggressor, all the others pledge themselves, within their power and according to their ability, to make a collective effort to safeguard the aggrieved member of the League."<sup>1</sup>

Similarly Arthur Henderson expressed concern lest anything was done "to take away the universal conception of the League".<sup>2</sup>

Small wonder that Labour's League idealists have had a bad press. Samuel Davis has written of them as "soaring above reality", clinging to the League long after it had ceased to be an active political force.

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 27 July, 1936, Cols.1200-1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 31 July, 1936, Col.1914.

His heroes are Dalton and more particularly the trade unionists, Bevin and Citrine:

"They underwrote Labour's support of the League of Nations in 1934, and then in 1936 when it had ceased to be practical, they wrenched the party away from its adherence to the doctrine."<sup>1</sup>

Similarly A L Rowse, who was then a Labour Parliamentary Candidate, not only described Noel-Baker as going on "with his mind in the cloud of 1929-31", but the "League fanatics" generally, "the hopeless doctrinaires, illusionists, chronic unrealists", as being "the despair of the party".<sup>2</sup>

Not all of Labour's League of Nations supporters, however, were quite as unrealistic as has sometimes been imagined. A number of them ceased to cling to the League ideal but trimmed their sails in the wake of the Abyssinian episode, and began to modify their idealism and think of a more limited form of collective security. The attitude of two of Labour's leaders, Pethick-Lawrence and Morrison reflected the changing attitude in the party. The former informed the House:

"Let us be clear. I - and I believe my party as a whole - do not suggest that this country should fill the role of a peripatetic Don Quixote, and interfere wherever some trouble exists, or wherever we think it exists, in every part of the civilised world. There is, of course, a certain amount of truth in the right honourable Gentleman's

<sup>1</sup> British Labour and British Foreign Policy, 1933-9, p.8.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Present and Immediate Future of the Labour Party', Political Quarterly 1938.



statement (Eden) that every nation will not fight for each nation. Each case has to be considered on its merits, and we have to know how far each country can take action, and what that action ought to be."<sup>1</sup>

In 1937 Morrison contributed an article to a book entitled The League and the Future of the Collective System. In this were clearly set out the lines on which he would build up the collective system, which he recognised as no longer existing, except on paper:

"The Covenant was framed to meet the needs of a universal League of lightly armed democracies . . . Instead we have today a half League struggling along in the midst of a tremendous arms race and in more or less open conflict with heavily armed nationalist dictatorships . . . In such a world the existing Covenant is clearly inadequate and indeed partly inapplicable."<sup>2</sup>

To remedy this situation Morrison advocated a world conference in which security, disarmament, economic and colonial issues would be included on the agenda. This was, of course, long established Labour policy, but Morrison differed from the party in his view of what should be done once the conference was in session. He was of the opinion that an all-European treaty should be proposed, in which the contracting parties would record their interpretation of their collective system obligations as regards non-aggression, arbitration, and mutual assistance against aggression. Those states

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 27 July, 1936, Col.1161. It is necessary to add that for the League stalwarts, such as Noel-Baker, anything that smacked of regional pacts marked a return to the old alliance systems.

<sup>2</sup> The League and the Future of the Collective System, p.16.

signing the treaty "should renounce war completely as between themselves and give effect to that offer by instructions to their Naval, Air, and War Ministries to scrap all plans providing for the contingency of defence against each other and to concert plans for joint defence against attack from outside and joint upholding of the provisions of the Covenant and the All-European Treaty in so far as their collective geographical situation and military strength allowed".<sup>1</sup> Such a group would rapidly regain the initiative in international affairs which has been "captured by the nationalist dictatorships".

Clearly Morrison did not expect Germany and Italy to co-operate. While on the one hand the 'peace-and-pooled-defence-group of States' was in the process of formation, the nationalist dictatorships, on the other hand, would be pressed to accept the obligations of the collective system and reduce and limit their armaments, in exchange for economic advantages and complete security. If they refused the peace offensive would be continued until war was made too dangerous for any would-be aggressor.

Morrison's scheme is important in that it goes some way towards dispelling the myth that Labour's League wing was completely out of touch with reality. It is true that the plan had serious weaknesses. Morrison had given no real thought to the difficulties involved in securing the co-operation of 'peaceful' nations, however much they had in common. Neither was any attention paid to rearmament, the word not figuring at all in the article. Morrison had simply reckoned up the forces of good and evil and decided that those of

<sup>1</sup> The League and the Future of the Collective System, p.22.

the former were sufficiently superior. Yet faults included the scheme was "based on the principles of the collective system and not on the absence of principles, of international anarchy and power politics".<sup>1</sup>

There were a handful of Labourites, however, who adopted an even more questioning attitude to the League's future. The most important of these, Dalton, had supported the League of Nations approach as a practical means of maintaining peace, but he never became a blind adherent of the League theme. Having swung his weight in favour of the League at Brighton and watched it in action he believed that whatever the reason or blame, collective security had ceased to be practical in the form advocated by the Labour Party.

One of the leading League enthusiasts, however, has described Dalton and others sharing his views as "self-styled realists who were prepared to rat on the League over Abyssinia and who wanted rearmament before the hope of defeating Mussolini and securing disarmament was dead. These were a small minority. The most important was Dalton. . . . under the pressure of public opinion, (he) spoke in favour of the League and against Mussolini, but he was never really sound on the League".<sup>2</sup> It must be admitted that Dalton was never enthusiastic about the possibilities of League action; nations, he felt, would not run the risk of war unless their own vital interests were clearly involved. Convinced that this was borne out by the Abyssinian episode, Dalton began exploring ways of linking together those European countries whose interests coincided

<sup>1</sup> The League and the Future of the Collective System, p.26.

<sup>2</sup> Private information.

in a practical, strictly limited form of collective security.

In effect he came to believe, now that general agreement on defence against aggression was increasingly remote, that the only alternative was for Labour to support the Government in a measure of rearmament, which in association with countries like Russia and France, was capable of deterring aggression. Although Dalton was recommending little more than an armed alliance for collective security purposes, like Churchill he was careful - indeed he had to be, considering the current climate of opinion within the party - to couch his appeal in terms of revitalising the League "by inviting a sufficient number of States, possessing a sufficient preponderance of collective force over any possible peace breaker within a European pact of mutual assistance".<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, other members of the parliamentary party came to share his approach to collective security. Retrospectively the Labour Member for Llanelli, James Griffiths, paid tribute to their realism:

"Even at the eleventh hour, like most of my colleagues, I clung to the hope that the League of Nations, fully supported by the democracies, could save the peace. There were others, notably Hugh Dalton, who believed it was too late to rely on the League, and that we should concentrate our energies on rearming and building up an alliance with France and the Soviet Union."<sup>2</sup>

During the course of 1937-38 this view became increasingly dominant as successive crises threatened the peace of Europe. Fellow

<sup>1</sup> From an article written by Dalton for the Daily Herald, 13 July, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Pages From Memory, p.66.



MPs came to accept that the only possibility of preventing war and establishing a secure peace depended on Britain, in association with France and Russia and any other country ready to share in their aspirations and dangers, forming themselves into some sort of combination and organising for the mutual defence against aggression. This then, in a nutshell, despite frequent protestations that this was in essence a League or collective security policy and was therefore consistent with past policy, was to be the basis of Labour's stance in the two years prior to the outbreak of war.

#### Growing alarm at developments in Germany

With Hitler's conquest of power in Germany at the beginning of 1933, the threat which ever more insistently haunted Labour was the threat of Nazism. The rise of Hitler, which was accompanied by the destruction of the German trade union movement and of the most powerful Social Democratic and Communist Parties in Western Europe, jolted the Labour world. In Great Britain it was the trade unionists who were in the vanguard of the response to the Nazi danger. At the request of the General Council of the Trades Union Congress, Sir Walter Citrine, who on repeated visits to Berlin on matters connected with the International Federation of Trade Unions, had watched the Nazis rise, prepared a report, Dictatorship and the Trade Union Movement. It dealt with the suppression of the German Socialists and the trade unions, the confiscation of their property, the arrest of their leaders, and the abolition of collective bargaining and the right to strike.<sup>1</sup> Similarly Joseph Compton, of the Vehicle Builders and Chairman of the Labour Executive, in a pamphlet issued

<sup>1</sup> Trades Union Congress Report, 1933, pp.425-35.

in May, 1933, outlined fascist repression of public opinion, education, trade unionism and socialism.<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, the political wing of the movement, represented by the parliamentary party did not move with the certainty of the trade union leaders. In part this stemmed from the fact that the politicians were not so personally allied to the German Social Democratic leaders as were the industrial leaders to their German counterparts. Also important - as was noted earlier - was the poor quality of the parliamentary opposition: only 46 official Labour Party candidates were returned at the election of 1931 and half of that number were miners' representatives; of former cabinet ministers only Lansbury held his seat. Consequently the party in the Parliament of 1931-35 was ill-equipped and inexperienced to deal with the foreign situation.<sup>2</sup>

Yet most important of all in hampering an unequivocal response was Labour's difficulty in reconciling opposition to Nazi Germany with its traditional policy of redress of German grievances. Revision of the Versailles treaty had become a prime element in party policy, clearly set out by Labour leaders at the time of peacemaking. Arthur Henderson, in a speech at Blackpool in 1919, declared that the "Peace Treaty is not our treaty and we shall never accept it".<sup>3</sup> The first business of a Labour Government, he argued, would be to scrap the settlement and attempt to meet the substantial German grievances.

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Compton, Down With Fascism, in the National Joint Council's Hitlerism, pp.10-11. In 1935 Compton was elected Member for Gorton.

<sup>2</sup> Of the 21 noted in the 1935 Parliament for a close interest in the foreign situation only 7 (Attlee, Cocks, Cripps, Greenwood, Grenfell, Lansbury, Wedgwood) were present in the previous House.

<sup>3</sup> 21 June, 1919. Quoted in Q Hogg, The Left Were Not Right, p.31.

Both Labour Governments, however modestly, had acted on these convictions.

Although the conduct of the Nazis was to convert the party from the chief advocates of reconciliation with Germany to its firmest opponents, for the majority of Labour Members it was to be a gradual process, not a sudden conversion. Convictions held firmly for so long could not suddenly be rooted out in January 1933. Labour continued to be bedevilled by a strong sense of guilt about the Versailles Settlement and German grievances, and was naturally reluctant to play down the basic tenets of its international policy.

This is probably what Thompson had in mind when he remarked that the "Opposition stood closer to the Administration's position than its apologists cared to admit later".<sup>1</sup> To support his claim he quoted from a speech of Arthur Henderson, made in 1938, when he told the House:

"There is no honourable Member on this side of the House who has any objection to the policy of general appeasement to which the Prime Minister referred. The sooner the nations of the world can come together in an attempt to deal with the political and economic problems which confront civilisation today the more likely we shall be to avoid the conflagration which appears to many people to be inevitable."<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately Thompson has taken Henderson out of context, for the son of Labour's former Foreign Secretary, while acknowledging the desirability of general appeasement, fundamentally disagreed with

<sup>1</sup> The Anti-Appeasers, p.40.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 21 February, 1938, Col.86.

the way the Government was endeavouring to practice that policy. Thus he condemned the Prime Minister for being "hesitating and weak", allowing himself to be dictated to, and going "unconditionally into negotiations with Italy". Clearly here was no bipartisanship over foreign policy for Labour's appeasement was, using Henderson's words, "conditional" and in no sense "giving way to demands".

Yet while the party continued - with increasingly less emphasis - to recognise the need for appeasement in Germany's interest, it never pretended to be anything other than hostile to Nazism, and its hostility grew as evidence accumulated of what was taking place in Germany. Pethick-Lawrence's experience epitomises that of Parliamentary Labour in the years following 1933:

"I was profoundly moved at the stories which reached me of what was taking place . . . I was at first inclined to discredit the reports from Germany. But as case after case became authenticated, a black shadow began to creep across my consciousness which has never been lifted to the present day . . . I now learnt with horror that one of the great countries of Europe was going back century by century in civilisation, and that atrocities were being committed in cold blood on defenceless men and women, which had had their counterpart only in the darkest days of human history."<sup>1</sup>

It seemed just possible to Pethick-Lawrence that carefully worded protests in Britain, signed by persons of eminence, might have some influence on Hitler's actions in Germany. He accordingly gathered round him a number of distinguished men and women, drawn

<sup>1</sup> Pethick-Lawrence, Fate Has Been Kind, p.179.



from all parties, including Labourites Jagger, Lawson, Noel-Baker, Walkden and Wedgwood, the Conservative Adams, Liberal National Leckie, and Independents Harvey and Salter, in what was called the Dimitroff Committee. They took up individual cases in letters to the Press, and occasionally addressed polite remonstrances to Hitler himself, or to one of his principal subordinates. According to Pethick-Lawrence they did not achieve very much; but one or two of Hitler's victims were released after they had exposed the hollowness of the charges against them. In particular Dimitroff, the Bulgarian Communist, after his acquittal in the Reichstag fire trial, was allowed to leave the country. The Committee was later reconstituted so as to cover help of various kinds for the prisoners who were the victims of persecution in Germany and Austria, but once it became apparent that Hitler would go his own way without regard to what people thought in other lands it was wound up.<sup>1</sup>

The memoirs of other Labour Members reveal how deeply concerned they were at the turn of events in Germany, which carried with it a new menace to neighbouring countries. This is strongly borne out by the writings of David Quibell and Tom Johnston.<sup>2</sup> The former, together with Rhys Davies and Ben Riley, travelled to Budapest in the autumn of 1938. They went via Germany, and Quibell was so impressed by what he saw that he noted in his diary:

" . . . alongside our train was the longest troop train I have ever seen. Men, horses, guns, motor equipment and almost every kind of armament one could think of, all of

<sup>1</sup> Fate Has Been Kind, p.180.

<sup>2</sup> Quibell, born 1879; builder; MP Brigg, Lincolnshire, 1929-31 and 1935-45.

which took our minds and memories back to the days of the 1914-18 war."<sup>1</sup>

Johnston, in the autumn of 1936, journeyed with Major James Milner, the Member for South East Leeds, to the threatened city of Danzig in the Polish Corridor. There Johnston recalled buying a copy of De Sturmer, the Nazi propaganda paper, and being horrified by its anti-Jewish nature:

"The line taken . . . was that at their ritual feasts the Jews suck the blood of Christian children, and Herr Streicher, one of Hitler's right-hand men, who edited the rag, declared the Jewish butchers made their sausages from rats. The anti-Semitic cartoons in the copy I got were savagely conceived and forcefully drawn."

In the streets they noticed much "marching and counter marching and heil Hitlering, and there was a general apprehensive of a pogrom of some kind in the near future".<sup>2</sup>

Surprisingly the threat of danger ahead and the horror and shock at Nazi methods did not reconcile the divergent elements within the Labour movement. On the contrary, it accentuated and deepened the existing divisions. Differences emerged over the supposed nature of Nazism, or more generally fascism, and why it had triumphed in Germany and Italy. The Right of the parliamentary party tended to treat fascism as a middle-class revolution which came to power under conditions of acute political and economic crisis, and partly in response to the threat of Left revolution. This last point was

<sup>1</sup> E Dodd, David Quibell, p.105.

<sup>2</sup> Johnston, Memories, p.127.

underlined at the 1933 Conference by Morrison, speaking on behalf of the Executive: "The real point about the Manifesto" (Democracy and Dictatorship) "is that we condemn dictatorship as such, whether the dictatorship is a dictatorship of the Left or of the Right . . . we cannot hunt with the hounds and run with the hare . . . If we ourselves flirt with a dictatorship of the Left or with a dictatorship of our own, and if some of our people use the word 'dictatorship' in a sense that they ought not to . . . we are preparing a political psychology which, if we justify one form of dictatorship, gives an equally moral justification for a dictatorship of the other side."<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile the Left proposed an alternate interpretation of the phenomenon of fascism. Where the Right had viewed fascism in the larger context of the struggle between democracy and dictatorship, the Left, grounded to the concept of the class struggle, associated fascism with capitalism, its rise appearing as a staggeringly accurate fulfilment of Marxist prophecy. Indeed Marx had warned of the ruthless way the ruling class would rally to the defence of its privileges, sweeping away in the process all liberal trappings in the hour of need.

Furthermore, Marxist analysis, in that it treated fascism as the final throw of capitalism in decline, made it difficult for the Left to rise above domestic terms. The question which was uppermost in the minds of Left-oriented members was not how Germany could be thwarted but rather how soon the German pattern would be applied in Britain, and how it could best be resisted. Regarding the Government as the chief fascist danger the Left required the Labour movement to devote its whole strength to the defeat of its class enemies masquerading

<sup>1</sup> Labour Party Conference Report, 1933, p.63.

under the title of "National Government". Thus a resolution adopted by the Socialist League Conference in June, 1936, ran:

"Some say: 'Sanctions against Hitler if he walks into Austria'; some say: 'War with Hitler if he attacks the Soviet Union', but all of them are agreed that fascist Germany is the most important enemy to peace and of the working class and must be checked at all costs, even at the cost of collaboration by the workers with the war machine of the National Government. Such collaboration would be a betrayal of the interests of the workers since the National Government is capitalist and, at root, fascist in tendency and action."<sup>1</sup>

It was only very gradually, and then largely through the impact the Spanish imbroglio, that the Left began to shift from its preoccupation with the domestic "enemy" to the international.

#### Reactions to the Rhineland Coup

The restoration by the German Government of its full and unrestricted sovereignty in the demilitarised zone of the Rhineland was to be part and parcel of Labour's growing uneasiness about the Nazis' intentions. This, however, was not apparent in March, 1936, following Hitler's pledge to "work now more than ever to further the cause of mutual understanding between the nations of Europe".<sup>2</sup> His appeal was very nicely judged. Most members of the British public saw very little harm in his action, for it appeared he was merely

<sup>1</sup> The Socialist, July-August, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Bullock, A Study of Tyranny, p.345.



taking full possession of a territory which was Germany's by right. The Labour Party shared this reaction and was caught as unprepared by the violation as were the French and British Governments. There was no response comparable to the anger aroused by Mussolini's attack on Abyssinia. Any coercive action against Germany, Dalton informed the Commons, was quite out of the question:

"It is only right to say bluntly and frankly that public opinion in this country would not support, and certainly the Labour Party would not support, the taking of military sanctions or even economic sanctions against Germany at this time, in order to put German troops out of the German Rhineland."<sup>1</sup>

The Member for Bishop Auckland went on to draw a clear distinction between the attitude of Mussolini in resorting to aggressive war, and waging it beyond his frontiers, and the actions of Hitler which had taken place within the frontiers of the German Reich.

Hitler's peace proposals were eagerly taken up. From all wings of the party came the call to negotiate on the basis of the Chancellor's address to the Reichstag on 7 March. Cripps, speaking at Bristol the same day, announced that "there is no reason why our own Government and the Government of France should not test the worth of the offer he is making".<sup>2</sup> Lansbury, in an open letter to the Mayor of Poplar, declared that "those who desire peace should urge the Government to take Herr Hitler at his word . . . Our Government should accept the challenge Hitler makes for agreement and support

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 26 March, 1936, Col.1458.

<sup>2</sup> Daily Herald, 9 March, 1935.

the demand for a new peace conference".<sup>1</sup> Greenwood was equally emphatic: "This opportunity clearly ought to be seized without a day's delay for a free and full discussion . . . with all the nations of the world, of the outstanding problems that have helped to create this tension, unrest and war . . . If this chance is lost it will be a fatal and disastrous thing for the human race".<sup>2</sup>

The latter, in fact, was to visit Germany two months later. Together with Johnston and Kennedy, Smith, one of the whips, and four other Labour MPs he was shown the German compulsory Labour Corps and otherwise given what one observer has termed the "full treatment".<sup>3</sup> He did not see Hitler. A subsequent report from the German embassy in London purported to observe that Greenwood has ceased publicly to attack Germany since his visit.<sup>4</sup> Even if we accept this view as valid, Greenwood was to make up for this "aberration" in 1938, when he became one of the most outspoken critics of Hitler in the party.<sup>5</sup>

The remarks of Cripps, Lansbury and Greenwood above show clearly that Labour viewed Hitler's offer to negotiate as a chance to bring up to the surface the inequalities and grievances, under which Germany, it seemed, still laboured. Reginald Fletcher's intervention in the Rhineland debate summed up this feeling:

"If our object is to get Germany to enter into negotiations, I suggest that the first thing to do is to endeavour to remove all obstacles to negotiations. In making proposals, do not use injudicious language.

<sup>1</sup> Daily Herald, 9 March, 1935.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 10 March, 1936, Col.1982.

<sup>3</sup> D C Watt, Personalities and Policies, p.130.

<sup>4</sup> German Embassy Report, 12 September, 1936, quoted in Watt.

<sup>5</sup> See his attack on Hitler in the Daily Herald, 23 May, 1938.

