

'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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C O N T E N T S

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C H A P T E R V

THE RESIGNATION OF ANTHONY EDEN

While the Spanish War continued to rage Britain was plunged into a political crisis when Eden resigned.¹ Although in Channon's words, "He has had a meteoric rise young Anthony . . . at 38 he is Foreign Secretary. There is hardly a parallel in history", Eden for thirteen years had devoted himself almost entirely to the study of foreign affairs.² Shortly after entering the House in 1925, he became Parliamentary Private Secretary to Sir Austen Chamberlain, then at the Foreign Office. In the MacDonald/Baldwin coalition of 1931 he was appointed Under-Secretary of State and served under the new Foreign Secretary, Sir John Simon, whose conduct of affairs was not viewed with favour. Eden began, therefore, to acquire prominence, becoming Lord Privy Seal and retaining, by the desire of the Cabinet, an informal but close association with the Foreign Office. With the Cabinet reshuffle of June 1935, he was appointed Minister for League of Nations Affairs, working in the Foreign Office with equal status to the Foreign Secretary, now Sir Samuel Hoare, and with full access to the despatches and the department staff. "Mr Baldwin's object", Churchill wrote, "was no doubt to conciliate the strong tide of public opinion associated with the League of Nations Union by showing the importance which he attached to the League and to the conduct of our affairs at Geneva".³ Six months later, in the wake of the

¹ MP Warwick and Leamington, 1923-57.

² Diary entry, 23 December, 1935, The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.49.

³ The Gathering Storm, p.118.

Hoare-Laval fiasco, Baldwin, sensing the need to conciliate pro-League opinion once again, installed Eden as the new Foreign Secretary.

Eden, above all other Ministers, caught the public imagination. "His good looks, his charming smile, his elegant clothes, and his evident attachment to the cause of the League won him great opinions from the public".¹ Nor were these confined to the Tory Party, for Socialists and Liberals alike were attracted by what appeared to be a new "Sir Galahad". In a world falling apart, with the democracies governed by elderly men, Eden stood out to many as the one young man who might save the world from war.

It is an irony of history that Eden should actually have welcomed Chamberlain's succession in May, 1937, on the ground that the new Prime Minister would take a more active interest in foreign affairs than his predecessor. Chamberlain certainly did, and was convinced that a determined effort must be made to end the drift and disarray (as he and the various opposition elements saw it) in British foreign policy since 1931. Unknown to Eden he had developed clear-cut views on the desirability of actively appeasing the dictators in the hope of averting a future conflict or, at the very least, reducing the number of Britain's enemies.² The Chiefs of Staff had advised the Cabinet that Britain was in no condition to fight a war against Germany, Italy and Japan simultaneously. If Germany was the most threatening of these three powers, Japan nevertheless had the most powerful navy; and if Russia intervened on the side of Britain and

¹ R Churchill, Sir Anthony Eden, p.103.

² For Eden's ignorance of Chamberlain's intentions see Harvey of Tasburgh Papers, 16 March, 1937, 56394.

France this might bring Japan in on the side of Germany and Italy, and thus would "in fact be an embarrassment rather than a help". The value of the Russian army was also in doubt as a result of Stalin's purges.¹ As for the United States, popular feeling there in favour of isolation appeared to be as strong as ever, and so, as Chamberlain observed, "he would be a rash man who based his consideration on help from that quarter". Consequently Britain had to recognise that France was her only possible major ally; and for the rest it was essential to "take political or international action . . . to reduce the number of our potential enemies".²

Whatever the rights and wrongs of Chamberlain's course he did provide Britain, from May 1937 until March 1939, with a coherent and consistent foreign policy. Yet unlike that of his predecessor, Chamberlain's conduct of affairs had a marked effect on the divisions within the Conservative Party, which became harder, harsher and longer lasting. They left, according to Robert Blake, a "lasting mark on the party, not wholly obliterated even as late as 1957".³

Two incidents led to the break between the Prime Minister and his Foreign Secretary, although by the turn of the year it had already become apparent to Eden and his entourage that his position, rather than being strengthened by Chamberlain's accession, was rapidly being undermined.⁴ Harvey, Eden's private secretary at the

¹ COS Report, Comparison of Strength, Cab 24/273.

² Cabinet Minutes, 8 December, 1937.

³ Blake, The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill, p.240.

⁴ Eden was also profoundly worried about the state of Britain's rearmament in relation to the international situation. 1938 was, according to the Foreign Secretary, going to be a very difficult year, and yet Britain's rearmament was far from complete, necessitating Eden felt, some acceleration in the programme. See Cabinet Memorandum 210, "The Foreign Secretary's Views on the Rearmament Programme", 31 December, 1937.