Endeavour to set in motion machinery for revision of just grievances from which we know Germany is suffering . . . aim at cutting away all the tangle of the old treaties in which those grievances are rooted . . . (make) new treaties and new agreements which would be entirely divorced and separate from the old treaties and the grievances implicit in them."<sup>1</sup>

Three years after Hitler's coming to power Labour was still bedevilled by a strong sense of guilt concerning the Treaty of Versailles. In effect the party's belief that the international order could only be sound when it was based on justice had become a weakness. Too long Labourites listened to Germany's case for revision even after it became Hitler's excuse for destroying international law. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to conclude that the parliamentary party was completely taken in by Hitler. Though his proposals were welcomed they were received with an air of scepticism. The paradoxical situation in which Labour found itself is well illustrated by a speech made by Attlee, in Dumbartonshire, exactly a week after the Rhineland coup:

"No sympathy for the injustices inflicted on the German people by the Versailles Treaty should blind us to the true nature of the act of the German Government. It has shattered all confidence in the words of Fascist rulers . . . Are they (pacts) to be repudiated whenever it suits the convenience of the German Government?"<sup>2</sup>

However the effect of the above was somewhat tempered by his declaration that a "new effort should be made to rebuild the fabric

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 26 March, 1936, Col.1520.

<sup>2</sup> Daily Herald, 16 March, 1936.

of peace and international security", which necessitated trust in Germany's word.

Perhaps the best explanation of Labour's attitude is found in Fletcher's comments to the Commons:

"I think it is because of this feeling that Germany has certain grievances of substance that our action is not very clear-cut in this crisis, because we have not got entirely clear-cut convictions."<sup>1</sup>

#### Labour Members acutely conscious of the German threat

A recent writer on the Labour Party has observed that during the crisis the "Labour leadership denounced Hitler's move and understood its significance".<sup>2</sup> In fact the most that can be said of Attlee and much of the leadership is that they were sceptical, increasingly so after the Rhineland episode, as to German intentions. There were, however, a handful of Labour Members, as there were in the Conservative and Liberal Parties, who went further than this and who shared an outright disbelief in the protestations of wounded innocence that Germany's ruler offered the world. For these either the year 1933 marked a watershed in their attitude to Germany, or the activities of the Nazis since that date had convinced them that no confidence could be placed in their word. Such members had reached alarming conclusions as to the intentions of the Hitler regime and of the necessity of fortifying peace against it.

Dalton, whose realisation of the German danger was unequalled in the party leadership, was the foremost of this group. As front-bench spokesman on foreign affairs he aired his fears that Hitler

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 26 March, Cols.1515-16.

<sup>2</sup> C F Brand, The British Labour Party, p.197.



had been "playing during these past weeks" for a free hand in Eastern and Central Europe. It was important therefore that Britain should make it clear that so far as we are concerned he has no free hand to attack either Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria or Soviet Russia through any convenient door which may be opened to him".<sup>1</sup>

Behind the scenes Dalton had urged his colleagues on the Executive to take a dim view of Hitler's move. "Don't condone Hitler. It is a very serious shock to confidence". What with the end of reparations, disarmament, and the remilitarisation of the Rhineland, talk of German grievances now had a hollow ring. "Meanwhile no military and probably economic sanctions can be justified or would be supported by public opinion or by Labour Party opinion in particular against Germany unless she has actually attacked anyone. We should, however, in view of the danger of the situation press for an All-European Pact of mutual assistance against aggression."<sup>2</sup>

Dalton, within a month of Hitler coming to power, had had first hand experience of nazism. A short while before he had accepted an invitation to give a series of lectures in the principal German cities, speaking on international relations, the League of Nations and disarmament. "But in March, when Hitler came to full power, I called this off . . . I did not wish to claim privileges of free speech now denied to Germans".<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Dalton did visit Germany for four days, albeit reluctantly, and his impressions were most sinister. Private executions, he learned were still going on, and the wiping out of old grudges. In the concentration camps, just

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 26 March, 1936, Cols.1461-62.

<sup>2</sup> Dalton Papers, Diary, 12 March, 1936.

<sup>3</sup> The Fateful Years, pp.37, 39-40.

opened, things were pretty bad. From another source he heard that people were kept awake all night by the screams of the Nazis' victims in their barracks. The victims were buried at night and the undertakers dared not mention names. When he left, Dalton wrote in his diary, "I woke in Holland with a sense of freedom. Germany is horrible. A European war must be counted now among the probabilities of the next ten years".<sup>1</sup>

An insight into Dalton's early realisation of the potential danger from Nazi Germany has been given by two of his colleagues in the parliamentary party. "Dalton", one of them wrote, "was a German hater so his views must be taken with some reserve". The other, an even closer colleague and friend, one of the few people referred to by Christian name in Dalton's private papers, concurred with this judgement: "Dalton was a German-hater . . . He embraced the doctrines of Vansittartism before and during the war; he was sent by Vansittart to see Mussolini and he came back saying what a great man the duce was."<sup>2</sup>

There is some truth in the latter remark. Dalton did visit Italy, interviewing Mussolini in the Palazzo Venezia, when he had praised "the elan and energy" which he had found in the country. "I spoke, in particular, of the Public Works, the afforestation, the draining of the Pontine Marshes, which I had just seen, and the building of new villages there".<sup>3</sup> Such policies were absent in Britain, bewailed Dalton, not because traditions and political institutions were so

<sup>1</sup> The Fateful Years, p.41.

<sup>2</sup> Private information. The Vansittart referred to was Sir Robert Vansittart, Permanent Under-Secretary of State, Foreign Office, 1930-38, and Chief Diplomatic Adviser to the Foreign Secretary, 1938-41.

<sup>3</sup> Dalton, The Fateful Years, p.34.

different, but "because we have too many old men in high places". Contrary to what his colleagues thought, Dalton's admiration for the Italian "spirit of adventure" - an inconsistency paralleled by that of the Conservative dissidents - did not blind him to the darker side of fascism. Yet Italian fascism, just because it was Italian "was much less intense, more casual, and therefore less evil, than German Nazism. Nor could Italy, standing alone, ever be the grim threat that Germany soon would be".<sup>1</sup>

As to Dalton's alleged natural dislike of Germans there is evidence that gives slight credence to such a view. Vansittart, very much the "professional" anti-German, who on one occasion noted that he did not "hate all Germans, only the bloody-minded bulk", spoke highly of Dalton:

"Hugh (Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, 1929-31) redeemed his little habit of breathing down our necks by an intuition of the German danger unusual in 1930."<sup>2</sup>

Whereas A L Rowse recalled him as describing the Germans as a "race of carnivorous sheep", Dalton himself registered the opinion that it was the German way "to bully the weak and cringe to the strong", and that "many Germans, but very few Italians, were really mad. The Germans never knew when to stop".<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, like Austen Chamberlain, at no time did Dalton view Nazism as a new phenomenon. The brutality and provocation which characterised the Hitler regime, the conscription, the massive rearmament, and the carefully nurtured war spirit, were to him but

<sup>1</sup> Dalton, The Fateful Years, p.41.

<sup>2</sup> Vansittart, The Mist Procession, p.46.

<sup>3</sup> All Souls and Appeasement, p.52; The Fateful Years, p.41.

a modern variation of Germany's past history replete with the same methods and the same goal of universal domination. This being so, Dalton argued, in 1940, the need for the moral re-education of Germans.<sup>1</sup> Whereas Britain and France, both aggressors in their time, had outgrown the bad habit of aggression, the theory of the 'master race', destined to dominate other slave races, was still being widely disseminated in Germany. "Some time would be needed", he wrote, "a testing period, to determine whether, after the moral darkness of the Nazi years, Germans, and especially young Germans, could regain their sight."<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the truth of the matter the fact remains that Dalton was acutely conscious of the threat emanating from Nazi Germany, and his view was held by others within the parliamentary party. They included Wedgwood, Hicks, Compton, Lathan and Price. Others sharing their apprehensions but not always so outspoken, or in some cases as clear-cut in conviction, were Clynes, Cocks, Fletcher, Haden-Guest,<sup>3</sup> Arthur Henderson, Joseph Henderson, Jagger, Lawson, Noel-Baker, Pethick-Lawrence, Walkden and Wilmot.<sup>4</sup> The latter group were distinguished by their belonging to the Dimitroff Committee, membership of Focus and support of the movement Arms and the Covenant.

<sup>1</sup> According to a colleague quoted above, Dalton's anti-German bias was to lead to unfortunate results in the British radio propaganda during the war. He "succeeded in keeping away from the microphone German Socialists and Trade Unionists who might have done an immensely effective job. Dalton also used to say that the socialist exiles in Britain would have no influence in their country after the war. In fact these exiles dominated the German Social Democratic Party for many years."

<sup>2</sup> Dalton, Hitler's War - Before and After, pp.144-47.

<sup>3</sup> Doctor who served in the Boer War and both World Wars; travelled extensively, 1919-37; MP Southwark North, 1923-27; Islington North, 1937-50; Member of the Parliamentary Committee on Evacuation of the Civil Population.

<sup>4</sup> MP, East Fulham, 1933-35; Kennington, 1939-45.



It is interesting to note that several of the above members, including Clynes, Cocks, Compton, Dalton, Fletcher, Joseph Henderson, Lathan, Lawson, Price and Wedgwood, were influential in the party rearmament lobby, which had accomplished the policy switch in the summer of 1937. There is an obvious connection between those aware of the German threat and the armaments issue. It was in the very circles that favoured rearmament that there existed the greater appreciation of Nazism and its intentions. Once the German danger was recognised it became obvious that Britain required a more effective arms establishment, not only to protect herself, but to play an effective part in any scheme of collective defence.

Wedgwood, in his autobiography, noted that "there was no firmer friend of the German Republic in the House of Commons than the writer of these Memoirs".<sup>1</sup> 1933 was the turning-point. Already he saw clearly that there was no friendship to be had with the German dictator at any price. Within a short time he had established himself as the most frequent and outspoken critic of Hitler in the House, a distinction which had a "depressing effect on the sale of Wedgwood china in Germany".<sup>2</sup> Thenceforward he never lost an opportunity to point out in debate that the Middle Ages had returned to the Twentieth Century, and that while he did not wish to destroy Germany, it was, he felt the duty of all those who loved civilisation to put an end to the sort of spirit ruling in that country. He noted that great as the danger was in 1914, he believed it to be infinitely greater now, for while it would undoubtedly have been unpleasant to be under the Kaiser's heel, to be under "this awful Frankenstein in Germany",

<sup>1</sup> Wedgwood, Memoirs of a Fighting Life, p.224.

<sup>2</sup> C V Wedgwood, The Last of the Radicals, p.212.

he maintained, would be more terrible. "There you have the complete negation of justice, the dark ages . . ."<sup>1</sup>

In 1937 the BBC invited him to take part in a debate on pacifism. Wedgwood spoke so strongly that the broadcast was cancelled. Undaunted he printed his comments in full:

"What Hitler wants is Austria, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, some of Poland and the Ukraine and I hope some of the Southern Tyrol - not to mention Switzerland, Alsace-Lorraine, Schleswig-Holstein and Malmedy."<sup>2</sup>

The only chance of preventing these things happening was to take a firm line and never give way to weakness. "If you do that, you encourage force . . . Do not let us rewrite the history of the end of the Roman Empire, continually buying off hordes by concessions to people whose appetite you merely whet by conciliation . . . We must stand together and not have divided opinions on when to put our foot down, but realise before the demands are made that they will be made, and that either we have to fight Germany now or allow Germany to fight us later on."<sup>3</sup>

Compton, the Labour Member for Gorton, was the Assistant General Secretary of the National Union of Vehicle Builders.<sup>4</sup> He served on

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 13 November, 1933, Cols.649-55. Wedgwood's horror at what was taking place in Germany was based on the evidence sent to him, in his capacity as Chairman of the German Refugee Hospitality Committee, by German Socialists and Jews.

<sup>2</sup> Last of the Radicals, p.230.

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Debates, 26 May, 1933, Col.1504. It is interesting to note that Wedgwood considered that "till the invasion of Abyssinia I was quite alone in the House in holding such views. I would have struck . . . when Hitler seized power in 1933". Memoirs of a Fighting Life, p.230.

<sup>4</sup> Compton: MP Gorton, 1923-31, 1935-37; Chairman of the party, 1933.

the National Executive Committee of the Party from 1925 and represented British Labour on the Labour and Socialist International until his untimely death in 1937. In the latter capacity he came into contact with many foreign socialists including representatives of the German Social Democratic Party, soon to be destroyed by Hitler.<sup>1</sup> His concern with the danger of Nazism is evident in the pamphlet, Hitlerism, issued in May, 1933. Here Compton strove to circulate the bitter truths about Nazi Germany, outlining the repression of socialism, trade unionism and public opinion that had taken place.

George Lathan, MP for Park, Sheffield, was also a leading trade unionist sitting on Labour's National Executive. Prominent in the councils of the Railway Clerks' Association he had also been a member of the Advisory Committee to the International Labour Office, 1923-37. At this time he was Chairman of the World Anti-Nazi Council, which, as has been noted elsewhere, aimed at awakening the public to a realisation of the German menace and to persuade them to boycott German goods.

The Member for Gloucester, Price, drew upon a wealth of travel and experience in assessing the Nazi regime. Probably the most important influence in the formation of his views was that of Russia where, following two visits before 1914, he was appointed by C P Scott to be the Manchester Guardian's correspondent, a post he held for the duration of the war. Price quickly became critical of the Tsarist regime, and was a natural supporter of the revolution when it came. Where he was unusual was in the speed and wholeheartedness with which he espoused the Bolshevik cause, sending back reports suggesting that they were the only Russians worth taking seriously

<sup>1</sup> In May, 1932, together with Attlee, he attended a conference at Zurich, the last occasion the German Socialists were to be seen in full strength. Attlee, As It Happened, p.79.



from a political point of view. "I had been all through the October Revolution there and had given considerable moral support to the Bolsheviks who, I thought, were the only people in Russia who could create order out of chaos, even if they had to use ruthless methods. I did not become a Communist, but by the time I got to Germany, I was certainly what one would call today a "fellow-traveller". Consequently when I came to Germany after the Armistice I soon saw that the so-called revolution in Germany was no revolution at all and that the old regime would, as it did, use all methods to get back to power, only dropping the Kaiser and the trappings of monarchy in order not to antagonise the Western Powers too much. Hence I at once disagreed with the sentimentalists and pacifists inside the Labour Party who argued that the Versailles Treaty was the cause of all the troubles in Germany."<sup>1</sup>

During the latter part of his time in Germany, when he was the Daily Herald correspondent in Berlin from 1919-23, Price became aware of the Nazis and similar organisations in Bavaria and wrote about them in his newspapers despatches, mentioning Hitler by name on several occasions, long before he was important. During the same period he married Elisa Balster, who for a short while had been one of Rosa Luxemborg's secretaries, and thus acquired close links with the German Left. Such knowledge derived from his time in Germany, and the contacts he maintained, stood him in good stead when he entered Parliament in 1935. Unlike many of his colleagues he had clear ideas and genuinely saw the Nazi danger.

Following the Rhineland crisis Price was to intervene in the House with a speech notable for its prophetic qualities. The

<sup>1</sup> Price, Letter to the author, 14 February, 1969.



remilitarisation of the Rhineland he argued, was "part and parcel of the whole Nazi policy and theory that they must keep power in their country by foreign diversions". It was his considered opinion that Austria was one of the places in Europe on which the Berlin leaders had their eyes:

" . . . it is the place where the next move may take place. It will be even more serious if the move that takes place is against the one democratic republic which remains in the sea of Fascist dictatorships, the Republic of Czechoslovakia. There we have a German minority which might easily become the object of attention of the Gentlemen in Berlin".<sup>1</sup>

Faced with either of these "diversions", he warned, Britain could not retire into isolation otherwise "it will be our turn next some day".

In The Gathering Storm Churchill pointed out that when Hitler came to power there was no one book which deserved more careful study than Mein Kampf, for here was the complete programme of the German resurrection, the concept of the Nazi state, the aims of National Socialism and the techniques and methods which were to be employed in carrying them out. Few Englishmen were familiar with the contents of this volume during the early years of Hitler's regime. The edition which was published in translated form at the end of 1933 was brief and expurgated. Not until 1939 was the complete work made available to the British public. The language barrier, the difficulty in acquiring a copy of the book from Germany, the restrictions on its publication outside of the Reich that were later imposed by the

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 26 March, 1936, Col.1510.

Nazis, all undoubtedly were the cause of its not being known to any great extent in England.

One of the small number of people that attempted to rectify this situation was George Hicks, Labour MP for Woolwich East and General Secretary of the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers.<sup>1</sup> Hicks was familiar with Mein Kampf and was convinced that the future policy of Nazi Germany could be traced within its pages. In an attempt to educate public opinion to the nature and intentions of the regime he published a booklet, entitled Hitler Means War, which showed by quotations from Mein Kampf that Hitler's main objective was expansion. His "plan", as Hicks termed it, was to expand the Reich, in the first place, in Eastern and South Eastern Europe and subsequently, when strong enough, also in Western Europe, at the expense of France and Belgium. To accomplish this Germany's ruler was leaving nothing to chance and was occupying strategic positions, which would enable him to settle the various European countries one by one. In order to prevent the Nazification of Europe a practical system of collective security was necessary:

"While endeavouring to transform the League into a more swiftly working instrument, the first step should be a firm non-aggression and mutual assistance pact between Britain, France and the USSR, as the three countries which, at the present time, stand for peace.

"Other countries would, of course, be invited to join these pacts. Who can doubt that such a step would rally

<sup>1</sup> He too rubbed shoulders with foreign socialists in his capacity as delegate to the General Council of the International Federation of Trade Unions. Hicks was a Marxist and was pro-Russian without being a Communist. "He has always been", Dalton noted, "ostentatiously pro-Soviet, is Chairman of the Anglo-Russian Parliamentary Committee, and spoke recently at the IFTU in favour of affiliating the Russian trade unions." Diaries, 22 September, 1939.

the smaller countries of Europe? . . . If the rest of the world combined to outlaw war, in fact, and not merely in words, the two danger centres could be isolated, encircled, and perhaps ultimately even rendered innocuous."<sup>1</sup>

In calling attention to the brutalities of the Nazi regime, and in particular warning public opinion of the external threat posed to Britain by Germany, this handful of Members served their party - and their country - well. Although only a small minority in the counsels of the Labour Party their opinions were to become increasingly dominant as successive crises indicated that the Hitler regime was a perpetual danger to world peace. Parliamentary colleagues, who had not moved with such certainty, came to accept the view that against Germany's aggressive militarism there was only one shield - collective security of a limited and practical nature.

### Liberal Party

#### Abyssinia and the League of Nations

During the autumn of 1935 it became clear that a crisis was at hand, not only for the League but for Liberal foreign policy, which was based on it. With the invasion of Abyssinia the party immediately pressed for the application of sanctions in the hope that they would bring the aggressor to heel. During the election campaign that followed the Liberals maintained their commitment to the League. Richard Acland, Liberal candidate for Barnstaple, told his future constituents "we must go the whole lengths of the Covenant to frustrate Mussolini's aggression", but added the proviso "if all other nations shirk their duties we cannot go on alone, and the

<sup>1</sup> Issued by the Anglo-Russian Parliamentary Committee, price 1d.



whole situation must be considered".<sup>1</sup> Other Liberal candidates, while firmly supporting the League, threw doubts on the sincerity of the Government's conversion to collective security. It seemed too recent to be genuine.

One week after the new Parliament met, Liberal suspicions were confirmed when news of the Hoare-Laval Pact broke. The parliamentary party were aghast at the proposals and a resolution was tabled in the names of Sinclair, Francis and Richard Acland, Mander, Megan Lloyd George,<sup>2</sup> White, Griffith, Harris, Foot,<sup>3</sup> Rathbone and Wedgwood condemning "any settlement of the Italo-Abyssinian dispute which violates the territorial integrity or the political and economic independence of Abyssinia in favour of a declared aggressor and would regard any settlement on these lines as a betrayal of the League of Nations and as an act of national dishonour".

Labour also submitted a vote of censure on the Government for its share in the Hoare-Laval episode and their move was supported by Liberal MPs. Sinclair took the opportunity to intervene, placing the blame squarely on the shoulders of the Prime Minister:

<sup>1</sup> Election Manifesto. Acland: MP Barnstaple, 1935-42 (Liberal), 1942-45 (Common Wealth). This new party was founded in 1942 by Acland during the war-time electoral truce, and its aim was to contest seats where a "reactionary" candidate was in the field, not opposed by a "progressive" one. This should be seen as a continuation of his popular front activities. Acland, now Sir Richard, joined Labour once the 1945 results were known, becoming MP for Gravesend, Kent, 1947-55, and in the latter year, in his characteristic way, lost his seat in a famous by-election. Harris wrote of his membership of the Liberal Party (words equally applicable to his time in Labour) "I was never quite certain what he would say or do, and it was agreed that his attitude was hardly consonant to an official of the party (assistant whip), and he resigned. After the outbreak of war his speeches became more extreme in form and matter. I was pressed from outside to turn him out of the party, but this I refused to do." Forty Years in and out of Parliament, p.142.

<sup>2</sup> MP, Anglesey, 1929-51.

<sup>3</sup> MP, Dundee, 1931-45.



"here is an issue which involves the honour of the country, the authority of the League, and the peace of the world. The man who bears the supreme responsibility for an issue of that kind is the Prime Minister, and he cannot divest himself of it at this stage by sacrificing a colleague."<sup>1</sup>

Sinclair went on to pinpoint Abyssinia as "the great test and, if the League does not survive the test, it may never be reconstructed in our lifetime". What was needed to give a lead and to make a success of the League of Nations was for the Government to show confidence and faith in it. "The League", he said, "can be made to succeed, but it needs faith, which is moral energy and firmness of purpose in asserting the authority of the League on the part of Britain and British statesmen above all."<sup>2</sup>

When the issue was put to the vote 18 Liberals combined with the Official Opposition, but 2, R H Bernays and J P Maclay, voted with the Government.<sup>3</sup> Thus not all Liberal Members of Parliament were united behind the party's avowed foreign policy. Within a year one of the dissentients, Bernays, the Member for Bristol North, wrote to Sir John Simon asking that the Liberal National Whip be sent to him when Parliament reassembled.<sup>4</sup> The Liberal Magazine noted that "for many months he has been in agreement with the Government

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 19 December, 1935, Col.2040.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Col.2045.

<sup>3</sup> David Lloyd George was not present in the House when the vote was taken but was absent paired. Manchester Guardian, 20 December, 1935.

<sup>4</sup> Bernays: News Chronicle correspondent in India, 1930-31; Germany, 1933; MP 1931-45; Parliamentary Secretary for Health, 1937-39, Transport, 1939-40.

on all the main issues of policy. What particularly influenced him was the course of events abroad".<sup>1</sup> Bernays, in fact, had for some time past experienced difficulties within his constituency party. In a letter to Samuel, written in November 1933, Bernays explained his problems, which accounted for his later defection from the Independent Liberals. He seems to have been willing, against his own judgement, to follow Samuel but had trouble with his local Liberal Association, who "do not mind how much I criticise and vote against the Government - but . . . contend that except on some great issue I ought to do so from the Government side of the House".<sup>2</sup> The fact that in the General Election of 1935 he was only opposed by a Labourite, relying on Conservative support to be re-elected, must also have weighed heavily upon him and his local organisation.

The other dissident on this occasion, Maclay, a frequent rebel on major issues, was in a similar situation, only scraping home by 389 votes in a two-cornered fight with Labour. And, of those voting for Labour's motion of censure, Herbert Holdsworth, the Member for Bradford South, later crossed the floor to join the Liberal Nationals, and he too had fought a direct contest with a Labourite, defeating him in the absence of a Conservative candidate.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Liberal Magazine, September, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Bernays to Samuel, Samuel Papers 19 November, 1933. He was soon appointed to a junior ministerial post and was to follow the Government faithfully, through thick and thin, against his inclinations. Nicolson, his closest friend in the House, recorded his true feelings. Over Eden's resignation he was "unhappy" and felt he "ought to have taken a line against the Prime Minister" (Diaries and Letters, p.325). During the Czech crisis he confessed that he had "lost all confidence in this Government and that nothing will restore it", but eventually decided it was "far easier to resign than not to resign". (pp. 371-75).

<sup>3</sup> Five Liberal Members in all fought the General Election against Labour, Conservative candidates not standing: the above three plus Ernest Evans and Sir Percy Harris. The latter two, however, represented seats which had remained Liberal in 1929, although contested by all 3 parties, while the other 3 had gone Labour.

When in May, 1936, Abyssinia fell to the Italians, the executive of the National Liberal Federation, in almost its last act, gave expression to the shame and horror with which it regarded the fate that had befallen Abyssinia, a primitive country which trusted to the honour of the civilised countries.<sup>1</sup> "By their pitiful weakness in resisting this defiance of the League system, the Governments of the Powers, including Britain, have jeopardised the League of Nations, have terribly increased the menace of war, and have ensured that, if it comes, this war will be so ruthless that it will probably bring down our civilisation in ruins."<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile the parliamentary party anticipated moves within the Government to end sanctions. On 11 May Sinclair, Mander, Foot, Owen Evans, White and Richard Acland tabled the following resolution:

"That this House, believing that any settlement of the Italo-Abyssinian dispute which confirmed and accepted the triumph of the aggressor would be fatal to the collective peace system and would encourage acts of unprovoked aggression throughout the world, urges His Majesty's Government to take the lead at Geneva in advocating the maintenance and intensification of sanctions until a settlement is reached in accord with the principles of the Covenant."<sup>3</sup>

Within a month their fears were confirmed when the Foreign Secretary announced the Government's intention to drop all sanctions against Italy. Immediately the Liberal Convention, meeting in London

<sup>1</sup> The National Liberal Federation was wound up in June, 1936, and merged into the new Liberal Party Organisation.

<sup>2</sup> Liberal Magazine, June, 1936.

<sup>3</sup> Notices of Motions, May, 1936.



to discuss the new constitution of the party, passed a motion which voiced the indignation which Liberals felt. It spoke of the deep sense of humiliation with which Liberals had learned of the Government's decision to "surrender" to the aggressors, to "betray" the League of Nations, and to "disregard the pledges" which it had given at the General Election. The Convention went on to reaffirm its unfaltering loyalty to the Covenant of the League, which it declared would not have failed if courageously applied.<sup>1</sup>

Attempting to do everything in its power to arouse the conscience of the nation to the issues at stake the party organised a series of rallies and meetings. As part of the agitation the parliamentary party tabled a condemnatory resolution dissenting "from the decision of His Majesty's Government to abandon the policy of steady and collective resistance to unprovoked aggression to which they are pledged by their declarations at the General Election, and regrets the giving up of sanctions by which alone the rule of law can be asserted against arbitrary power, and the Italian Government be compelled to agree to a settlement of the Abyssinian question in conformity with the Covenant of the League". In the debate that followed David Lloyd George took the opportunity to make a brilliant and devastating speech, contrasting Eden with Hoare, the previous Foreign Secretary. Witheringly he commented that he had been in the House very nearly fifty years and "have never heard a British Minister, one holding the most important position in the Government to the Prime Minister at the present moment, come down to the House of Commons and say that Britain was beaten, Britain and her Empire beaten, and that we must abandon an enterprise we had taken in hand".

<sup>1</sup> Manchester Guardian, 19 June, 1936.



At least Eden's predecessor, "when his policy had been thrown over", had had "the decency to resign". Turning to the Prime Minister, he referred to a recently published book containing the speeches of Baldwin: "In one he is talking about the difficulties of Abyssinia, and he says it is essential 'that the country stand like a rock in the waves, however rough they may be'. The rock has turned out to be mere driftwood. He goes on to say . . . in a great message to the Peace Society, talking about this dispute: 'Let your aim be resolute and your footsteps firm and certain'. Here is the resolute aim, here is the certain footstep - running away."<sup>1</sup>

Frances Stevenson noted in her diary that "D. had a smashing success in the House on Thursday, a real resurrection of his old fighting days. The House almost hysterical and so was I. The Front Bench literally cowed before his onslaught, and Baldwin's reply was pitiable. There was consternation on the faces of young Tory backbenchers. After the speech a young Tory went up to Winston and said he had never heard anything like it in the House. 'Young man', replied Winston, 'you have been listening to one of the greatest Parliamentary performances of all time'."<sup>2</sup> If, as Macmillan concurred, it "had a demoralising effect on the Treasury bench", it did not affect the formal vote of censure.<sup>3</sup>

Like Labour, the Liberal Party clung to the League after the Abyssinian debacle, sharply criticising any talk of weakening it still further. "Ministers say that the League should be reformed",

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 18 June, 1936, Cols.1225, 1231-2.

<sup>2</sup> Lloyd George, A Diary by Frances Stevenson, p.324.

<sup>3</sup> Winds of Change, p.457.

said Sinclair, "in my opinion there is something much more urgent and practical to be done, and that is to reform the Government. It was not for want of material force that the League has so far failed - its material force is overwhelming in its struggle with Italy. It is moral force which has been lacking. It is not the machinery of the League, but the faith, the name, and the will of the Government which has failed."<sup>1</sup>

In consequence of their refusal to abandon faith in the League, Liberal Members called upon the Government to take a courageous and definite lead in the organisation of peace, with the object of restoring confidence in the League as an instrument of collective security and a medium for the redress of grievances.<sup>2</sup> As the League system was the basis of the policy that Liberals had advocated since the Peace Settlement it could not be dropped lightly, unlike the National Government whose adherence to the League was much more short-lived. In fact, of the three established parties it might be argued that the Liberals were the most heavily committed to the League of Nations. Certainly this was true of its House of Commons personnel: five of the parliamentary party had served on the Executive of the League of Nations Union, including Harris, Megan Lloyd George, Mander, Roberts and Sinclair. Seven - Bernays, Owen Evans, Ernest Evans, Griffith, White, Megan Lloyd George and Mander - belonged to the New Commonwealth Society, the pro-League organisation which advocated the creation of an international police force. A further seven members had also been involved in the Movement for the Defence of Freedom and Peace: Richard Acland, de Rothschild, Seely, Bernays,

<sup>1</sup> Speech to the Liberal Convention, 18 June, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> The Times, 3 December, 1936, Statement entitled 'Peace or War'.

Griffiths, Harris and Sinclair. In all 13, or 61.9% of Liberal members were involved in pro-League organisations.

#### Germany and the Rhineland

March, 1936, brought a further jolt to the parliamentary party, when German troops violated the demilitarised zone of the Rhineland. The party leader, however, drew a distinction between Mussolini's action and that of Hitler, which did not necessitate punitive measures or sanctions:

"Nor, while we must condemn any violation of treaties, can we regard the occupation of German territories by German troops as so clearly indefensible as an aggression against the territory of a member of the League."<sup>1</sup>

Sinclair's view was reinforced by that of the deputy leader, Sir Francis Acland who argued "that the action of the French and British Governments has been correct under the Treaty (Locarno), and that no more violent action could have been justified."<sup>2</sup>

Germany, Liberals admitted, had by unilateral action torn up a treaty to which she had fixed her signature, but if this breach was all that had happened the outlook would have been bleak indeed. Instead Hitler had accompanied his defiance with a remarkable offer of conciliation "which transforms Europe's crisis into Europe's opportunity".<sup>3</sup> Therefore the parliamentary party felt that the Government ought not to let slip the opportunity for finding a basis for the rule of law, to which Germany, with every other nation in

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 9 March, 1936, Col.1867.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to The Times, 18 March, 1936.

<sup>3</sup> News Chronicle, 9 March, 1936.

Europe, would freely consent.

As in the case of Labour, sympathy for the underdog, Germany, and her cry for equality of treatment came to the surface. Equality did not exist as long as she, alone of all the Powers, was denied the right to maintain troops in an integral part of her territory. The News Chronicle, summarising the views of Liberal Members, announced that it was "high time to make it clear that the country cannot forever continue to underwrite a dictated peace and be the defender of an international system founded on inequality and the desire to keep the vanquished down".<sup>1</sup>

One of the News Chronicle's headlines for 9 March had been "Lloyd George's faith in German Peace Offer". By the mid-twenties David Lloyd George had revived much of his earlier admiration for Germany and he continually urged that her claims for equality of status and fairer treatment were well founded. Now that Germany had occupied the Rhineland and backed it up with an offer of a twentyfive years peace pact, Lloyd George thought the offer should be taken seriously. Three weeks after the Rhineland move he outlined his plan for a "policy of appeasement in the world" in a letter to Kingsley Martin, the editor of the New Statesman and Nation. His plan envisaged the rectification of German frontiers, "where boundaries were not quite justly drawn", the reallocation of colonial mandates, and "the enforcement of provisions as to the rights of (German) minorities".<sup>2</sup>

Lloyd George had regarded the Russo-French Pact as provocation for, if not justification of, Hitler's occupation of the Rhineland.

<sup>1</sup> News Chronicle, 9 March, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Lloyd George Papers, Letter dated 28 March, 1936.



He told the Commons:

"The moment the Russo-French Pact was signed, no one responsible for the security of Germany could leave its most important industrial province without defence of any sort or kind when - and here is a thing which is never dwelt upon - France has built up the most gigantic fortifications ever seen in any land . . . Yet the Germans are supposed to remain without even a garrison, without a trench. I am going to say here that if Herr Hitler had not taken some action with regard to that . . . he would have been a traitor to the Fatherland."<sup>1</sup>

Small wonder that Lloyd George's views were noted with interest, if not approval, within ruling circles in Berlin. Subsequently Ribbentrop, the German Ambassador in London, formally invited him to visit Germany. The notorious trip took place in September 1936 when, accompanied with his children, Megan and Gwilym, both Liberal Members of Parliament, Lloyd George visited Germany on the pretext of seeing what Hitler had accomplished in conquering unemployment.<sup>2</sup> He met Hitler twice. By all accounts Lloyd George was favourably impressed, and convinced that the Chancellor was a man of peace, a genius bent on social reform, with no desire whatsoever to plunge Europe into war. Yet of the leading figures in the regime Lloyd George admired only Hitler, for he refused to see Goering or Goebbels, apparently flouting their invitations.<sup>3</sup> Whatever his reasoning it

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 27 July, 1936, Col.1209.

<sup>2</sup> See Tom Jones, A Diary With Letters, pp.239-65 for an eyewitness account of the trip. The full transcript of Lloyd George's talk with Hitler can be found in Martin Gilbert's Roots of Appeasement, Appendix II.

<sup>3</sup> Lloyd George, Twelve Essays. 'Lloyd George and Compromise Peace', Paul Addison, p.365.

appears strange that Lloyd George could so easily divorce Hitler from his associates and the system that he had established.

On his return, Lloyd George wrote an article for the Daily Express, which attracted much attention and no doubt sent a shudder through his parliamentary colleagues. It was a wildly extravagant tribute to Hitler:

"One man has accomplished this miracle. He is a born leader of men. A magnetic, dynamic personality with a single-minded purpose, a resolute will and a dauntless heart . . . The old trust him; the young idolise him. It is the worship of a national hero who has saved his country from utter despondency and degradation . . . not a word of criticism or disapproval have I heard of Hitler. He is the George Washington of Germany."<sup>1</sup>

For two years Lloyd George remained full of admiration for Hitler and convinced that Germany's leader was not temperamentally an aggressor. In December 1937, while writing to a friend, he recalled the trip, and yet again lauded Hitler:

"I had the privilege of meeting the great leader of a great people. I have never doubted the fundamental greatness of Herr Hitler as a man even in moments of profound disagreement with his policy. . . . I only wish we had a man of his supreme quality at the head of affairs in our country today,"

and bewailed the fact that Britain had not composed her differences with Germany before the Spanish crisis ever arose. Even then Lloyd George somehow convinced himself that it was "not Hitler's fault

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in D McCormick's The Mask of Merlin, p.277.

that a friendly arrangement was not reached . . . The present muddle is entirely due to the hesitancy and the nervelessness of the Baldwin Administration. They never saw an opportunity until it was too late to act upon it."<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to note that while admiring Hitler, Lloyd George reserved a strong contempt for Mussolini. "It looks," he wrote, "as if the Fuhrer has committed himself to Mussolini - that adds enormously to the obstacles in the path of friendly accommodation of the troubles of Europe. Mussolini is temperamentally an aggressor. I have never thought Herr Hitler was and I do not believe it now." This he wrote at the height of the Spanish Civil War, although it is fair to say that Spain was far more an Italian than a German operation, and Lloyd George was strongly for the Republic, as he had been for Abyssinia.

Nevertheless, less than a year later and largely under the impact of the Spanish conflict, Lloyd George moved away from a position favouring revision of the Versailles Treaty. During 1938 he became one of the most outspoken and articulate critics of Chamberlain's foreign policy and a leading member of that group urging some form of Anglo-French-Soviet collaboration as an alternative to appeasement. But on Czechoslovakia his line was not all that it seemed. He called for an arrangement with Russia to stop Hitler, and condemned the Munich Agreement as a surrender. Yet it was clear that Lloyd George was also inclined to be anti-Czech, and his attack on Munich was far more anti-Chamberlain than anti-Hitler.

Excluding Lloyd George, Richard Acland could still describe the attitude of Liberal Members to Hitler's remilitarisation of the

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Professor Conwell-Evans, 17 December, 1937, Lloyd George Papers. He was not wholly blind, however, to the darker aspects of Nazism, making clear his dislike for anti-Semitism. A J Sylvester, Life With Lloyd George, p.154.

Rhineland as "woefully blind". Nevertheless, there were within the Liberal position nagging doubts.<sup>1</sup> Negotiations with Hitler on the basis of his offer would not by itself remove suspicions of German motives for, by the brusque and defiant manner the Rhineland had been occupied, confidence in Germany's good faith had been shaken. As Sinclair told the House:

"Not for the first time he tears up by unilateral action a treaty to which German signatures have been appended. It is, however, for the first time he tears up a treaty which he himself has undertaken to respect."<sup>2</sup>

In consequence it was necessary for the Chancellor to dissipate the suspicion that he was attempting to free Germany from shackles that prohibited his freedom of action.

For the Liberal Party, as with Labour, the value of the Rhineland coup lay in its educative effect. "It will be said", commented the News Chronicle, "it has been said a dozen times already - that we cannot trust Germany's word. Even if that is true, the negotiation of a new Locarno would not place Europe in any graver crisis than she is in today. At the very worst, the world would discover Hitler for a villain, and at the least we should know where we were and what to do."<sup>3</sup> The sequel was indeed to show that Germany's apparent unwillingness to come to terms with the Locarno Powers did not go unnoticed on the Liberal benches. A growing awareness of the Nazi threat became evident.

<sup>1</sup> Acland, Why So Angry, p.30.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 9 March, 1936, Col.1867.

<sup>3</sup> News Chronicle, 9 March, 1936.



Of Liberal Members Geoffrey Mander was almost unrivalled in his understanding of the German situation. In April, 1936, he asked the Foreign Secretary whether the Foreign Office would enquire of the German Government if Mein Kampf remained a reliable expression of German foreign policy. Not to be fobbed off by Viscount Cranborne's reply that "no useful purpose would be served", Mander wondered:

"In view of the fact that this book contains some very aggressive proposals and is regarded as the Bible of the German people, would it not be desirable to include such matters as this in the forthcoming questionnaire to Germany?"<sup>1</sup>

Three months later, when he again addressed the House, he announced that the views expressed by Churchill on the danger of the menace were not the least bit exaggerated. "I believe that the whole world is faced with a danger of the gravest kind, threatening us at the present moment and with a growing certainty as the months go by. The German Government are treating our Government with the utmost contempt. They do not even trouble to reply to diplomatic documents or questions which we submit to them".<sup>2</sup>

Other Liberal Members sharing Geoffrey Mander's apprehensions concerning Germany's future policy included Sinclair and de Rothschild - two close associates of Churchill - Richard Acland, Foot, Griffith and Harris. As private members they were distinguished by their participation in Focus and the Movement Defence of Freedom and Peace.

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 28 April, 1936, Col.735. Eden had considered it worthwhile to get some idea of German intentions and drew up a questionnaire, which was put to Hitler. No reply was ever received. Facing the Dictators, p.372.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 20 July, 1936, Col.139. It is interesting to note that Mander argued the case for rearmament by reference to Germany: "In a world", he wrote, "that is rapidly rearming and which possesses an almost self-designated aggressor in the person of Germany, rearming more vigorously than all, it is necessary for the country not to be left behind in so deplorable a race". Contemporary Review, May, 1936.

### Foreign Affairs Debates

As with the Labour Party, Liberal contributions to foreign affairs debates for the period November, 1935 to September, 1939, have been recorded. The following were found to be the most active members:

<u>Member</u>	<u>Number of Speeches</u>
Acland, F	2
Acland, R	7
Lloyd George, D	18
Griffith, K	5
Harris, P	2
Mander, G	20
Roberts, W	10
Sinclair, A	42 <sup>1</sup>
White, H	2
Bernays, R <sup>2</sup>	3

The results indicate that half of the party took part in debates, although clearly Sinclair, Mander, David Lloyd George, Roberts, Richard Acland and Griffith were the most active leaders on foreign affairs before the war.

An analysis of the seven members taking part in debates with any consistency revealed no marked differences from their fellow Liberal Members. Nevertheless, background information on the seven supports the contention that those Members of Parliament who take an interest in foreign affairs are almost always found to have lived abroad, to have travelled, or in some way to have been placed in close contact with particular foreign interests. Bernays, in his capacity of special correspondent for the News Chronicle, had travelled extensively, residing abroad on more than one occasion. He had,

<sup>1</sup> The figure of 42 interventions may appear high but as chairman of the Parliamentary Party he assumed the leadership in debates of importance.

<sup>2</sup> While a member of the Independent Liberals, 1935-6.

in fact, reported for the paper from Germany in the year that Hitler came to power. Mander, too, had travelled widely in Europe, as when he visited the Baltic States in 1935, discussing the international situation with statesmen there.<sup>1</sup> Roberts and Acland, whose interest in foreign affairs dates largely from the Spanish conflict, were known to have visited Spain, studying the situation and obtaining first-hand knowledge of what was happening there. Lloyd George, of course, was not only a hardened traveller but as Prime Minister from 1916-22 had been ultimately responsible for the formation of Britain's foreign policy, and had himself presided over a number of important international conferences.

<sup>1</sup> Mander, We Were Not All Wrong, p.61.