Foreign Office, recorded in his diary that "in the Cabinet he is criticised and thwarted by half his colleagues who are jealous of him and would trip him up if they had half the chance".¹ And again, reporting the conclusions of a conversation held with Jim Thomas, he wrote:

"He (PM) must either support A.E. or A.E. must resign and the Government would then fall. The Cabinet cannot use A.E's popularity and sabotage his foreign policy. The majority of the Cabinet is against A.E. and the Cabinet are far to the right both of the House of Commons and of the country."²

The first incident arose from President Roosevelt's conference proposal. Roosevelt, deeply disturbed by the progressive deterioration of the foreign situation, proposed to take an initiative along the only lines which, in the state of public opinion in the United States, was open to him. He would call a conference of the leading powers to consider ways of returning to more peaceful international relations, provided he received the assurance from Britain that it would meet with the cordial and wholehearted support of His Majesty's Government. Without consulting Eden, who was on holiday on the French Riviera, Chamberlain rebuffed the President's offer on the grounds that it would cut across his own efforts to come to terms with the dictators. Subsequently Eden was annoyed at the way the American initiative had been handled and felt it would annul all the progress so far made in Anglo-American co-operation, which he had described elsewhere as the "most encouraging sign in the international scene".³

¹ Harvey Papers, entry for 15 October, 1937.

² Ibid, entry for 3 November, 1937.

³ "The Foreign Secretary's views on the Rearmament Programme", Cabinet Memorandum 210.

After arguing about the matter for several days, an agreement was reached between Chamberlain and Eden whereby the President was asked to postpone his plan for the time being while the Prime Minister continued his efforts to approach the dictators unilaterally. In his memoirs Eden maintains that but for the strict secrecy of Roosevelt's offer he would have left the Government on this issue.¹ Indeed he apparently informed his secretary that he "cannot go on like this", and the latter felt that 'the gang' will "do him down if they can get him to swallow such treatment. He is the most important person in the Cabinet and if he went the Government would fall".²

The second incident was concerned with British policy towards Italy. During the previous September Eden had made known his fear that the Prime Minister had a "certain sympathy for dictators whose efficiency appealed to him and that he really believed it would be possible to get an agreement with Mussolini by running after him".³ Thus when the latter made an offer of negotiations, in February 1938, for a general reconciliation, the Prime Minister was enthusiastic. Not so Eden, who was sceptical, with good reason, of Italian good faith and insisted there should be an agreement on the conditions of the withdrawal of Italian volunteers from Spain, and the beginning of actual withdrawal, before conversations began. Meanwhile, the British Government should not go beyond the informal talks which had already begun with Count Grandi, the Italian Ambassador in London.

¹ Eden, Facing The Dictators, p.565.

² Harvey, diary entry, 17 January, 1938.

³ Ibid, entry for 22 September, 1937.

To overcome the deadlock Chamberlain took the issue to the Cabinet. After listening to both cases, the Cabinet supported the Prime Minister's decision to begin talks immediately, viewing the dispute as a minor one of timing, and not one of principle. W N Medlicott, thirty years later, reiterated the Cabinet view and confessed to difficulty in seeing "in the breach between the two Englishmen anything more than a difference in timing on the part of two very self-willed men".¹ Yet at the Cabinet meeting Eden maintained his ground and insisted - correctly, according to these researches - that the "differences were not merely time time and method, but of a deeper outlook", indicating his belief in the necessity for a firmer approach to Mussolini (and by implication for the future, Hitler) with Britain insisting on concessions - carried out - to overcome genuine fears as to Italy's intentions.² Feeling himself out of sympathy with Chamberlain's new approach of faith, without necessarily mutual works, and preferring instead a greater emphasis on closer links with obvious friends - France, Belgium, and if possible the United States, he announced his intention to resign.

This threw Ministers into considerable dismay, and there was some discussion of the political crisis that would be produced by Eden's departure, the Minister of Agriculture, W S Morrison, describing the probable effects as 'calamitous'. Thereupon the discussion turned on finding some modus vivendi whereby Chamberlain would have his way and Eden would remain in the Cabinet, but no compromise proved possible.

¹ Medlicott, British Foreign Policy since Versailles, 1919-63, p.173.

² In his memoirs, written in 1962, Eden still insisted that it was "neither timing nor temperament nor the gap in years" which had made it impossible for him to work with Chamberlain. Facing the Dictators, p.435.