## C H A P T E R   I V

### THE INTER-PARTY MOVEMENTS AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

#### The Inter-Party Movements

Within three months of the General Election Mander, in surveying what little scope there was for a Liberal advance, commended the "possibility of the development of a moderate centre government commanding the support of the Left".<sup>1</sup> He saw two organisations around which such a gathering of forces could take place: the Next Five Years Group and the Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction. Similarly Ramsay Muir, ex-chairman of the Liberal Party, in a letter to Samuel on the disastrous election results, felt:

"We may perhaps hope for some good results from the inter-party discussions of the Council of Action, which might conceivably lead to the formation of a middle party, eventually liberal in character. But I doubt if it will come to much. It is too Nonconformist, and too narrow in its range."<sup>2</sup>

The Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction had been formed in the summer of 1935. Its formation had been foreshadowed in a manifesto, issued by David Lloyd George and 34 Free Church leaders, entitled Peace and Reconstruction: A Call to Action. The appeal to the electorate was made under two heads:

<sup>1</sup> The Contemporary Review, January, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Papers, letter dated 17 November, 1935. Stephen Koss has described the Council of Action as the last and most spectacular of the attempts to reactivate Nonconformity as "a political vehicle and to bring its waning influence to bear in domestic and international affairs". However, the campaign revealed beyond all doubt that Radical Nonconformity was "not dormant but dead". Nonconformity in British Politics, p.11.



"1. PEACE. We call upon all lovers of peace to give their support at the next General Election only to those candidates who pledge themselves to exact from whatever Government takes power after the Election, the positive and courageous use of British initiatives towards redressing injustices, economic and territorial, which breed the spirit of war, and who pledge themselves to support energetically practical measures of disarmament, and the maintenance of peace through conciliation, arbitration and collective action within the League of Nations.

2. UNEMPLOYMENT. We invite men and women irrespective of party attachments, to pledge themselves to secure at the next General Election the return of a parliament whose members are committed to insist on measures that will apply to the problem of unemployment remedies commensurate with the magnitude of its dangers to the moral and physical well-being of the community."<sup>1</sup>

The following month a convention was held at Central Hall, Westminster to consider the manifesto. It was attended by 82 MPs.<sup>2</sup> Two resolutions were passed. The first expressed approval of the manifesto and the second, moved by Lloyd George, constituted as a Council of Action such of the signatories to the manifesto as were prepared to act, and pledged the delegates to set up constituency

<sup>1</sup> Measures in mind were: a national Development Council, with representatives of industry, commerce, finance, the workers and economic thinkers, with independent power to plan bold schemes; a small cabinet of only five, largely non-departmental ministers, on the lines of his own war cabinet; action on housing, roads, land, and the reconstruction of depressed industries.

<sup>2</sup> Among those attending were Lansbury, then Labour's leader, Samuel, Liberal leader, Lord Cecil of Chelwood, and Harold Macmillan.

councils to secure the return to the next Parliament of members prepared to seek appropriate action on the peace and reconstruction issue. It was stressed that the purpose of the Council of Action was not to form a new political party. Rather the local councils would interrogate all candidates to secure pledges of support for the peace and reconstruction policies. Only those giving the required undertaking would be supported by the councils. Where all candidates were found to be unsatisfactory it was left to the local councils to decide whether new candidates should be promoted.<sup>1</sup>

The Council's foundation was denounced by some as an attempt on the part of Lloyd George to undermine the Government and get his hands on the levers of power again. However much this was denied at the time, retrospectively it appears to be so. Lloyd George's secretary, Frances Stevenson, revealed that he was thinking in terms of "wrecking" the power of the National Government, in the event of an election, by securing a Liberal-Labour coalition including, if possible, Left-wing Tories, under his leadership, or at any rate under his inspiration.<sup>2</sup> "He calculates", she wrote, "that Labour may win 275 seats, on the analogy of the 1929 election. If then the Liberals have only 20, that would give the Government a majority of only 25 to carry on with, which would make things impossible for them after a very short time. If on the other hand Labour win 290, and we win 40, then the Government would be defeated. But in that case, even by combining forces with Labour, we should not have a sufficient majority to carry on a vigorous policy. 'Under those

<sup>1</sup> The Times, 2 July, 1935.

<sup>2</sup> Lloyd George, A Diary by Frances Stevenson, p.296. Apparently Lloyd George, when informed by Tom Jones that Baldwin was "angry, thinking D. is out to wreck", replied "That is precisely what I am out for." Ibid, p.313. See also A J Sylvester, Life With Lloyd George, p.124.

circumstances', said D., 'I would form a Government with Lansbury as nominal Prime Minister but retaining the active leadership for myself. I would then proceed to formulate a devastating progressive programme and go to the country again immediately upon it with a terrific campaign, and return with a majority of 150'."<sup>1</sup>

Lloyd George's only hope of attaining this was to secure, in the new Parliament, as many members as possible pledged to vote for the Council's policy, whatever party was in power. In the event, the Council never really got a sufficient hold on the country to fire the electorate in time for November's election. "A general election now almost certain to take place next month. D. dispirited and discouraged. It has come far too early for him . . . He is out of heart at the Government election changes and realises the Government have torpedoed his plans, probably deliberately."<sup>2</sup> In effect, exactly as Baldwin intended, the Council of Action - like the Labour and Liberal Opposition - was caught off-guard.

Out of the 615 members returned only 67 supported the new deal policy. It was clear that the Council could neither "smash the power of the National Government" nor exert anything but little influence in the face of the solid Tory majority.<sup>3</sup> Undeterred, Lloyd George called a meeting of the 67 to discuss how the questions of peace and reconstruction could be kept before the new Parliament. Less than half the group attended the meeting on 29 November, when Lloyd George

<sup>1</sup> Lloyd George, A Diary by Frances Stevenson, p.312.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp.318-9.

<sup>3</sup> Frances Lloyd George, The Years That Are Past, p.233. Broken down, the 67 supporters consisted of 11 National Members, 21 Liberals, 34 Labourites and 1 Independent.



was appointed sessional chairman and it was reaffirmed that there was no intention of forming a separate party in the Commons. At a further meeting an executive was elected consisting of 10 members: Liberals - Richard Acland, Gwilym Lloyd George, Mander and White; Labourites - Alexander, Ammon, Hopkin, Jenkins, Milner and Young. The Conservatives were conspicuous by their absence.

With Lloyd George to finance it the Council was kept going. Established in a suite of offices in Central London it maintained a steady stream of propaganda on behalf of the policy of peace and reconstruction. A weekly News Bulletin of political information was issued as were speakers' notes and other literature. The Council intervened strongly at by-elections, laying its programme before the candidates and working for those that agreed to support it if returned. "There can be no doubt", wrote Malcolm Thomson, "that in a number of by-elections which took place in the four years between 1935-39, the Council's activities turned the scales in favour of its protege."<sup>1</sup>

The Council took a stand on the foreign policy issues of these years. It opposed the Hoare-Laval proposals and co-operated in the campaign of protest which led to Hoare's resignation. Refusing to recognise the annexation of Abyssinia, the Council, in May 1936, called for the application of oil sanctions on Italy and the closing of the Suez Canal. Although favouring the non-intervention policy on the outbreak of war in Spain the Council, as early as October 1936, set aside non-intervention which it considered "one-sided in its effects", and urged the Government "to restore the right

<sup>1</sup> Thomson, David Lloyd George, p.420. It is likely that the victory of Noel-Baker at Derby, in 1936, and those of Stokes and Summerskill at Ipswich and West Fulham, in 1938, were in part attributable to the Council's efforts. See A J Sylvester, Life With Lloyd George, pp.143, 195.



of the constitutionally elected Spanish Government to buy arms in this country - a right to which she is entitled under international law."<sup>1</sup> Supporting Eden at the time of his resignation, it organised test ballots in four Government held constituencies in order to get a rapid test of public opinion "on the Eden crisis".<sup>2</sup> A reply-paid ballot card was sent to every elector with the following leading question:

"Do you approve of Mr Eden's stand for good faith in international affairs, and will you support his demand for the re-establishment of peace and security through the League of Nations?"<sup>3</sup>

The replies clearly indicated that there was widespread support for the stand taken by Eden.<sup>4</sup> Actively opposed to the Government's course throughout the Czech crisis, it subsequently launched a Czechoslovakian Thanksgiving Fund in gratitude for the sacrifices the Czechs had submitted to in order to preserve peace.

The hopes held by Lloyd George that the Council of Action might become a focal point for a united resistance to the National Government's policies, contributing to its eventual overthrow and replacement by an inter-party administration, never came to fruition. Neither can it be said that, in the period from the election to the outbreak of war, the Council succeeded in influencing the Government nor in impressing its views upon the nation. In fact it only subsisted to the outbreak of war by paring its platform to certain limited objectives on

<sup>1</sup> The Times, 21 October, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> The Times, 5 March, 1938.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> According to Harvey, the Whips asked Eden "if he will publicly disown the Council of Action's Referendum on his resignation. He has refused to do so." Diary entry for 6 March, 1938.

which action and agreement amongst members could be obtained. Even on this narrow ground the movement experienced dissension, particularly from the few Left-Wing Tories associated with it. The continual criticism levelled at the Government's handling of affairs both home and abroad placed the Tories pledged to the Council's policy in such an awkward position that they soon found it necessary to repudiate the organisation and its activities.<sup>1</sup> "It has been made clear beyond all doubt", complained five Conservative members, "that the Council is in reality nothing more or less than an appendage of that section of the Liberal Party which opposes the Government . . . becoming a platform organisation for the propaganda of one distinguished statesman".<sup>2</sup> Similarly, a year later, Anthony Crossley severed all connection with the Council on the grounds that it was a "body under the influence, inspiration or domination of Lloyd George. Supposedly non-party it nevertheless lent its support to almost any opposition candidate in every by-election".<sup>3</sup>

The other movement around which a possible alternative Government might have formed was the Next Five Years Group. This, like the Council of Action, originated in the summer of 1935, when a number of people of all parties and of none, inspired by Lord Allen of Hurtwood, came together to urge a 'new deal' for Britain.<sup>4</sup> They

<sup>1</sup> The Conservatives associated with the Council were equally attracted by its progressive policies and its declared freedom from party bias, however little this meant to Lloyd George. Yet anti-Government tendencies could be distinguished from the first, tendencies which had led such interested Conservatives as Adams, Crossley, Marsden, McCorquodale, Molson and Watt to protest at the movement's partisanship. The Times, 29 July, 1935.

<sup>2</sup> The Times, 1 June, 1937. The five, all of whom had signed the pledge were: Gratton-Doyle, Denville, Craven-Ellis, Dudley Joel and Shepperson.

<sup>3</sup> The Times, 5 March, 1938.

<sup>4</sup> Lord Allen: an important, but secondary, figure in the Labour movement; supported MacDonald in 1931 and was made a peer in 1932.

planned a book to put forward their policy. This, published in July, was entitled The Next Five Years, and, naturally enough, propounded a political programme for five years. The book, divided into two sections, outlined radical proposals for economic reconstruction and social justice as well as a plea for the sincere support of collective security through the League of Nations.<sup>1</sup> The greater part of the signatories to the book were not politicians as such, although there were 17 MPs mostly supporting the Government.<sup>2</sup> These included some that were later distinguished by their opposition to the Government's foreign policy, including Hills, Macmillan and Molson.<sup>3</sup> From the signatories an executive committee was formed, which included Allen as Chairman, Macmillan as joint treasurer, and Molson, Mander, King-Hall, White and Salter as members.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Its detailed plans included a government planning committee of cabinet ministers, an economic general staff, public control of utilities and a nationalized Bank of England. It advocated reducing hours of work, abolishing the means test, raising the school-leaving age, and increasing death duties.

<sup>2</sup> Conservatives: T Cazalet, G Ellis, C F Entwistle, F M Graves, J W Hills, N K Lindsay, Macmillan, T B Martin, Molson, T J O'Connor. National Labour: R D Denman. Liberals: Acland, Bernays, I Foot, Mander, White. Independent: Rathbone. Another four signatories were to become MPs: Bartlett, T E Harvey, King-Hall, Salter.

<sup>3</sup> Molson: MP Doncaster, 1931-35; High Peak, Derbyshire, 1939-61. Although defeated at the General Election, he sided with the Tory dissidents and when re-elected to the House he voted against Chamberlain, in May, 1940. He spent much of his time out of Parliament travelling in Europe and was well-equipped to warn that National Socialism "teaches that force is the source of Right" and that Germany is "physically the strongest nation in Europe and certainly her Government and probably her people are imbued with a desire to assert themselves aggressively in foreign affairs". The peace-loving countries, he urged, "must stand by the League and each other", becoming a "Grand Alliance of defence", organising a "co-ordinated rearmament of its members to ensure its superiority over the anti-League Powers", Germany, Japan and Italy. New Outlook, August, 1936.



As the programme of the Next Five Years Group was similar to that of the Council of Action it was natural that there should be talk of co-operation between the two. That August representatives of the Next Five Years, including Macmillan, had a much publicized meeting with Lloyd George, which gave rise to a crop of rumours that some kind of new coalition was in process of formation for the next election.<sup>1</sup> In fact there was no foundation for the speculation as the meeting was confined purely to the "possibility of getting a joint policy out of the two documents Five Years and Organising Prosperity". Apparently Lloyd George favoured such a move but the Next Five Years representatives were very 'sticky', so much so that he lost his temper and taunted them with being cowards. "When one of them tentatively suggested that what they were afraid of was that the movement would become a Lloyd George one, he suggested that there was an easy way out of the difficulty.<sup>2</sup> I will withdraw altogether from it, and you can run the thing yourselves. I ask for nothing better. I will have nothing to do with the campaign, and will retire to my constituency and occupy myself with that".<sup>3</sup> This, however, did not satisfy the Next Five Years representatives and the two bodies

4 (from previous page)

Salter: Director, Economic and Finance Section, League of Nations Union, 1919-20, and 1922-31; Gladstone Professor of Political Theory and Institutions, Oxford University, 1934-44; Independent MP Oxford University, 1937-50 - his election to the House was to be the only striking public success attained by the Next Five Years Group. Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Shipping, 1939-41.

<sup>1</sup> The Times, August, 1935. This was exactly what Lloyd George wanted and he was hoping to detach Macmillan and other Left Wing Conservatives from the Government forces.

<sup>2</sup> Certain of the Next Five Years Group viewed Lloyd George's Council of Action and his so-called New Deal with apprehension: "We do not want", Lord Allen remarked, "the New Deal to turn out a 'New Game'." Macmillan, Winds of Change, p.377.

<sup>3</sup> Lloyd George, A Diary by Frances Stevenson, p.314.



remained separate in form and purpose: the Council a definite political movement; Next Five Years existing for research and the propagation of ideas.

After the General Election there was much discussion about the future. At length, in February, 1936, the Next Five Years was reformed as a definite organisation, not as a party but as a pressure group. Its purpose now was to mobilize public opinion in support of the principles outlined in the book. This would be done by the publication of further literature, holding meetings and lectures, conducting correspondence in the press, and arranging deputations and employing other means of bringing influence to bear upon ministers, local authorities, political parties, and other organisations.<sup>1</sup> The Group also agreed on the launching of a monthly journal entitled The New Outlook, first issued in June, 1936, with Macmillan virtually in control of its publication.

As 1936 progressed differences began to emerge as to the function of the group. Some members wanted to keep the group as it was, a constructive academic pressure group whose foremost concern was to secure the adoption of their programme and to this end be free to permeate all parties. By contrast a section led by Macmillan, acutely aware of the need for immediate action in regard to home and foreign affairs, wished to "bring together the progressive elements in the political life of Britain in a common movement for the achievement

<sup>1</sup> The Times, 18 February, 1936.

of a programme of immediate demands".<sup>1</sup> In effect what was proposed was an English version of the French Popular Front, the success of which had not gone unnoticed in Britain. "Should we not launch", asked Macmillan, "some kind of popular front wide enough to embrace Progressive Conservatives, Radicals, Liberals, and those members of the Socialist Party who were prepared to work for a limited objective?"<sup>2</sup> A start could be made by linking the Next Five Years Group, the Council of Action, and other similar bodies. "It is obvious that the official Party leaders cannot take action on these lines. If it is true, however, that the mass of people in Britain desired such a movement then the Party machines might be expected to move into line at a later stage, in response to rank and file pressure".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Macmillan to Lloyd George, 12 August, 1936, Lloyd George Papers. In an interview in The Star, who were running a series about the possibility of a Popular Front, Macmillan said on 25 June, 1936, that he thought the Conservative Party had become dominated by money and the City. "A party dominated by second-class brewers and company promoters - a Casino capitalism - is not likely to represent anybody but itself". But there was not much confidence to be placed in the Left either: "after ten years of no imagination, no drive, all we are left with is men like Attlee and Lansbury who are quite incompetent to govern an Empire". Macmillan felt that progress could be made in creating a popular front but it would have to be done slowly. What was needed was the formation of a great popular political party - he suggested Morrison as leader - which would be Labour stripped of its extremes, "but he would have to achieve a fusion of all that is best in the Left and the Right and it would have to be a Left Centre rather than a Right Centre".

<sup>2</sup> Winds of Change, p.487.

<sup>3</sup> Letter, Macmillan to Lloyd George, 12 August, 1936.

As the Next Five Years remained divided over the popular front proposals it was agreed that the Group be officially separated from The New Outlook, the official journal. The former concentrated on the academic and educative side while the latter entered the field of current politics, becoming involved in electoral activities. The Next Five Years continued its useful propaganda until it became clear it could not do much more along old lines, and was thus wound up in November, 1937. At the same time The New Outlook, with its board of directors, began exploring the possibilities of a popular front movement, based on a five-point programme of collective security, abolition of the means test, steps to help distressed areas, willingness to reduce tariffs and extension of public control over industry.

In August 1936 Macmillan sent out a letter to interested parties:

"As Chairman of the Board of Directors of the The New Outlook Ltd I am asked to communicate with you to find out whether you would be prepared to attend a meeting to be arranged for the early part of September to discuss the possibilities of launching such a movement."<sup>1</sup>

Lloyd George, at any rate, replied to the effect that he was "in entire sympathy" with the exploratory movement.<sup>2</sup> However, with Parliament in recess and so many people on holiday at that time of year, the meeting was postponed until a more favourable date could be arrived at.

Meanwhile the journal, New Outlook, commenced its discussion and comment on the practicability of co-ordinating organisations and persons into a popular movement. A number of eminent people from

<sup>1</sup> Letter, Macmillan to Lloyd George, 12 August, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Lloyd George Papers, Letter to Macmillan, 18 August, 1936.

different walks of life made contributions, including such Members of Parliament as Morrison, John Parker, Foot, Mander and Roberts, although these were not all favourable to a front. From the articles published it is clear that the international situation influenced many in favour of a combination of progressive forces: questions of home policy were treated as secondary in urgency to foreign affairs.<sup>1</sup>

In January, 1937, the meeting to discuss the possibility of launching a Popular Front at last took place. It was attended by representatives of the Next Five Years, the Council of Action, the Labour and Liberal Parties, the People's Front Propaganda Committee together with churchmen and people of no definite political attachments. Macmillan, in a letter to Lloyd George, set out the basis for discussion and the programme of action which he hoped they would eventually adopt. "We have been discussing", he wrote, "the possibilities of an alliance of progressives for the advocacy of an agreed short term programme . . . The first step is to achieve the partial unity we suggest (co-ordination of the Next Five Years, Council of Action, People's Front Propaganda Committee etc). Next is to obtain a following in the country. And the following would persuade or compel the Party leaders to take the action desired."<sup>2</sup>

Nothing, in fact, came of the attempt as the various individuals and groups "broke into fragments".<sup>3</sup> Undeterred, Macmillan continued to agitate for combined political action until it became clear, with the New Outlook ceasing publication, the Next Five Years Group being

<sup>1</sup> See New Outlook, July, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Lloyd George Papers, Letter dated 16 January, 1937.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, Council of Action Memorandum on the Left Book Club, 12 February, 1937.



wound up, and the Council of Action beginning to "fade out as Lloyd George realised that it could not succeed in overthrowing the Government or even in influencing it, . . . that by the end of 1937 these various movements, whether academic or political in a narrower sense, were nearing their end".<sup>1</sup> Failure, in part attributable to the organisations available not being strong enough and agreement not broad enough to carry into fution any effective plan, can also be put down to their inability to overcome the rigid party alignments in British politics. The Labour Party rejected any association with other political bodies not sharing its "determination to achieve our democratic socialist objectives", while the Liberal Party could not allow itself to be "identified with a policy of complete state socialism to which the Labour Party is committed".<sup>2</sup> Although New Outlook might declare that "the rival principles and catch words which marked the lines of political cleavage in the past, are to a large extent irrelevant to the real issues now", the cleavage nevertheless existed.<sup>3</sup> "Obsolete" and "irrelevant" party structures may have been but the fact remained that they were an effective obstacle in the way of the new developments.<sup>4</sup> It was an obstacle on which all the united or popular fronts were to founder.

Macmillan had realized that "if the Popular Front proves impossible - if the various progressive groups will not come together - then the only thing for people like myself is to revert back to the old policy of trying to influence the present Government".<sup>5</sup> Though described

<sup>1</sup> Winds of Change, p.489.

<sup>2</sup> Liberal and Labour Party statements quoted by J V Delahaye in "Party Manifestoes", New Outlook, February, 1937.

<sup>3</sup> New Outlook, January, 1936; article entitled "Old Divisions Now Irrelevant".

<sup>4</sup> Macmillan, New Outlook, May, 1937.

by national newspaper as a "rebel at heart" Macmillan turned back to his party, working with the dissident Conservatives to strengthen its policies, but never quite relinquished his hope of a "a 1931 in reverse".<sup>1</sup>

### Spain and the later fronts

#### The Right

In the summer of 1936 a new question came to divide British public opinion. This was the Spanish Civil War. Neither the aggressions of Hitler's Germany and its anti-Jewish atrocities nor Italian barbarities in Abyssinia aroused such political passions as did that event. Nothing since the French Revolution, K W Watkins concluded from his study of British opinion towards the war, had so tragically divided the British public as the conflict in Spain - and that at a moment when unity was more necessary than at any time in British history.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, public attention was distracted from the graver problems raised by the revival of German power.

The bitter and passionate differences between the Right and the Left, which existed at this time, have somewhat obscured differences within the Right. Three trends can be discerned among the National Government supporters over Spain. Nicolson recorded in his diary, in July, 1937:

"The Foreign Affairs Committee discuss Spain. The enormous majority are passionately anti-Government and pro-Franco."<sup>3</sup>

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Letter to Lloyd George, 16 January, 1937, Lloyd George Papers.

<sup>1</sup> The Sunday Times, 8 February, 1937, quoted in Sampson's Macmillan - A Study in Ambiguity, p.44.

<sup>2</sup> Britain Divided: the effects of the Spanish Civil War on British Public Opinion, p.VII.

This large, ardent pro-Franco section was well-satisfied with a situation in which the policy of non-intervention was operating to the advantage of the Nationalists. Another trend was that of the true neutrals, who were indifferent to the issues being fought out in Spain and were therefore anxious to operate non-intervention in the cause of peace and to discourage any violation of that policy by Germany, Italy and Russia. The last, somewhat minimal, sympathised with the elected Republican Government.

Where did those Government supporters considered so far, and others soon to oppose appeasement, stand over the Spanish issue? The dissidents in fact reflected the divisions of the Government supporters at large, and saw little connection between a Nazi Germany and a Franco Spain. Although the friends of Hitler were to a great extent those of Franco, Franco also had other supporters who were by no means so well-disposed to Hitler. There were a number of Conservatives who supported Franco, but who believed that the policy of strengthening Hitler by making concessions was fraught with danger.

For Amery ideology and class sympathies were paramount in any analysis of the civil war. To him a Left Wing combination, dependent on the Communists and other extremist elements, had "created a state of anarchy and terror which by July led to a ferocious and implacable civil war."<sup>1</sup> Amery's sympathies went to those attempting to "restore order", the Nationalists, just as he had sympathised with Mussolini:

"It was in this atmosphere of violence and frustration that Mussolini . . . rallied round him his little bands of

3 (from previous page)

Nicolson, entry for 15 July, Diaries and Letters, p.307.

<sup>1</sup> The Unforgiving Years, p.193.

men determined to restore some sort of social and industrial order and, above all, as he told me at the time, to see to it that no man's honourable wounds should be insulted with impunity."<sup>1</sup>

Was not Franco attempting to do the same thing in Spain? Amery, however, perhaps regarding Spain as a mare's nest, tended to be silent on the issue, as his colleague Austen Chamberlain was. The latter favoured Franco, although inclined to view Spain as an embarrassment, presumably a distraction from the main German challenge, as he indicated in a letter to his sister, Ida:

"I wish that Franco would make a quick end of it for the longer the civil war lasts the greater the international complications and danger."<sup>2</sup>

Other Conservative dissidents who, from the beginning of the civil war, had openly supported Franco were Crossley, Page Croft, Cazalet, Wolmer, Keyes and Bower. Crossley visited Spain during the Christmas recess 1936-37 and met Franco, to whom he made a promise "to tell the truth about what I had seen and what I had heard in the part of the country which he ruled".<sup>3</sup> Crossley told the Commons that everywhere the Red Forces had retreated, images had been rooted out of the churches, altars hacked down and some buildings had been razed to the ground. "In one church I saw tombs that had been desecrated . . . then there are the massacred priests. Out of the 136 priests in Toledo, six are now alive."<sup>4</sup> Crossley frankly admitted

<sup>1</sup> My Political Life, p.380.

<sup>2</sup> Austen Chamberlain Papers, 28 November, 1936.

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Debates, 19 January, 1937, Col.124.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, Col.126.



sympathising with the Nationalists who, he claimed, not only carried on behind the lines in a perfectly normal and civil way but stood up for the rights of religion. The Member for Stretford was himself a Roman Catholic and as such sided with the majority of Spanish Catholics in seeing the Republican forces as fundamentally anti-God.

Page Croft, perhaps the most voluble exponent of the Nationalist cause, belonged to the Friends of National Spain, the important pro-Franco propaganda organisation. In his memoirs Croft explained the reasons for involving himself in the conflict:

"the case of Nationalist Spain was never presented, murder and outrage never exposed and the Reds had it all their own way . . . under these circumstances I, with some friends, decided to inform the country."<sup>1</sup>

Croft published a pamphlet describing "the welter of cruelty on the part of the Red Government", organised meetings and spoke on many occasions, either inside or outside the House, in support of the Nationalists.<sup>2</sup> One such meeting was at Queens Hall on 23 March, 1938 when Croft declared: "I recognise General Franco to be a gallant Christian gentleman, and I believe his word."<sup>3</sup> Like Crossley, Sir Henry was motivated by his religious feelings, but there was also his firm belief in law and order:

"I desire to see Franco win because I feel there is a danger of Christianity being completely wiped out in Spain. When before the revolution, I saw the wholesale

<sup>1</sup> My Life of Strife, Croft, p.266.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.270.

<sup>3</sup> Report of a Meeting Published by the Friends of National Spain, March, 1938.

destruction of churches, and when I saw . . . that the law no longer ran and the liberty of the people no longer existed, I feel convinced that we must hope that the forces of law and order will win in Spain . . . Franco will win."<sup>1</sup>

Captain Victor Cazalet belonged to the Friends of National Spain. In March 1938 he shared the Queens Hall platform with Croft, and described Franco as "the leader of our cause today".<sup>2</sup> Wolmer was a member of a further pro-Franco organisation of some importance, the United Christian Front, which sought to show that Franco was fighting the cause of Christianity against the anti-Christ. Another Conservative dissident that openly supported the Nationalists was the Catholic Robert Bower, who was subsequently involved in a physical clash over Spain. In April 1938 when Emmanuel Shinwell was questioning the privileges accorded by the Government to Franco's agent in London, Bower interjected "Go back to Poland".<sup>3</sup> Shinwell rose from the Front Opposition Bench, crossed the floor of the House and struck Bower a resounding blow on the cheek with the open palm of his right hand. The Member for Seaham continued to stand over Bower, challenging him to remove his jacket and together leave the Chamber. Bower, although an experienced boxer, refused to leave his seat. Such was the passion aroused by Spain.<sup>4</sup>

So much for the overt sympathisers of Franco within the group of Government supporters studied here. By contrast a number were by

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 14 March, 1938, Cols.74-75.

<sup>2</sup> Daily Herald, 24 March, 1938.

<sup>3</sup> A reference to Shinwell's Polish ancestry.

<sup>4</sup> The Times, 5 April, 1938.

and large, genuinely neutral throughout the Spanish melee. Macmillan recorded how, over the Spanish issue, not only was public opinion both in France and in Britain deeply divided, but the attention of Governments, of Parliaments, Press and the public was distracted from the real dangers immediately ahead. He went on:

"I remember Churchill talking to me with great fervour on this aspect of the Spanish question. He decided to declare himself neutral, for his eyes were on the real enemy. In my small way, I took the same course."<sup>1</sup>

Consequently Macmillan agreed with the Government - whose policy, contrary to what members of the Left envisaged, seems on the whole to have been governed by a lack of sympathy for either side - that the chief danger lay in the possibility that the war in Spain would spread and escalate into a general European conflict.<sup>2</sup> Open intervention rather than non-intervention would increase the chances of such a conflagration, and no issue to his mind could have been a worse one than the Spanish on which to challenge the dictators. Both French and British opinion was divided in sympathy and in any case both countries were, he felt, largely unarmed.

Other Conservatives who, in Boothby's words found it "difficult on many occasions to support whole-heartedly, in every one of its aspects, the policy of His Majesty's Government", but on the issue of Spain "wholeheartedly" supported this "side of their policy", thinking it "admirable" and feeling that "the country thinks so too", included Horne, Spears, Sandys and Kerr.<sup>3</sup> It is apparent from such

<sup>1</sup> Winds of Change, p.475.

<sup>2</sup> Hoare, for example, is supposed to have remarked in the summer of 1936 that he hoped for a war in which Fascists and Bolsheviki would kill each other off.

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Debates, 30 July, 1937, Col.3357.

sentiments that although Spain may have divided the British political community as a whole, it did much to unite the supporters of the National Government and smooth over many of their former disagreements over foreign policy.

"For my part", declared Horne, "simply facing the real practical issue, I am prepared, even though non-intervention proves more ineffective than it is today, to support that policy in order to prevent the spread of a conflict which would be disastrous to the civilisation of Europe."<sup>1</sup> Spears was another not wanting to become embroiled in the conflict. Great Britain was "dealing with an extremely dangerous civil war which, if we are not careful may involve Europe in war". He was against taking sides for the reason that "what is happening in Spain is that you have two extremist forces fighting it out, and the people as a whole clearly only want to be left in peace".<sup>2</sup> Using a similar argument Sandys announced:

"We on this side do not view with equanimity the establishment in Spain of either a Communist or a Fascist Government, but we are not so ready as Members opposite to make a choice between those two evils."<sup>3</sup>

The Member for Oldham, Hamilton Kerr, shared these sentiments and was persuaded that "a policy of neutrality will serve not only our interests but the cause of European peace". He admitted that Germany and Italy hoped they could establish a Fascist Government in Spain, subservient to their interests, but this he felt did not

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 29 October, 1936, Cols.72-3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 1 December, 1936, Col.1093.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, Col.1123.



take into account the Spanish temperament and character which resented outsiders interfering in the nation's affairs. Like many other Conservatives he rested on Wellington's experience during the Peninsula War, hoping that the Spanish national character would, after the conflict, prevent any permanent control or occupation of Spanish territory by foreign powers.<sup>1</sup>

A slight difference of approach among the non-interventionists can be detected in the case of John Macnamara. Having visited Republican Spain and showed great understanding of the situation there, he pressed the Government to do all in its power to make non-intervention effective. Fearful lest the Government - so soon after Abyssinia - again showed to considerable disadvantage, he called upon his fellow members to face the facts and not delude themselves that non-intervention was working:

"Our prestige is at stake in the whole world, and there is an attitude of mind in many countries that we are running away from Italy and Germany. We have to regain our prestige and make non-intervention effective, because if we do not, we shall only store up much more trouble for ourselves in the future."<sup>2</sup>

If non-intervention were made effective, he added, then either the Spaniards would fight it out in their own way, or else would listen to efforts of mediation.

Churchill claimed that he too was neutral in the Spanish quarrel. The dominant factor in deciding his thinking was the critical

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 18 December, 1936, Col.2855. "There is no country in Europe", the Duke had declared, "in the affairs of which foreigners can interfere with so little advantage as Spain." Kerr: MP Oldham, 1931-45; Parliamentary Private Secretary to Duff Cooper, 1933-38.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 16 July, 1937, Col.2847.

importance of concentrating attention upon the German threat and not on a subsidiary issue. He might declare:

"This Spanish welter is not the business of either France or Britain. Neither of these Spanish factions expresses our conception of civilisation . . . Let us stand aloof in redoubled vigilance and ever-increasing defences."<sup>1</sup>,

but it is apparent from his writings that he regarded the Nationalists as the lesser of two evils.

Newspaper article after article gave indications of his bias. On 21 August he wrote that the majority of the nation supported Franco, and referred to the Republicans as "the Communist, Anarchist and Syndicalist forces which are now openly warring for absolute dominance in Spain". It is clear that Churchill was seriously alarmed by the revolutionary character of the Republic and felt it was only a matter of time before the 'democratic' force would be dispersed with, and the direct rule of Communists and Anarchists openly established:

"Since the . . . early part of this year, we have witnessed in Spain, an almost perfect reproduction, mutatis mutandis, of the Kerensky period in Russia."<sup>2</sup>

Although he expressed distaste at the atrocities committed by both sides, it was unfortunate that Churchill always managed to differentiate between them. Thus, 'although it seems to be the practice of the Nationalist forces to shoot a proportion of prisoners taken

<sup>1</sup> Step By Step, 10 August, 1936, p.53.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

in arms, they cannot be accused of having fallen to the level of committing the atrocities which are the daily handiwork of the Communists, Anarchists and the POUM, as the new and most extreme Trotskyist organisation is called. It would be a mistake alike in truth and wisdom for British public opinion to rate both sides at the same level."<sup>1</sup> That same month Churchill made his attitude very clear to Azcarate, the Republican Ambassador in London. On being presented to the Ambassador, Churchill turned red with anger, muttered "Blood, blood, blood", and refused the Spaniard's outstretched hand.<sup>2</sup>

Churchill's ambivalent attitude did not go unnoticed. Perhaps the most outspoken attack on his stance was made by Alan Sainsbury in the magazine New Outlook:

"Unable to stage his comeback on India, he is now trying another game and angling for the support of the progressives, by posing as a strong believer in the League of Nations. He appears as star turn (really rather a ham actor) at a demonstration for "Peace, Freedom and Democracy" at the Albert Hall. With his incomparable demagogic oratory he praises the virtues of peace, democracy and better armaments. But make Spain the test case, and read his recent newspaper articles on this subject and you see the real Churchill.

Is he for democracy in Spain? No!"<sup>3</sup>

It may be said that Churchill was obsessed with the German menace and deplored any diversion from what he regarded as the real enemy, but

<sup>1</sup> Step By Step, 2 October, 1936, p.67.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, p.220.

<sup>3</sup> New Outlook, February, 1937, Article entitled "Liberals and Spain".

the fact remains he was inconsistent over Spain. Much of his recent activity had been devoted to espousing the League and defending democracy against dictatorship, and yet here we have him overlooking the position of the League and all but sympathising with a would-be dictator, backed by Germany and Italy.

His attitude lends weight to the view that he saw the League simply in terms of the containment of Germany. Throughout the conflict he did not protest at the League being completely ignored and he even applauded the Non-Intervention Committee, which only succeeded in further reducing all international agreements into contempt. On 14 April, 1937, after reiterating his Olympian detachment, he told the Commons:

"I expect the Non-Intervention Committee is full of swindles and cheats; anyhow it falls far short of strict interpretation and good faith, but it is a precious thing in these times that five great nations should be slanging each other round a table instead of blasting and bombing each other in horrible war."

Churchill's stance was open to question for not only did it wholly ignore the position and authority of the League, but also the attitude of "progressives" in Parliament, and Hitler's use of the Spanish issue.

1938, however, witnessed a change in Churchill's attitude towards the Republic. He wrote in December that "The British Empire would run far less risk from the victory of the Spanish Government than from that of General Franco".<sup>1</sup> Ignoring his own

<sup>1</sup> Step By Step, 20 December, 1938, p.313.



previous record of implicit support of the Nationalists, he described the possible triumph of the Republicans as a "strategic security for British Imperial communications through the Mediterranean".<sup>1</sup>

Hugh Thomas puts Churchill's conversion down to "the work of his son-in-law, Sandys, who visited Barcelona in the Spring of 1938".<sup>2</sup> There is, however, no evidence to support such a contention. Sandys did indeed visit Republican Barcelona, but this was in his official capacity as Secretary of the Conservative Air Raid Precautions Committee. The Committee, which had a membership of over 100 MPs, was formed in 1937 to press the Government for more action in the field of precautions. It had six sub-Committees dealing with gas, high explosives, fire, evacuation, public services, and finance and insurance, and its work included research into precautions taken in other countries.<sup>3</sup> In March, 1938 the Chairman, Oliver Simmonds, and Sandys, visited Spain for the express purpose of viewing the havoc wrought by bombing from the air and the precautions that were being taken by the authorities. On his return, Sandys reported to the Committee the results of the trip, and outlined what Britain's towns could expect in the event of bombing and what precautions could be taken before the event.<sup>4</sup> Despite this visit to Barcelona, at no time did Sandys display any sympathy to the Republic, neither did he attempt to influence his father-in-law's views.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Step By Step, 20 December, 1938, p.313.

<sup>2</sup> The Spanish Civil War, p.531. So does R R James, Churchill: A Study in Failure, p.321.

<sup>3</sup> Members of the committee visited Berlin on 20 February, 1938. The German Air Ministry arranged a three day programme of tours of Berlin's air raid shelters and centres. The Times, 9 February, 1938.

<sup>4</sup> The Times, 8 April, 1938.

<sup>5</sup> Private information.

Thomas further contends that the English Conservative opponents of Chamberlain, headed by Churchill, came during the summer of 1938, to be Republican sympathisers.<sup>1</sup> Again there is little evidence to support such a statement. It has been possible to ascertain that of the opponents of Chamberlain only Boothby, Nicolson, Hills, Adams and Atholl were sympathetic to the Republican cause.<sup>2</sup> Nicolson recorded how he and Boothby felt over Spain in contrast to Churchill:

"Winston doesn't fully agree with us about Spain, but mainly because of his friendship with Spanish grandees."<sup>3</sup>

At the outbreak of the war Nicolson, like Boothby, had been a genuine neutral, since the brutality and political aims of each side were equally obnoxious to him. A year of intervention had followed and Nicolson had become partisan:

"I know that in the Spanish situation I desire the Spanish Government to win. If I were to say in the House what I think about Franco I should use the most turbulent language."<sup>4</sup>

Adams, too, had been neutral on the outbreak of war in Spain. Within a few months, however, despite his continued support for non-intervention, he could tell the House that in one respect Gallacher the Communist MP and himself agreed:

". . . that is in an ardent desire that General Franco shall not win. I am not sure why the honourable Member wants him to lose. I do, because among other reasons, I cannot conceive anything more damaging to the security

<sup>1</sup> The Spanish Civil War, p.531.

<sup>2</sup> There is a possibility that Macnamara became sympathetic to the Republic. Late in the war he was secretary to one of the main Spanish relief organisations, the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief.

<sup>3</sup> Diary entry, 16 March, 1938, Diaries and Letters, p.332.

and interests of the British Empire than a victory for General Franco."<sup>1</sup>

During the course of the following year, when non-intervention visibly collapsed, Adams felt on two grounds - "the ground of justice and the ground of British self-interest - the Spanish Republican Government should have had restored to it the power to defend itself".<sup>2</sup>

But the most famous of Britain's Republican sympathisers was the Duchess of Atholl, who was to ruin herself politically by her championing of the Republic. In fact Gallacher was to write that "Republican Spain never had a more loyal, earnest and energetic supporter".<sup>3</sup>

In her autobiography Atholl confessed to "knowing nothing about Spain". It was the news that Germany and Italy were aiding the Nationalists that opened her eyes as to what was at stake there:

"It seemed clear to me that if Hitler as well as Mussolini was helping Franco, his victory would be dangerous to us."<sup>4</sup>

What is surprising is that the Duchess was almost alone in the recognition of danger to Britain. She did, however, pay tribute to Major Jack Hills, who she wrote was "the only Conservative MP who saw Spanish

<sup>4</sup> (from previous page)

House of Commons Debates, 19 July, 1937, Col.894.

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 21 October, 1937, Col.150.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 28 February, 1939, Cols.1158-59.

<sup>3</sup> The Chosen Few, p.49.

<sup>4</sup> A Working Partnership, p.208.



affairs as I did".<sup>1</sup> The latter, on the occasion of Eden's resignation, explained his standpoint over Spain: "I want the Government in Spain to win. I should regard a victory for Franco as a national disaster".<sup>1</sup>

The Duchess was instrumental in setting up an All-Party Committee for Spanish Relief, which attempted to evacuate children from bombed areas during the early months of the war. Her interest in Spain was to deepen so that in April, 1937, accompanied by Eleanor Rathbone and Ellen Wilkinson, she paid a short visit to Spain to get first-hand knowledge of the situation there.<sup>2</sup> Atholl was impressed with the way the Republican authorities were handling the emergency and was eager to publicize this on her return to England. Reactions to her visit reveal the extent to which the Right was committed to Franco. A National Citizens' Union, which she had joined because it had opposed the India Bill, "summoned" her to appear before its Committee to explain the reasons for her visit to the Republic. When the annual meeting of the union took place some weeks later, she was not surprised to find that she was no longer Vice-President.

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 21 February, 1938, Col.115.