The latter, therefore, resigned thanking his colleagues for "the years of close co-operation, and expressed the hope that he would not be an embarrassment to them outside".¹ The only person who resigned with Eden was Lord Cranborne, his Under-Secretary, but their Parliamentary Private Secretaries, respectively J P L Thomas and Mark Patrick, naturally followed them onto the backbenches. Ronald Tree, Parliamentary Private Secretary to R S Hudson at the Overseas Trade Department also gave up his post "in sympathy with Mr Eden".²

The announcement of the resignation caused a sensation. Fears or hopes were expressed, according to which side of the fence one was on, that it would be a "tremendous blow" to the Government and might even bring about its "fall".³ Duff Cooper records how his Parliamentary Private Secretary, Hamilton Kerr, rang him up in alarm and then came round to see him. "He said that the situation in the House would be hopeless, that more than one hundred of our supporters would vote against us. I gathered that he would be inclined to do so himself".⁴ Aneurin Bevan, too, thought that the day when Eden was to make known the reasons for his resignation would be the most exciting sitting since 1931. "No one could be sure who would emerge the victor . . . the determined Premier with the rather sinister, repellant appearance" or "the youngest, the most colourful, the most

¹ Cabinet Minutes, 19 February, 1938.

² Daily Telegraph, 23 November, 1938.

³ Duff Cooper, Old Men Forget, p.212.

⁴ Ibid.

controversial, the most important and at the same time the most popular Minister of State".¹

Churchill recorded how acutely disappointed he was at the news:

"I must confess that my heart sank, and for a while the dark waters of despair overwhelmed me . . . There seemed one strong young figure standing up against long, dismal, drawling tides of drift and surrender, of wrong measurements and feeble impulses. My conduct of affairs would have been different from his in various ways; but he seemed to me at this moment to embody the life-hope of the British nation, the grand old British race that had done so much for men, and had yet some more to give. Now he had gone."²

In retrospect historians have questioned whether Eden was a "strong young figure," standing out against the 'drift', and one observer, a Foreign Office official at the time, felt that he "never made the full impact of a Foreign Secretary".³ If the ensuing debate and eighteen months are anything to go by Eden far from embodied the 'life-hope' of the 'grand old British race'.

In what Hansard refers to as a "personal explanation" Eden freely admitted that the Government, when he was a member, had committed itself in principle to conversations with Italy and that the "immediate issue", dividing him from his colleagues, was as to "whether such official conversations should be opened in Rome now."

¹ Aneurin Bevan, p.272.

² The Gathering Storm, p.226.

³ A J P Taylor, for instance, remarks "Eden did not face the dictators; he pulled faces at them". English History, p.627. The observer was G McDermott; The Eden Legacy, p.58.

It was his conviction that the attitude of the Italian Government, with the continuing propaganda against Britain and lack of co-operation over Spain, was "not yet such as to justify this course". He placed "emphasis on performance as opposed to promise" from Italy and felt that her "now or never" stance to negotiations was little less than a "threat". "This is the moment for this country to stand firm", he said, "not to plunge into negotiations unprepared, with full knowledge that the chief obstacle to their success has not been resolved."¹

Eden's speech may have been "dignified and impressive" but it left Members, according to Macmillan, somewhat "uncertain as to what all the fuss was about".² Lord Hailsham, the Lord Chancellor, for one felt quite unable to explain why Eden resigned "because I couldn't make it out myself".³ Clearly Eden had failed to present a strong case for his resignation, for instead of drawing out the more general difference of outlook that separated him from the Prime Minister, he narrowed the issue, in Aneurin Bevan's words, to "a point of diplomatic finesse".⁴ His ineffective performance, however, does not alone account for the confusion that existed in the minds of MPs, even those sympathetic to him, but must also be related to the occasion on which he had chosen to separate himself from his colleagues. The timing and conditions for talks with Italy seemed scarcely sufficient to warrant a resignation, and Vansittart is probably correct

¹ House of Commons Debates, 21 February, 1938, Cols.45-50.

² Winds of Change, p.538.

³ Quoted in R F W Heuston, Lives of the Lord Chancellors 1885-1940, p.488.