<sup>2</sup> Rathbone: Independent MP Combined Universities, 1929-46. Throughout the 1930s she was a member of the executive of the League of Nations Union, and she favoured "the emergency of the League as an effective instrument for imposing a rule of law upon an anarchic international situation". Earlier than many of her contemporaries she realized that as a "last resort the League must be prepared to use force". M Stocks, Eleanor Rathbone, p.228. With the emergence of Hitler, Rathbone believed that a new menace confronted the civilized world. "A spirit has come over Germany", she said, "one speaker called it a new spirit, but I would rather call it a re-emergence of an evil spirit which bodes very ill for the peace and freedom of the world". House of Commons Debates, 13 April, 1933, Col.1034. Her concern for the victims of Nazi excesses led to her involvement, as vice-chairman, of the National Committee for the Rescue from Nazi Terror. She also refused to visit Germany and was in favour of an economic boycott of German goods. With the outbreak of war in Spain, Rathbone chaired a Commission of Inquiry into Alleged Breaches of the Non-Intervention Agreement and further involved herself in the conflict by heading a National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief.



In the Commons Atholl made known her views. One such occasion was the December, 1936 debate over the Carriage of Munitions to Spain Shipping Bill. If the Spanish Government won, she said, the dangers that would involve Britain were much less than those which might be faced if the insurgents were victorious, "Obviously, they have had valuable assistance from Fascist Powers which could not well be repaid in money, and would therefore have to be repaid by some transfer of territory, or the use of ports, air bases and so on." Unfortunately for her standing in the Tory party, Stafford Cripps, who followed her, "humbly and respectfully" congratulated her on the speech.<sup>1</sup>

To counter the general ignorance about the origin and history of the Spanish war, Atholl set about writing a book. She called it Searchlight on Spain, which kept her busy until June 1938, when it was published by Penguin. She started with the background of agrarian poverty that had provoked the fall of the monarchy, the peasants living on an average of 1s 6d a day, with no unemployment insurance or old age pensions to fall back on. She showed how from the very first the Right had never accepted the Republic, and cited testimony to show that as early as 1934 Mussolini had been promising armed aid for the restoration of the monarchy. This was the preface to the story of the war itself, which occupied the remaining four-fifths of the book, and which examined and described the various insurgent propaganda myths, beginning with the legend that Franco had forestalled a Communist rising by striking when he did. At the end of her book she included a chapter entitled "What it means to us" in which she considered the war in relation to the vital interests of

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 1 December, 1936, Col.1140.

Britain:

"the importance to us of Spain not falling into hostile hands cannot be exaggerated. A friendly Spain is very desirable, a Spain which is at least neutral is essential."<sup>1</sup>

Searchlight on Spain was among the most successful of all the books on the Spanish war. It sold 100,000 copies in a week and ran into a third edition. Atholl received an amazing amount of publicity and "from a local and insular figure she suddenly became almost a world figure".<sup>2</sup> Inevitably it provoked an answer from the Right by Professor Charles Sarolea, entitled Daylight on Spain, which summed up the feelings of the Tory Party towards the Duchess:

"The Duchess of Atholl merely by flying the Conservative flag is attempting to foist a pro-Bolshevik policy upon the Unionist Government and may succeed at least in dividing a party in which, until recently, she was a shining light and of which she nominally remains a member."<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile her views on Spain did not go unnoticed in her own constituency. A Catholic member of the Executive of the West Perthshire Unionist Association published and circulated a pamphlet attacking her support of the Republicans. Naturally, the Duchess replied to this, and her reply was circulated in the constituency. Soon after, the Annual General Meeting of her Association took place, and as the author of the pamphlet was present, there was a

<sup>1</sup> Searchlight on Spain, p.18.

<sup>2</sup> C Sarolea, Daylight on Spain, p.15.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.15.

somewhat heated discussion. It ended when the Chairman reminded the meeting that his predecessor in the chair had made a bargain with Atholl that she was to have liberty to differ from the party line if she so desired. A resolution was then agreed to, reaffirming the meeting's strong support of the Government's policy of non-intervention in Spain but recognising that the arrangement made with her at the last General Election gave her liberty to express her own personal views. In reply the Duchess made it plain she had never advocated intervention in Spain but only the restoration of the Republicans' right to buy arms.

With this in mind she wrote, on 25 April, 1938, to the Prime Minister and told him she believed the scales were being weighted against the Spanish Government. In it she detailed a series of points in which she felt the position of the Republican Government had been seriously weakened by the so-called non-intervention policy. "Chamberlain", she wrote, "gave what seemed up to a degree to be reassuring replies", but ended his letter by saying that he assumed this would not satisfy her. Therefore he had sent word to David Margesson to deprive her of the party whip.<sup>1</sup>

Only a month later came a further meeting of the executive of the Unionist Association of her constituency party. This was to consider a charge against Atholl that at a recent Glasgow meeting in aid of Spanish relief she had joined in singing "the Red Flag". Unable to attend, she sent a complete rebuttal, which the majority of those present did not accept. Without consulting her they decided to look for another candidate. "I felt so confident that time would make

<sup>1</sup> A Working Partnership, p.219.

clearer the dangers of Europe, that I was not unduly depressed by the Committee's decision."

She was to be involved in a further incident of note. With Eleanor Rathbone and Ellen Wilkinson, the Duchess had given her name as patroness to a fund raised for an International Brigade Dependents' Committee to help men who had been disabled while fighting in Spain. On 27 July, 1938 a Captain Heilgers, Conservative Member for Bury St Edmonds, rose in the House and alleged that the Committee was recruiting young men for the Brigade. Heilgers implied that Atholl was involved. Two days later Atholl made a personal statement, replying fully to the charges. However, "my accuser was unrepentant, and on my going to him to assure him of my innocence, I found he would not listen. I actually heard him and the member next to him referring to me as a Communist."

When all is said and done it seems hardly credible that the Government and its supporters ignored strategic factors of paramount importance and pursued a policy divorced from Britain's national interests. Ideologically blinkered, the National Members overlooked their cherished Empire and paid no heed to warnings that:

"from a strategical point of view, the political outcome of the present struggle is not, and cannot be a matter of indifference to us. A friendly Spain is desirable, a neutral Spain is vital."<sup>1</sup>

It is true that the hope, shared by so many Government backbench supporters of non-intervention, that Spanish national character would prevent any permanent control or occupation of territory by

<sup>1</sup> The Defence of Britain, B Liddell Hart, p.66.



foreign powers was realised. Nevertheless Franco's Spain subsequently made available to Germany and Italy naval and air bases, information on Allied movements, strategic war materials and 'volunteers', both soldiers and workers. Although Spain did not openly come into the war on the side of the Axis Powers therefore, as many on the Left feared and prophesied, it is evident that it came as near to doing so as its internal position would allow.

Particularly blind were the majority of those Members who could be termed opponents of Chamberlain. Although support for appeasement, to a great extent, went hand in hand with sympathy for Franco, there were a number of Conservatives who supported Franco, or consented to an ineffective non-intervention policy, and yet who believed that the policy of strengthening Hitler by making continual concessions was dangerous. Macmillan might claim that Churchill's eyes were on the "real enemy", but this entirely ignores the manner in which Hitler utilized to his own future advantage - as seen above - the war in Spain. Furthermore, France was increasingly isolated since she had an unfriendly neighbour to the south-west in the event of war, while at the same time the international co-operation that many of the dissidents hoped for was brought into further disrepute. These were the fruits of the war for Germany and for the most part they escaped the gaze of those who, more than any other group in their party, should have noted the way Hitler lost no opportunity in gleaning every possible advantage from the conflict.

### The Left

Just as there was much sympathy for Franco on the Right, there was passionate sympathy throughout the Labour movement, as indeed far

outside it, for the Republican cause. Excluded were the pacifists, to whom violence, even in the noblest cause, was abhorrent, and a number of Catholics for whom the official voice of the Church was just as compelling as any political factor. David Logan, the Catholic Member for the Scotland division of Liverpool, described the dilemma that Spain had placed him in:

"I have been in a difficulty in regard to Spain during the last two years, having many friends on both sides, and being asked by both parties to visit Spain and express my opinion. I have always refused to do so for the simple reason that I should be considered a partisan."<sup>1</sup>

These apart, the overwhelming majority of the British Left professed complete support for the Spanish Republic.

Nevertheless, in practice, the Right of Labour - with some exceptions - did not approach the Left and certain League enthusiasts in the ardour of their support for the Republicans. The Right, and those associated with it on this issue, was influenced by several factors: the strong pacifism in France; the hope that if Europe could be prevented from lining up in warring camps over the Spanish issue, a friendly settlement might be effected; above all, the conviction that the Spanish situation was fraught with danger of a general war, for which Britain was ill-prepared in armed might and allies, and which her public would not sanction, divided as it was. In addition, Labourites of the Right had little enthusiasm for the Spanish Popular Front Government. "I was not an admirer", wrote Dalton, "of the Spanish approximation to democracy. When the Spanish Left lost the elections in 1934, they started an armed revolt to reverse the

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 24 April, 1940, Col.326. Other Catholics on the Labour benches were J J Jones, W T Kelly, W A Robinson, J J Tinker and R R Stokes.

result of the voting. This was very inefficient and soon fizzled out. Now that the Spanish Right had lost in 1936, they too had started an armed revolt, which looked more serious. I did not think well of this political method . . . I was, therefore, a good deal less enthusiastic than many of my political friends on behalf of the Spanish Republican Government. I was also far from enthusiastic for the slogan "Arms for Spain", if this meant, as some of my friends eagerly thought it did, that we were to supply arms which otherwise we should keep for ourselves. For I was much more keenly conscious that most of my friends of the terrible insufficiency of British armaments against the German danger." None the less, since Germany and Italy were now Britain's potential enemies in Europe, and since Franco was their ally, Dalton held that it was "a British interest that Franco should not win this civil war". It was on this proposition, rather than on any extravagant eulogy of the Republic that he based most of his public references to the struggle. Owing to this difference of approach, Dalton, although front bench spokesman of foreign affairs, did not speak in any of the numerous Parliamentary debates on this subject demanded by his colleagues.<sup>1</sup>

Dalton's cautious approach characterised the reaction of those responsible for shaping Labour's attitude to the outbreak of war in Spain. With Labour's leaders out of the country during the summer recess, it fell to Greenwood, Bevin, Citrine and party officials to deal with Blum's proposals for non-intervention. Following extensive consultation with the Foreign Secretary they felt that they could not take lightly the risk of general war in Spain and therefore recommended,

<sup>1</sup> The Fateful Years, pp.96-7.

at a hastily convened meeting of the remnants of the Parliamentary Labour Party, the Trades Union Congress General Council and the General Executive Committee, that Labour support non-intervention. In a statement issued on 28 August, the day of the meeting, the right of the Spanish Government to obtain arms was stressed as against the illegal supply of arms to the rebels. Grudgingly, however, the statement went on to commit Labour to non-intervention, expressing regret "that it should have been thought expedient, on the ground of the dangers of war inherent in this situation, to conclude agreements among the European Powers laying an embargo upon the supply of arms and munitions of war to Spain, by which the rebel forces and the democratically elected and recognised Government of Spain are placed on the same footing".<sup>1</sup>

Labour, then, together with the Government and the Liberal Party agreed that the correct policy was one of strict non-intervention in conjunction with France. The Spanish borders would be sealed and the Spaniards left to fight out their differences among themselves. That policy was perfectly to the Labour Party's liking so long as it was effective and the agreements "loyally observed by all parties, and their execution effectively co-ordinated and supervised".<sup>2</sup>

It is easy in retrospect, to regard the policy of non-intervention, as Labour's Left did, as a gross betrayal by the Labour leadership of the Republican Government. Yet this misses the force of the argument for effective non-intervention in August and September, 1936. Had the policy been strictly observed and enforced, it could well have

<sup>1</sup> Labour Party Conference Report, 1936, p.29.

<sup>2</sup> From the statement made on August 28.



proved in the general interests of Europe and the particular interests of the Spanish Government, since the rebels would have been more damaged by the cessation of aid from Hitler and Mussolini than the Republic hurt by the proscription of aid from France and Russia. It was not therefore the policy which was at fault but the way in which it was implemented, whereby intervention was permitted under the guise of non-intervention. Only when it became clear that the policy was working against the Republicans was it necessary to oppose non-intervention and advocate instead the sale of arms to Spain, in the same manner as they would be supplied to any other legitimate Government facing an insurrection.

By the time the Labour Party Conference assembled in Edinburgh on 5 October rumours were already circulating of the one-sided operation of non-intervention, and already there was a great upsurge of sentiment running contrary to the views of the Labour leadership. Greenwood was given the task of moving the resolution in support of the policy of the National Council of Labour, but was very uncomfortable with his brief, and was not very effective. Dalton summarised his speech:

"The alternative to non-intervention, he said, was 'free trade' in arms, and then the rebels would get fifty guns from Germany and Italy, for every one which the Republicans would get from other countries. This was received with anger and jeers from the delegates. Nor did they respond much better to his well meant reference to Blum's difficulties, nor to his warning that 'free trade' in arms, with the incidents which it was likely to cause, would much increase the risk of general war."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Fateful Years, p.98-9.

When Greenwood sat down no one rose from the floor to second the motion. The embarrassment was only broken when Grenfell eventually stepped into the breach, but even he, within a few months and following a visit to Spain, was to openly advocate the repudiation of non-intervention.

Vigorous opposition to the non-intervention policy came from the floor, including speeches by Noel-Baker, Bevan and Dobbie. Noel-Baker, no Leftist, termed the rebels a "handful of adventurers" who were defeating a government backed by the vast majority of people. They were only able to do this because non-intervention was being violated, and consequently he wanted Labour to press the Government to announce that it would suspend the arms embargo. Unlike other speakers in the debate, William Dobbie had recently visited Spain, where a militiaman had told him: 'With us it is victory or death. Take the message to your people, and ask them to give us, not help, but the opportunity to buy the things necessary for us in the defence of democracy, not only of ourselves, but of the free peoples of the world'.<sup>1</sup> A dreadful picture, said Aneurin Bevan, had been painted of what would be the consequences if free trade in arms took place. But, he asked, "is it not obvious to everyone that if the arms continue to pour into the rebels in Spain, our Spanish comrades will be slaughtered by hundreds of thousands? Has Mr Bevin and the National Council considered the fate of the Blum Government if a Fascist Government is established in Spain? How long will French democracy stand against Fascism in Germany, Fascism in Italy, Fascism in Spain, and Fascism in Portugal? . . . Democracy in Europe will soon be in ruins. This is the consequence of this policy."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Labour Party Conference Report, 1936, p.142. Dobbie was President of the National Union of Railwaymen, 1925-28 and 1930-33; MP, Rotherham, 1933-50.

<sup>2</sup> Labour Party Conference Report, 1936, p.145.

The comments of Bevan, Dobbie and others at the Conference make nonsense of Neville Thompson's view that while the Opposition became engrossed in the long drawn out Spanish conflict "their attention was diverted from events in the rest of Europe. To ignore the invasion of the Rhineland while preoccupied with sanctions was serious enough; but during the three years that attention was fixed on Spain it was hard to see clearly the significance of the Anschluss, the absorption of half of Czechoslovakia in two stages, and the Italian seizure of Albania. While the dictators were making these gains the British Government received no strong pressure from the Labour and Liberal Parties to pursue a different course".<sup>1</sup> Rather the reverse was true. Spain for many in the Opposition Parties was the key to an understanding of what was at stake in Europe generally. Far from diverting attention from events in the rest of Europe, the civil war made them aware of German and Italian expansion, so that they were able to keep their eyes firmly fixed on the dictators' actions and to press the Government to see that the danger to European peace came not from Spain but from Germany and Italy.

The Edinburgh debate continued heated to the end, when Greenwood's resolution was approved. However, the size and composition of the minority indicated the displeasure with a course that followed too closely that of the Government. The Manchester Guardian characterised the feeling of the delegates as Judases and went on: "If decisions were counted by hearts, not hands, today saw the heavy defeat of the official policy of non-intervention in Spain."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thompson, The Anti-Appeasers, p.116.

<sup>2</sup> 6 October, 1936.

The Conference was not finished with Spain, however, because two Spanish fraternal delegates spoke the following day. One of them, Isabel de Palencia, known as La Passionaria, electrified the delegates with a passionate speech that brought them to their feet spontaneously singing the "Red Flag". Whereupon the wisdom of non-intervention was further questioned and accordingly Attlee and Greenwood proceeded to London to discuss Spain with Chamberlain, the acting Prime Minister.<sup>1</sup> As a result Attlee, on the last day of the Conference, moved a resolution stating that if there proved to be deliberate violations of the agreement, the British and French governments should at once restore to the Spanish Government the right to purchase arms. Attlee cautioned that abandonment of non-intervention involved the risk of war but nevertheless, the Conference unanimously accepted the resolution. Presumably the fear that a bold British stand on Spain would be courting war, one of the major themes in Greenwood's argument, must have now given way to a hope that such was not the case.

This decision is a classic illustration of the contradiction within the existing policies of Labour. Whilst calling for an increasingly militant anti-Fascist policy, the party was still opposing the development of the very forces and materials, which, in the last resort, would have been essential to sustain it. Small wonder Dalton described the delegates, after the decision, as "wallowing in sheer emotion, in vicarious valour. They had no clue in their minds to the risks, and the realities, for Britain of a general war".<sup>2</sup> Although

<sup>1</sup> Apparently delegates circulated a petition among themselves which demanded that the Spanish question again be brought before the Conference. 200 signatures were obtained including those of 40 MPs.

<sup>2</sup> The Fateful Years, p.100.



K W Watkins takes Dalton to task for what he terms this "inherently contemptuous attitude to the democratically elected representatives of the rank and file of his own movement", the Labour Leader's comments appear justified, particularly in the light of the Hasting's Conference of 1933, when the rank and file voted both to oppose war by any means at their disposal while enthusiastically supporting a collective security approach.<sup>1</sup>

In all the Conference "was a most unhappy experience" with no-one, Left or Right, pleased with the results. To outsiders the proceedings over Spain gave an impression - not a mistaken one - of a leadership which was following from behind rather than one which was urging its supporters forward. Consequently The Times was not far wrong when it concluded that Labour was a party "adrift in a stormy world, with a committee of divided leaders uncertain how or where to steer".<sup>2</sup>

Any shred of confidence in non-intervention disappeared within a month after the Edinburgh conference. Hitler and Mussolini made a farce of it with a steady flow of aid to Franco that sooner or later was certain to strangle the Republic. Thus on 28 October, in accord with the Conference resolution, Labour now demanded "that the right of the constitutionally elected Government of Spain to secure, in accordance with the practice of international law, the means necessary to uphold its authority and to enforce law and order in Spanish territory, must be re-established".<sup>3</sup> From then onwards Dalton

<sup>1</sup> Britain Divided, p.166.

<sup>2</sup> 12 October, 1936.

<sup>3</sup> Labour Party Conference Report, p.7.

noted "we stood on the simple slogan, 'Arms for Spain'".<sup>1</sup>

Yet was this opposition to non-intervention? Watkins has argued that the "demand that the Republican Government should be permitted . . . to purchase arms abroad was not opposition to non-intervention. For the next nine months the official policy of the Labour Movement was one of pressing the National Government both to support the implementation of this demand and to take measures to make the Non-Intervention Agreement work". And again he has written that not until 27 July, 1937 did "the British Labour Movement officially adopt a policy of opposition to non-intervention".<sup>2</sup> In fact this is incorrect for opposition dates from October, 1936, as Sir Charles Trevelyan indicated in a speech, on 7 October, at the 1937 Party Conference. While proposing that the National Executive launched forthwith a nation-wide campaign to "compel the Government to:

1. Abandon the so-called Non-Intervention Agreement which allows the Fascist rebels to receive help while imposing sanctions on the Spanish Government.
2. Restore to the democratically elected and Constitutional Spanish Government its rights under International Law to purchase arms and maintain its authority and establish order in its own territory",

Trevelyan remarked that "for the best part of a year the repeatedly declared policy of the Party has been to demand the cessation of non-intervention and the restoration to the Spanish Government of its rights to purchase arms".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Fateful Years, p.105.

<sup>2</sup> Britain Divided, pp.167 and 181.

<sup>3</sup> Labour Party Conference Report, p.212.

If then Labour opposed non-intervention as from October, 1936, what is the significance, if any, of events in July, 1937, to which Watkins referred? Interestingly enough the statement of the National Council of Labour, issued on 27 July, is important, not as regards non-intervention, but precisely what Labour meant by "intervention". The meeting of the National Council followed an earlier one in Paris, of the Labour and Socialist International and the International Federation of Trade Unions, at which member groups were required "to bring pressure to bear by all possible means and without delay upon the Governments, members of the League of Nations, in order that in accordance with the Covenant, they assist the Spanish Government to recover its political and territorial independence", and ensure that it "may acquire the arms necessary for the defence of its territory and its rights".<sup>1</sup> The fact that the sale of arms is argued separately from the reference to assisting the Spanish Government to recover its independence is clearly ominous. The two Internationals were implying not simply the sale of arms but direct military assistance by the League Powers to redress the balance in the Republic's favour. Labour's National Council met on 27 July to consider the import of the above requirement, and significantly played down the involvement implication for Britain. The "political and territorial integrity of Spain", the manifesto stated, "is not the exclusive interest of France and Great Britain. It is a matter of concern to all members of the League of Nations. It is the duty of the League to assist the Spanish people to recover their independence . . . Britain should use its power and influence as a member of the League to ensure the immediate

<sup>1</sup> Labour Party Conference Report, p.12.

withdrawal of foreign troops from the soil of Spain".<sup>1</sup> These were guarded words, carefully framed to avoid committing Labour to the alternative of military assistance; what was really desired, as the manifesto elsewhere made clear, was the restoration to Madrid of a government's normal rights.

With the decision to stand on the legal right of the Republican Government to buy arms the parliamentary lines were drawn which were to persist for the duration of the Spanish Civil War. The party thereafter remained critical of the British Government's policy whenever foreign affairs were debated but its opposition, though persistent, was fruitless and altered the government's course not a whit. The party protested in scores of questions, and with motions of censure, and consistently opposed legislation which was judged to damage the cause of the Spanish Government. One such instance was the party's resistance to a "Carriage of Munitions to Spain" Bill which prohibited British ships from carrying munitions to Spain. Labour's objection was that Britain surrendered her bargaining power in taking such action before the Fascist Powers similarly committed themselves. At the same time the Government banned the recruitment or volunteering of British citizens for the conflict, which Labour condemned as a further one-sided sop to the dictators.

The party also objected to a Merchant Shipping Bill, introduced in March, 1937 to tighten the controls preventing the passage of supplies to both sides.<sup>2</sup> At first the executive suggested that the Bill should be allowed to go through unopposed with Labour merely

<sup>1</sup> Labour Party Conference Report, p.13.

<sup>2</sup> Merchant Shipping (Spanish Frontiers Observation) Bill.



pointing out the Bill's shortcomings. Backbench discontent, however, defeated this line at the party meeting, and the Bill was opposed both on first and second readings. The Labour front bench would then have been content to let the measure go through without further opposition but some Labourites were prepared to challenge each clause as it came up for discussion.

After Noel-Baker, for the executive, had announced that "having made our protest, we mean, if the Third Reading is challenged to abstain from voting", Seymour Cocks confessed that he took "a much stronger line of antagonism to the Bill".<sup>1</sup> The strength of feeling that motivated him can be seen from his speech:

"I do regard this measure . . . as one of the most . . .  
 . . . despicable . . . pieces of legislation that has ever  
 been brought before this House. It seems to me to be  
 part of a general scheme that has been going on in the  
 last few months to destroy the Spanish Government, and  
 over the bodies of the Spanish peoples to erect a Fascist  
 State in Spain. . . . If there is anybody in the House  
 who has a sense of chivalry or a feeling of fair play,  
 who loves liberty and cherishes democracy, I ask him  
 to vote against the Bill on the Third Reading. The  
 Spanish people are fighting for liberty and freedom . . .  
 If anybody will help me, I will divide the House."<sup>2</sup>

Sixteen responded to his appeal and defied the Whips, though three were non-Labourites: Gallacher the Communist, Campbell-Stephen and Buchanan of the Independent Labour Party. The other thirteen were:

<sup>1</sup> Hansard, 18 March, 1937, Col.2458.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Cols.2458-60. Cocks had visited Spain during the summer recess of 1936, and, like William Dobbie, returned saying non-intervention was a farce. Bevan and Davidson are also known to have gone to Spain.

Bevan, Cripps, J J Davidson, S O Davies, Dobbie, T Henderson, A C Jones, W T Kelly, E Smith, W J Stewart, J Westwood, E J Williams and W Windsor. An analysis of the fourteen (including Cocks) revealed little except that the majority were manual workers with little formal education, who had worked their way into Parliament via the trade unions.<sup>1</sup> The only exceptions to this were Cripps and Cocks, from comfortable homes, possessing a good education, holding jobs untypical of the party, respectively a lawyer and journalist.

What is surprising in view of the fact that foreign affairs was a minority interest, the preserve of the middle class MPs, is that such average members should concern themselves with events abroad. Hansard, in fact, reveals that 10 of the 14 never intervened in a foreign affairs debate in the 1935-39 period, suggesting no pre-occupation with external matters. Of the 5 that contributed, Bevan, Cocks, Cripps, Davidson and Dobbie, the majority of their speeches were concerned with Spain. It seems true to say therefore that the Spanish struggle widened the horizons of many 'domestic' Labour Members and brought home to them the connection between events abroad and the security of Britain.

This was especially true of Left-wing Labour MPs who were well-represented in the fourteen: Cripps and Bevan, two of the most prominent Left-wingers in the party; Davidson,<sup>2</sup> Davies,<sup>3</sup> Stewart,<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Five, in fact, were miners.

<sup>2</sup> MP, Maryhill, 1935-45.

<sup>3</sup> MP, Merthyr Tydfil, 1934-72.

<sup>4</sup> MP, Houghton-le-Spring, 1935-45; an unemployed miner at the 1935 General Election.

Williams<sup>1</sup> and Windsor.<sup>2</sup> The Civil war seems to have stirred the emotions of such Left-Wing MPs in the same way as Abyssinia had aroused the League devotees. In fact the crusading zeal with which they and other like-minded Labourites approached the issue was to induce severe strains within the parliamentary party. In their enthusiasm to preserve the Republic, the Left turned against the party leadership no less than the British Government, regarding their leaders as being too accommodating and cautious for the vigorous opposition warranted by the situation.

K W Watkins has argued that the upsurge of sentiment as a result of the war produced a situation in which two alternatives confronted the leadership of the Labour Party. "The first was to pursue a more militantly anti-Fascist policy, especially over Spain, which would have strengthened their leadership, and at the same time would have cut the ground from under the feet of the Communists. The second was to try and hold back the tide, using the weapons of discipline and expulsion against their dissident members, and by so doing to drive many into alliance with, or membership of, the Communist Party". In his view the leadership "chose the second path", their policy to a considerable extent "determined by their anti-Communism. In practice, this led to a position in which the Communists were enabled to appear as the true anti-Fascists and the defenders of democracy. They reaped a harvest in membership and influence which would otherwise have been unthinkable".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> MP, Ogmores, 1931-46; Secretary to the No Conscription Fellowship and the Hands Off Russia Council.

<sup>2</sup> MP, North East Bethnal Green, 1923-29; Kingston-upon-Hull, 1933-45.

<sup>3</sup> Britain Divided, pp.181-82.

On several counts this will simply not do. At no time does Watkins spell out what he means by a "more militantly anti-Fascist policy over Spain". Presumably he has in mind a great agitation in the country to force the Government to give back to the Spaniards their international right to be armed, but precisely how this was to be done he does not make clear. A 'Spain Campaign Committee' was in fact appointed by the Executive after the 1937 Conference, and it did organise meetings, demonstrations and collections of relief funds, culminating in a great demonstration at the Albert Hall in December 1937. After that, it must be admitted, the initiative waned, as it was mainly left to local parties and organisations, but it nevertheless remains true that the Labour Party was more active on Spain than on any other issue in this period. Perhaps Watkins goes further and is of the opinion, along with some members of the Left, whom he quotes, that greater pressure should have been applied by general protest strikes and non-co-operation in rearmament schemes, which might have forced the Government to reverse its position over Spain. This certainly would have been a more 'militant' policy but it ignores the fact that the failure of 1926 was uncomfortably close, that strikes "designed or calculated to coerce the government" were thereafter illegal, and that such a course would have created bitter divisions both within the Labour movement and in the nation at large. As to halting rearmament, Labour would have laid itself more open to the charge - already made - of making Britain defenceless while willing to run the risk of war to arm a foreign government.

Why, then, did the leadership act as it did? Those who "grasped the levers of power", as Watkins unkindly put it, were forced by virtue of their position, to take into account the realities of the



general situation, not solely events in Spain. There were those in the leadership, it is true, who had their doubts about the character of the Republican regime, but there were graver considerations, graver than anti-Communism, influencing the leaders as a whole. There was the yawning chasm in French political life to be taken into account, the widespread pacifism amidst Popular Front supporters, and the non-intervention initiative urged by Blum on his British colleagues. Then there was the conviction that the Axis could supply arms far in excess of what the Democracies could provide, a telling argument for the effective non-intervention that the leadership initially wanted. Above all was the conviction that the Spanish situation was fraught with danger of a general war, for which Britain was ill-prepared - and certainly would have been if the Left had had their way - in armed might, and which her public, divided as it was, would not have sanctioned.

The latter point raises the familiar question in Labour politics - whether the party was to act the part of a movement looking to power or to play the role of a party of protest. Although the majority of the public was broadly sympathetic to the Republican cause, Labour's leadership was acutely aware of the need to tread warily lest it go to lengths which the public, to whom there were more things under the sun than Spain, would be unprepared to brook. With the ultimate aim of attaining power, the leadership regarded it as essential to maintain contact with public opinion and practical considerations, not leaving both behind, as did many of the Left to whom "little else mattered" save Spain.<sup>1</sup> Given all these factors it is understandable why leaders were reluctant to be too militant, and unfair

<sup>1</sup> Foot, Aneurin Bevan, p.226.

to dismiss them as "having abrogated political wisdom to themselves", and "reached a position in which the ends justified the means", "prepared to use all available weapons to obtain support for non-intervention, even if this meant that support for the Republicans could only be verbal".<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore it is not correct to argue that the leadership used the weapons of discipline and expulsion to hold back the tide of sentiment over Spain. Discipline and expulsions were used, not to hold back the "Spanish tide", but to prevent co-operation with the Communist Party, the ideology of which, like fascism, was anathema to Labour orthodoxy. Herbert Morrison, of all people, who had expounded Labour's thinking on this score at the Hastings Conference, was himself a dissident over Spain, having opposed non-intervention from the beginning, and there was no question of expelling him or any of likemind over this issue. Seen in this light, it was not points of view that were at stake but associations, and any schoolmasterly behaviour displayed by the leadership at this time must be directly related to the approach of members of the Left to the Communist Party, an organisation which was pulling in a similar direction in the tide of sentiment over Spain.

One further point remains. Were 'many' driven into alliance with, or membership of, the Communist Party, which thereby "reaped a harvest of membership and influence"? Watkins quotes Burgess and McLean and other intellectuals as examples, but just how representative were they? Henry Pelling's figures for Communist Party membership are revealing - implying, in the view of this writer, how much out on a limb the Left were over Spain - for although they show a rapid

<sup>1</sup> Britain Divided, p.166.

expansion in membership the party was still comparatively tiny. From a total of about 7,500 early in 1936, the figures rose rapidly to 11,500 in November. Thereafter, however, in spite of most favourable conditions for recruitment, the expansion slowed down; it was 12,250 in May, 1937, and 15,570 in September. In the first eight months of 1939 the party remained fairly constant in size at about 18,000, dropping to 10,000 in 1940. It was therefore not without reason that Manuilsky complained in March, 1939, that the British party was "one of the most backward sections of the Comintern. It has not succeeded in breaking through to the main sections of the British working class".<sup>1</sup> Having questioned the many, it remains to say that if the Communists did appear the "true anti-Fascists and defenders of democracy" this could only have been to a few thousand people, predominantly drawn from Left-wing circles.

#### The United Front with the Communists

The depth of the commitment to the Republic felt on the Left can be gauged not only by the breaking of ranks over the Merchant Shipping Bill, and the bitter intra-party clashes at the Party Conferences, but - as has been hinted at above - by the attempt to establish a united front in Britain. As the agitation over Spain had appeared to indicate that it was the Communists who were the busiest, organising, demonstrating, protesting and also fighting in Spain, it seemed to some Left-wing members of the Labour Party less and less defensible to treat them as pariahs. Rather, the situation required an association between the Labour and Communist Parties as well as the Independent Labour Party.

<sup>1</sup> The British Communist Party, p.104.

The Labour leaders, for their part, were firmly opposed to the formation of a "united front" with the Communists, or for that matter of a popular front, including anyone opposed to the Government's policies, which was also then being considered. At the 1936 Conference, their attitude had been overwhelmingly endorsed: a united front resolution was defeated by 1,805,000 votes to 435,000. An amendment to the resolution suggesting that the National Executive should "take all practicable steps to mobilize the support of all peace-loving and democratic citizens in the struggle for peace and fight against Fascism" was turned down by an even larger majority.<sup>1</sup> The delegates then unanimously agreed to a resolution which declared that they were irrevocably opposed to any attempt to water down Labour policy in order to increase membership.

Despite the fact that the Conference had given massive endorsement to the Executive's opposition to the united front, the Socialist League, under the guidance of Cripps, pressed more vigorously than ever for its creation.<sup>2</sup> On the 16-17 of January a special delegate Conference of the League approved, by 56 votes to 38, with 23 abstentions, the launching of a Unity Campaign with the Independent Labour and Communist Parties. The three organisations agreed to cease attacking each other and sought to make an alliance with the Labour Party in order to effect the unity of the three parties at the next election.

<sup>1</sup> Labour Party Conference Report, 1936, p.257.

<sup>2</sup> Cripps, according to Fenner Brockway, the moving spirit behind the campaign, was "convinced that the official leadership of the Labour Party had not the inspiration or the policy to lead the workers to socialism", and hoped that a combination of the Communist Party, Independent Labour Party and Socialist League would "resurrect" the Labour Party, making it more "socialistic" and "dynamic". Inside the Left, p.264.



A Unity Manifesto, jointly signed, was issued calling for "Unity in the struggle against Fascism, Reaction and War, and against the National Government", and advocated "the return of a Labour Government as the next stage in the advance to working-class power". It repudiated "class-collaboration", denounced the Government as "the agent of British Capitalism and Imperialism" and recorded its "implacable opposition to the rearmament and recruiting programme of the National Government", which it accused of using armaments "only in support of Fascism, of Imperialist War, of Reaction, and of Colonial Suppression". The workers were summoned to "mobilise for the maintenance of peace, for the defence of the Soviet Union and its fight for peace, and for a pact between Great Britain, the Soviet Union, France, and all other states in which the working class have political freedom".

The Unity Campaign was officially launched at a meeting in the Free Trade Hall, Manchester on 24 January, 1937. Remarkable meetings, almost revivalist in nature, were held in Cardiff, Swansea, Birmingham, Plymouth, Bristol, Leeds, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee. Members of Parliament taking part in the campaign included Cripps, Strauss, Pritt, Bevan, Gallacher, and the four Independent Labour Party Members: Buchanan, Maxton, McGovern and Stephen. The appearance of members of the different groupings on the same platform, however, gave the united front an air of unity which did not exist. Negotiations for the campaign had nearly broken down several times, and even when launched there were serious differences, as testified to by Gallacher:

"It was a tough proposition from the start . . . We were presumably campaigning for unity of the Labour movement which meant winning over the Labour Party. The Independent

Labour Party representatives took an ultra-Left attitude on all questions, always putting forward the most extreme proposals, proposals that would have made any approach to the Labour Party impossible. Harry (Politt) would reason with them . . . while the Socialist Leaguers, in a sort of political daze, would gaze from one side to the other with little or no appreciation of what was going on. We never really got down to a common basis of understanding, nor was there that measure of confidence essential for the success of a joint campaign. Cripps, Brockway and I were billed one Sunday for meetings in Eastleigh and Southampton. We travelled from Waterloo in the same train, but in different carriages. What an exhibition of unity."<sup>1</sup>

The Labour Party Executive reacted at once with a circular headed Party Loyalty, which damned such collaboration with the Communists. Dalton privately recorded his annoyance at this "piece of clotted nonsense", which was "a most exasperating diversion of the Party's mind and energies".<sup>2</sup> As Executive pressure on the League failed to bring it to heel, on January 27, 1937, the organisation was expelled from the Party and a further circular issued. This chronicled the errors of the Socialist League and declared membership of it inconsistent with membership of the Labour Party. The Socialist League countered by dissolving itself in March, leaving members of the Labour Party free to support the unity campaign as individuals. The executive replied by threatening to expel members who did so, but at this point the

<sup>1</sup> Gallacher, The Rolling of the Thunder, p.147.

<sup>2</sup> The Fateful Years, p.129.

Independent Labour and Communist Parties decided to withdraw, and the campaign collapsed. Cripps resurrected the united front issue at the party's annual conference at Bournemouth in October, 1937; but the executive, defended by Clynes and Morrison, were supported by an overwhelming vote.

Yet as long as the international situation moved from crisis to crisis, neither conference vote nor executive decision could end the agitation for an anti-fascist front.<sup>1</sup> When it re-emerged, however, the demand took a different form. Whereas the proposed united front had been mainly a demand for joint action between the Labour Party and the Communists to meet the dangers of fascism both abroad and at home, that of the later months of 1937 rested on a basis broader than that of the working class. There began to appear a growing demand for the widest possible coalition of anti-Government, anti-fascist forces, with the object of evicting Chamberlain from office and installing by pressure of public opinion a government that would stand up to the aggressor nations.

The importance of events in Spain, not only on the various united front and popular front movements of these years, but on the Labour Party cannot be overstressed.<sup>2</sup> The conflict induced severe strains within the Labour Party; it exacerbated the divisions to such an extent that the Edinburgh Conference and its sequel marked the nadir of party unity in the 1930s. Nevertheless, the Nationalist revolt

<sup>1</sup> According to G D H Cole, the situation in Spain - whereby the Italians and Germans poured military help more and more openly, while nothing was done to aid the Republican cause - called very strong feelings into play among the Left, becoming the "main driving force behind the various United Front and Popular Front movements of the years 1937-39". History of the Labour Party, p.329.

<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly Spain intensified the movement's growing interest in foreign affairs. It has been possible to trace over 20 Labour Members of Parliament who visited Spain, several of whom had previously paid little attention to events beyond Britain's borders.

and the aid Franco received from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy strengthened the conviction, which originated in Mussolini's attack on Abyssinia, that there were issues in the international scene which justified a resort to arms. The Left<sup>1</sup> and other domestic orientated Labour Members came to recognise the threat of fascism from without, and in so doing, as C L Mowat has written, "It led to a changing of sides over peace and war. The Left became war-minded: the Spanish Civil War mobilised the non-trade-union sections of the Labour movement as Hitler's brutalities had already begun to mobilise the trade unions. The more this happened, the more the Government moved away from war; peace with the dictators, at almost any price, seemed to be its policy."<sup>2</sup>

Since the Tory Party, including most of those aware of the Nazi threat, was strangely silent about British interests in the conflict, Labour, and in particular its Left, became acquainted with a new vocabulary, one which spoke of vital communications and interests. It remained for Bevan to warn that "should Spain become Fascist, as assuredly it will if the rebels succeed . . . then Britain's undisputed power in the Mediterranean is gone".<sup>3</sup> Small wonder Bernays commented:

"There is a new tone about their speeches nowadays.

They talk about the prestige of the Navy and the might and power of the British Empire. Phrases have been used by the Opposition in these Debates that might have come

<sup>1</sup> One symptom of the change was the Left's new found enthusiasm for the League, which was now no longer an international burglars' union, but the means through which the spread of fascism could be challenged.

<sup>2</sup> Britain between the Wars, pp.577-8.

<sup>3</sup> Foot, Aneurin Bevan, p.219.



straight from a Palmerstonian Parliament. We have heard about Drake's drum and the Nelson touch and about how Britannia rules the waves, and one almost expected some honourable Member to rise on the Labour benches and say:

'We don't want to fight, but by jingo if we do  
We've got the ships, we've got the men and we've  
got the money too.'"<sup>1</sup>

But the fact that domestic oriented MPs, particularly the Left, became 'war-minded' does not warrant Watkins description of the Left of the Labour Movement as being one of the "two sections of British political life which most clearly foresaw the Nazi menace to Britain".<sup>2</sup> That description, if it must be applied, belongs elsewhere, to the Daltons, Bevins and Citrines, men disparaged by Watkins. It was this section, unlike the Left, which supported rearmament, and were willing to pursue a militant foreign policy, given the right conditions, which they felt did not exist over Spain. Nevertheless, Labourites, drawn asunder by Spain, were to be united by the Czechoslovak crisis, when the party as a whole pursued a militant foreign policy, with opposition to rearmament having withered away.<sup>3</sup>

Like Labour, the Liberal Party's initial reaction, on the outbreak of strife in Spain, was to prevent the flames of war spreading into Europe. Consequently the party applauded the French proposals concerning the non-intervention agreement which, it was felt, if properly implemented, would effectively isolate the conflict. Once

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 20 April, 1937, Col.1698.

<sup>2</sup> Britain Divided, p.186; the other being the Churchillian Tories.

<sup>3</sup> With the exception of the damaging Petition Campaign of Cripps.

the danger of an European conflagration had been overcome, the British Government should endeavour to mediate with a view to an armistice and an ultimate settlement. This is not to say that the Liberal Party was neutral in sympathy for, as a draft resolution, passed by the Liberal Council, read "The Spanish rebels are striving to overthrow the constitutionally elected Government of Spain. They are being backed by powerful elements in the British Press and the Conservative Party. If this revolt succeeds dictatorship will have become the predominant form of government in Europe, and will confront France on three fronts."<sup>1</sup>

Why then did the Liberal Party reject the policy that the Labour Party adopted in October, 1936, that owing to violations of the non-intervention agreement, the Spanish Government should be enabled to buy arms? Sinclair explained the reasons for the Liberal standpoint, during the first real debate on the Spanish imbroglio:

"I often hear it said by those who are in favour of abandoning the policy of non-intervention, that the agreement has been broken by the Fascist Powers and that we have the right to claim to be able to supply the Spanish Government. Of course we have. But what is lawful is not always expedient, and it is the expediency of abandoning the policy of non-intervention that I doubt . . . if we support the constitutional Government, and the other Powers are going to give fifty times the support to the rebels, and we shall then be in a general European conflict, the two sides of which will be evenly matched."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Times, 16 September, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Hansard, 29 October, 1936, Cols.66-68.

What the majority of Liberal Members wanted was not the sale of arms to the Republicans, but the effective application of the policy of non-intervention so that arms would no longer be sent to the rebel forces. Sinclair repeatedly voiced this in the House:

"Let the Government patch up this Non-Intervention Agreement if they can . . . but to put all the patches on the holes through which the constitutionally elected government of Spain is getting supplies, and to leave open all the holes through which the rebels are drawing supplies, would ensure the defeat of the Spanish Government . . . I believe the defeat of the Spanish Government would be a disaster to the peace of the world and a serious threat to the interests of this country and of the Empire."<sup>1</sup>

Some Liberal MPs came to view the Spanish conflict as a great opportunity to resurrect the authority of the League of Nations. On several occasions during the war they advocated the reference of the whole of the Spanish problem to the League. During a debate in June, 1937, the leader of the party suggested that the League should send an impartial commission to ascertain the facts, "to find out whether this really was a civil war between two fairly evenly matched parties in Spain with some foreign support to each, and, if so, let that Commission see if mediation was possible between the two sides so as to bring this horrible tragedy to an end, and re-establish peace; or whether intervention on such a scale and so one-sided as to amount to a deliberate attempt by certain foreign powers, with some Spanish military support, to conquer the Spanish

<sup>1</sup> Hansard, 1 December, 1936, Cols.1087-88.

people, to acquire Spanish mineral and other resources, and to occupy in Spain strategic positions".<sup>1</sup> Wilf Roberts too, supporting his leader, called for the League to send a commission to Spain, but added that "if either party in the Spanish conflict refuses to accept that condition of investigation, if either party refuses to agree to the withdrawal of foreign volunteers, if either party refuses to submit to that investigation as to the extent of foreign intervention, then it be treated as an aggressor in the war and that the League procedure be applied to that party as an aggressor".<sup>2</sup> However well-intentioned the proposal, its over-optimism was obvious, although Liberals were not alone in putting forward such a policy.<sup>3</sup> By 1937 the League's authority was almost non-existent, and in any case the League Powers were as badly divided over Spain as British public opinion.

After months of intervention, some of it blatant, the Liberal Party Assembly at Buxton, in May 1937, still passed a resolution calling on the Government to exert pressure to make non-intervention a reality, "to procure the cessation of aerial bombing in Spain and to secure the withdrawal of foreign nationals from the armed forces on both sides; and further, the Assembly urges His Majesty's Government to use their influence to bring about an armistice and,

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 25 June, 1937, Cols.1543-44.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Col.1564.

<sup>3</sup> Noel-Baker is recorded as having "transferred all his eager enthusiasm and credulous optimism from Geneva to the Spanish front". Dalton, Diaries, 12 April, 1938. He, too, pressed for the Spanish question to be referred to the League, in the hope that the rule of law might thereby be preserved and the League's pre-eminence restored. See his intervention, House of Commons Debates, 26 October, 1937, Cols.284-5.



if so desired by the Spanish people, to assist in the establishment of permanent peace".<sup>1</sup> The Liberals, therefore, were far more cautious than Labour in their approach to the Spanish problem.

Yet within the parliamentary party voices were raised questioning the wisdom of continued support of non-intervention. David Lloyd George, for one, queried the system whereby the machinery of war was sent by foreigners in the proportion of eight to one to one side. "You are not stopping equipment, you are not stopping bloodshed. All you are doing is giving an overwhelming advantage to one side."<sup>2</sup> Other members acutely stirred over the Spanish issue, and who tended to be drawn from the Left of the party, were Roberts, Richard Acland, Megan Lloyd George and Mander. When the Civil War started they had no doubt that the correct course would be to supply arms to the constitutionally elected government and to deny arms to the rebels. At no time did they favour denying the legal right of the Republican Government to buy arms, for as Acland put it:

"Once the Non-Intervention Treaty became a fait accompli our concern was two fold: first to call attention to the flagrant way in which Germany and Italy were defying the Treaty in the interests of Franco; and then to say because they are breaking the Treaty on their side, we ought to abrogate the Treaty and sell arms to the Republicans."<sup>3</sup>

All four MPs belonged to a Parliamentary Committee on Spain, as did Atholl and several Labour MPs.<sup>4</sup> The Committee was anxious to

<sup>1</sup> Liberal Magazine, June, 1937.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Debates, 25 June, 1937, Col.1598.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to the author, 22 March, 1971.

<sup>4</sup> The Labour Members were Bevan, Grenfell, Jagger, Noel-Baker, Pritt, Silverman, Strauss, Summerskill, Wedgwood and Wilkinson.

publicise the breaches of the non-intervention treaty and to press for the restoration of the Republic's right to buy arms. To this end Committee members were active in promoting Parliamentary questions, and in collecting and circulating material to be used in foreign policy debates. The Committee also supplied information on the voting and speaking records of the pro-Franco MPs to the various opposition parties in their constituencies; the reason being that these members could be attacked locally for supporting Franco, in the hope that this would help to unseat them at the forthcoming general election.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most active of Liberal MPs as regards Spain was Roberts, the Member for Cumberland North. Roberts helped set up the Parliamentary Committee on Spain, and, with the co-operation of fellow MPs like Rathbone and Atholl, was instrumental in establishing an All-Party Committee for Spanish Relief. The Committee's form of help was to send motor lorries to bring children from bombed areas, particularly from Madrid which by the autumn of 1936 was being bombed by the Nationalists, to safer districts. Roberts became the Relief Committee's energetic young secretary and, in that capacity, had first hand experience of Madrid, when he visited Spain in November, 1936.<sup>2</sup>

In Parliament Roberts regularly intervened in debates, often bitterly attacking the Conservative Party for its policy towards Spain:

<sup>1</sup> Rathbone Papers, in which there are personal files on the speeches and activities of such pro-Franco MPs as Crossley, Croft and Keyes.

<sup>2</sup> Report on the Visit by an All Party Group of MPs to Spain, November, 1936.

"I cannot understand why the constitutional party which sits opposite, on every occasion on which democracy is threatened, support the dictators, and I sometimes fear if in England democracy should decide on a Left-wing government, what, in those circumstances, would be the method of some honourable Members who sit opposite?"<sup>1</sup>

Roberts went on to argue that British interests were essentially bound up with the victory of the Spanish Government under its Liberal and Republican leadership.

By May, 1938, opinion in the party, stirred up by the events abroad, particularly the continuing breaches of the non-intervention agreement, swung completely against existing Liberal policy. A resolution, therefore, was passed at the Bath Assembly that the "failure of the Non-Intervention agreements should be frankly recognised; that the Non-Intervention Committee be dissolved; and that, while any direct intervention by the British Government in Spain should be confined to the relief of the sufferings of the Spanish people and the promotion of peace, it should no longer prevent the constitutional government of Spain from purchasing the supplies which it needs to defend itself from rebellion at home and invasion from abroad". Thenceforward the Liberal and Labour Parties stood firm on the policy that the Non-Intervention Agreements be ended, and that the Spanish Government should be entitled to buy arms. Neither favoured the alternative of intervention save as, in the words of the resolution, to relieve the sufferings of the people and promote peace.

The Bath Assembly also witnessed the party's official advocacy of the popular front. Although the parliamentary party had been

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates, 31 July, 1936, Col.1920.

intent on "building up a non-Socialist alternative to the present Government", by sheer lack of numbers it could on the short-term be nothing but a second and weaker opposition, unable to exercise any important influence on public policy.<sup>1</sup> In such circumstances a handful of Liberal Members, drawn from the radical wing of the party, came round to the idea of building a popular front against the Government. Pressure of events abroad, in particular the outbreak of war in Spain, brought this change from the independent stance affirmed after the General Election.<sup>2</sup> Liberal enthusiasts reasoned that any moderate government of the Left, although this would involve the temporary abandonment of ideological differences, was preferable to the continuance of the disastrous National administration.

In August, 1936, Mander wrote a letter to the magazine New Outlook arguing that "an association of Left parties is manifestly desirable". He went on to claim that the whole future of the world, for generations to come, hung in the balance, and depended upon courageous British leadership in the field of foreign affairs. This would not be given by Baldwin's Government. "Party considerations are of minor importance compared with the vital necessity of securing a Government which will give this leadership".<sup>3</sup> Mander's

<sup>1</sup> Sinclair, speech recorded in the Liberal Magazine, January 1937.

<sup>2</sup> By contrast the course of events abroad, notably in Spain, influenced Bernays to apply for the Liberal National Whip. In Spain, the Member for Bristol North argued, "were manifested in a lamentable form the results of the weak Popular Front Government now being strongly advocated in this country as the only alternative to the National Government". He had been increasingly convinced that in the "interest of efficient Government, and indeed of democracy itself, it behoved every Liberal to play his part in helping to maintain the existing National Front in these dark and difficult days". Liberal Magazine, October, 1936.

<sup>3</sup> New Outlook, August, 1936.



call was taken up by Richard Acland. In December he addressed a meeting in the Friends' House, and spoke of the need for a short-term programme of co-operation between Left inclined groups and individuals in order to overthrow the Government.<sup>1</sup>

An article written by Wilfrid Roberts showed clearly that the impetus for a broad-based grouping came from overseas:

" . . . some of us regard home policy, important as it is, as only secondary in urgency to foreign affairs. If we really believe what we have been saying about the danger of war, how can we avoid the irresistible conclusion that the National Government must be replaced at the next general election by those who are determined to avert the next war by collective action . . . Communists, Conservatives, Liberals, Labourites - I would accept the help of any or of all."<sup>2</sup>

In the autumn of 1936 a statement entitled the Liberal Party and a Popular Front was submitted to the Party Executive. This met to consider the proposals and rejected them out of hand. A manifesto was issued indicating that a popular front involved an agreement between the progressive parties on a programme, domestic as well as international, and an electoral bargain whereby they undertake to get out of each other's way in the constituencies. As Labour was not willing to suspend its efforts to realise its socialist aims for the time being, and concentrate on an agreed programme of practical reform, any basis of agreement was gone. Furthermore, any electoral bargain

<sup>1</sup> Liberal Magazine, January, 1937.

<sup>2</sup> New Outlook, April, 1937.

between the party headquarters whereby rival candidates undertook to get out of each other's way would break down in the constituencies. "Liberals", the statement announced, "are not prepared to accept dictation and in most of the constituencies where they have a candidate they would insist on fighting, knowing that withdrawal would mean the destruction of their organisation." While admitting the danger of war, the solution, the Executive felt, was a "new Liberal Party, attracting to its banner the millions who seek peace and progress . . . the typically British means of averting the dangers of war".<sup>1</sup>

Not to be fobbed off by the Executive the popular front enthusiasts took their case to the party conference. The 1937 Assembly, which was the first general meeting of the party under the new constitution, met at Buxton at the end of May. A resolution, in effect welcoming the popular front, survived the chairman's axe at a time when only 200 delegates were left in the hall. It was eventually thrown out but the majority was surprisingly narrow.<sup>2</sup> Within a year with the international situation going from bad to worse, Richard Acland, overriding the objection of the Party leaders, managed to persuade the rank and file at the Assembly to reverse the Buxton decision.

The demand for the widest possible coalition of anti-fascist, anti-Government forces, with the object of evicting Chamberlain from office and installing a Government that would stand up to the aggressor nations, gathered support during the winter of 1937-8. Eden's resignation in February, 1938, followed by the annexation of Austria, and the force of events in Spain strengthened this

<sup>1</sup> Liberal Magazine, February, 1937.

<sup>2</sup> The Times, 31 May, 1937.

movement. It was, however, an agitation without a definite organising centre, unlike the united front movement of the previous year.

Reynolds News, the paper of the Co-operative Movement, took up the appeal, advocating a "United Peace Alliance" based on the Labour and Co-operative movements but including those Liberals and even those Tories who were critical of Chamberlain and accepted the need for collective security. The Liberal newspapers, the News Chronicle and the Manchester Guardian, disregarding the outlook of the Liberal machine, also took up the demand on much the same basis. Meanwhile, a number of local popular fronts made their appearance, composed mainly of the more radical Liberals, independent-minded Labourites, supporters of the League of Nations Union, and other non-party bodies.

At the Easter Conference of the Co-operative Party a resolution in favour of a peace alliance was carried, although by a narrow majority. Two Labour and Co-operative MPs had been prominent in the carrying of the resolution: A J Barnes, the Chairman of the Co-operative Party, and the Reverend G S Woods. Due to the closeness of the vote the National Committee of the Co-operative Party delayed approaching the Labour Party with the embarrassing preposition with which it had been landed, and referred the matter to the Co-operative Congress, meeting at Whitsun. In fact the Labour Executive had already issued a manifesto against the peace alliance, which it regarded as tending to the "weakening of Party policy to accommodate other political demands". As this did not deter the growth of popular front sentiment within the party, the Executive issued another manifesto, The Labour Party and the Popular Front. The basic theme was that this new combination would be weaker electorally than the Labour Party fighting alone. Nevertheless the Executive did not offer



absolutely unqualified hostility to the popular front movement under all possible circumstances.<sup>1</sup> It argued that the case might be altered were there any evidence of an internal crisis in the Conservative Party. "A new situation might arise, of course, if any considerable number of MPs now supporting the Government were to rebel against the Prime Minister's authority". As to other suggested participants in such a combination, the Communists would be an "electoral liability rather than an asset, by driving millions into Mr Chamberlain's camp", while there was no direct evidence that the Liberals would "join the proposed combination as a body; and there is some evidence to the contrary". In any case, the manifesto argued, there was no certainty that the Liberal electorate would follow the advice of the Liberal leaders, should they decide in favour of the front.

The Liberal Assembly at Both, in May, went some way towards undermining the case set out in Labour Party and the Popular Front. Acland moved a resolution which read:

"That, whilst scrupulously safeguarding the independence of our party position, this Assembly is prepared to give assistance to and receive assistance from any individual, any group, or any organisation which is prepared to receive assistance from, and give assistance to the Liberal Party

<sup>1</sup> Several members of the Executive Committee, including Cripps, Pritt, Wilkinson, and Laski, were known to favour the alliance, and Cripps, in the summer of 1938, had submitted a popular front proposal to the National Executive Committee but only received the support of the aforementioned members. Since the time when Cripps had helped launch the Socialist League, on all international questions he had taken his stand on the need for fighting the class enemy in one's own country, refusing all associations with Liberals and Tories. Now that the policies of Chamberlain had helped to create so ominous a situation he was convinced that all opposition elements must combine to force the Government's resignation and replace it with a popular front government.



in order to put into operation the Foreign Policy adopted by this Assembly, and in order to achieve in the immediate future, a programme of domestic reform which is not inconsistent with the policy of the Liberal Party."<sup>1</sup>

Acland freely admitted that the resolution marked a change in outlook from the General Election, when the party had determined against political flirtation of any kind. Yet the needs of the international situation required that the Liberal Party, while preserving its essential independence, should make itself a rallying point for a popular front movement.

He went on to frankly state that as yet there was no certainty that any substantial number of Conservatives would break away from the present Government. Neither was there any indication that the Labour Party machine had ceased hunting around for signs of the possibility of a purely party victory. Nevertheless, Acland envisaged, in the immediate future, all people who believed in collective security, from the extreme Left to the Churchillian realists in the Conservative Party, and even a few "Simonites if they knew it was going to win", joining a mighty army that would sweep Chamberlain into oblivion.

Acland's speech revealed that the advocates of the popular front did not envisage the problem merely in electoral terms. Even before the Government saw fit to dissolve Parliament, it was hoped that pressure in the House, leading to defections from the Government ranks, combined with a ferment of opinion in the country would divert British policy from its dangerous course and at best topple the Chamberlain administration. The front, then was designed

<sup>1</sup> Liberal Magazine, June, 1938.

to stop the Chamberlain Government's course, if possible, before an election, but should that fail it would reap its rewards, once the Prime Minister went to the country, by mobilising the electors against fascism and the policy of appeasement.

Behind the scenes the Liberal leader, Sinclair, expressed his misgivings over the policy change. In an interview with Lord Cecil he explained that the Liberal Party aimed at being a National Party and that, therefore, it had a large number of candidates all over the country, and it would be a blow to these if all but 40 or 50 of them were withdrawn. Moreover, those on the Right-wing of the Liberal Party would resent very bitterly any agreement with the Socialists and it would probably mean considerable secessions before any agreement was reached. Putting the Liberal interest to one side he expressed doubt whether Labour would consent to any arrangement, "since it would hamper them in their attitude towards the Communists".<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, there was the "supreme difficulty" that there was no outstanding personality to be a leader of such a combination. The Labour Party had no magnetic leader, nor was there anyone anywhere else in the Liberal or Labour ranks". The situation, Sinclair concluded, might be different "if Eden came out" and lead a popular movement against the Government's foreign policy, it being "relatively easy to make a combination of all the parties under him".<sup>2</sup>

The popular front movement, having received considerable impetus from the passing of Acland's resolution, suffered a serious blow within a month of the Bath Assembly. A resolution in favour of the United Peace Alliance, though sponsored by the Co-operative

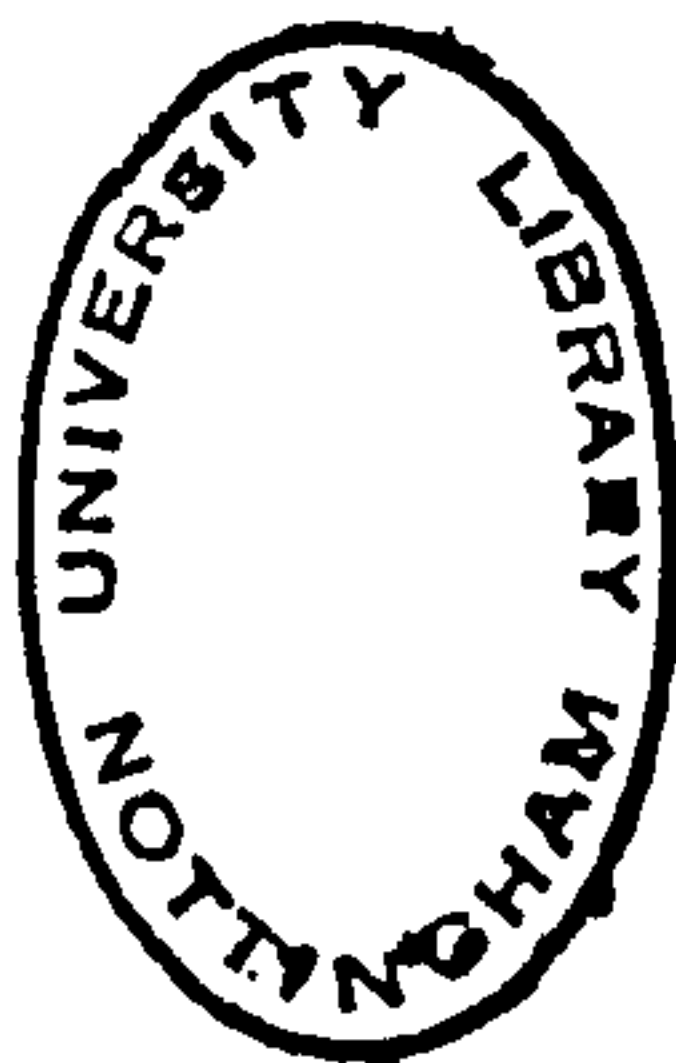
<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly a factor in Labour's opposition to a popular front. Bitter internal dissension was inevitable if the leadership advocated an alliance with the Liberals etc having persistently refused co-operation with the Communists.

<sup>2</sup> Note of an interview with Sinclair, 28 July, 1938, Cecil Papers, 5180.

Party, was defeated by over 2 million votes at the Annual Co-operative Congress. This did not end the movement; but it was reduced to a series of local actions, including the famous Oxford and Bridgwater by-elections. The following year, however, saw a revival of the popular front agitation in a new form, this time under the leadership of Cripps.

What must be kept in mind if the motives of those who backed the popular front activities are to be understood is the overwhelming concern with events abroad, in particular Spain. The necessities of the international situation required the immediate subordination of differences in ideology and policy. "We do not know", said Acland at the Bath Assembly, "whether we will not be dead in war before the date of our next meeting. This fact reduces to relative unimportance many things which, if it were not true, would be of the highest possible importance."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Bevan underlined the urgency for the front:

"If the Government remains in office another two or three years we shall rue in blood and tears that we did not take action earlier. The country is faced with two alternatives - the establishment of the Popular Front in this country, under the leadership of the Labour Party or drift to disaster under the National Government."<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Liberal Magazine, June, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> From a speech to a May Day demonstration at Pontypool, in 1938. Foot, Aneurin Bevan, p.279.