⁴ M Foot, Aneurin Bevan, p.272.

in his opinion that Eden made a mistake in going "on a point which, if not really a mere point of procedure, was at least not a clear issue and one which would be difficult to explain to the country".¹

Since the former Foreign Secretary had failed to present a strong case for his resignation Members were disposed to credit the rumours that were freely circulated that Eden was suffering from a nervous breakdown. Eden puts this story down to Sir John Simon, who on the 18th had told him to take care of himself: "You look rather tired. Are you certain that you're all right?" That same day Simon had sought out J P L Thomas, Eden's Parliamentary Private Secretary, saying that "he was as fond of Anthony as if he had been his own son, that he was becoming more and more depressed in watching A.E. at Cabinet Meetings and in realising that he was both physically and mentally ill. Nothing but six months' holiday could restore him During this period he and his Cabinet colleagues would keep his seat warm for him and look after foreign affairs". Thomas replied that Eden had just returned from a holiday and that his health had never been better. Simon then informed Thomas that the resignation would be "fatal to the Government, the country, nay the whole world"; that all this lay in Thomas's hands and that he must be sensible and take Eden away. The Parliamentary Private Secretary refused.²

Simon appears to have followed this up on the 21st by telling National Liberal Members that Eden was far from well and that his

¹ Nicolson, Diary entry, 28 February, 1938, Diaries and Letters, p.327.

² Thomas's account (presumably from his diary) recorded in Eden, Facing The Dictators, pp.584-85. Chips Channon mentions a conversation with Thomas over the subject of his diary: "Jim has kept a diary, dictated daily, he told me, since September (1937), soon after the first major row between Chamberlain and Eden took place. Jim, one day, intends to publish it, but he dare not do it now. It would, he assured me, 'let in the Socialists for a generation', so dark a villain, according to him, is the Prime Minister." Diary entry, 20 June, 1938, The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.159.

resignation was influenced by health reasons.¹ The Times gave full publicity to the story, which Eden attempted to allay by attending the Commons the following day. However his subsequent retreat to France could have done but little than strengthened the rumours that he was feeling the strain of recent weeks. Perhaps if Simon had known how easily the administration would survive the resignation he would not have continued with "his canard".²

Lord Cranborne, attempting to make the most of a bad job, was less restrained than Eden and referred to the "numerous agreements, agreements which, perhaps, to put it mildly have not proved to be so binding upon the Italian government as upon us".³ He saw Britain's entrance into official conversations with Italy at that moment as "surrender to blackmail".⁴ It was, Macmillan recalled, a more "pungent speech" but even Cranborne could not overcome the fact that there were issues of greater significance on which they might, with advantage to the nation and themselves, have resigned. That is not to minimise the differences that existed between themselves and Chamberlain, differences which became more apparent once the Prime Minister pursued the appeasement of Germany, but to say that the timing and conditions for talks with Mussolini pales into insignificance besides the Anschluss, the question of national defence and Czechoslovak territorial integrity.

Chamberlain then stated his position, confident that a worthwhile agreement could be obtained. In a characteristic phrase he

¹ The Times, 22 February, 1938.

² Facing The Dictators, p.601.

³ Eldest son of the fourth Marquess of Salisbury; MP Dorset, 1929-41; Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 1935-38.

⁴ House of Commons Debates, 21 February, 1938, Cols.51-2.

informed the House that he had "never been more completely convinced of the rightness of any course that I have had to take than I am today". Dismissing the actual timing and conditions for talks with Italy as too insignificant to stand in the way of negotiations between the two countries, he remarked "it did not seem that such differences of opinion as have arisen upon the immediate question at issue were of sufficient importance to make it necessary for my right honourable Friend to leave us".¹

Both opposition leaders then attempted to draw attention to the differences between Eden and Chamberlain and what they felt to be their far-ranging implications. Sinclair, perhaps the most effective of the two, pointed to the paths facing Britain:

"On the one hand, we may buy a few years of peace at the cost of the people of Spain and Abyssinia, and at the cost of abandoning the effort to organise security on the basis of equal justice for all nations and of surrendering strategic positions . . . or, on the other hand, we can organise a defensive system which would be able to resist aggression and thus avert war . . . "

Rather than the latter course, "in every crisis in recent years we have retreated before the bluff and the threats of the dictators".²

Although both Sinclair and Attlee wished to bring the administration into disrepute they were in deep sympathy with Eden's action. As expected Greenwood subsequently introduced a motion of no

¹ House of Commons Debates, 21 February, 1938, Cols.63-64.

² Ibid, Col.78-9

confidence in the Government's conduct of foreign affairs. The motion deplored the "circumstances in which the late Foreign Secretary has been obliged to resign his office and has no confidence in His Majesty's present advisers in their conduct of foreign affairs". Greenwood drew attention to the absence of any reference to the League of Nations or collective security in Chamberlain's outlook, and saw "very bleak prospects" for settled peace coming from "this policy of truck-and-scuttle".¹ Liberty could not be maintained by a relapse to the standards of the jungle nor by a base subserviance to the ruthless will of the dictators.

Several National members, who were soon to be associated with Eden, including Nicolson, Cartland, Crossley and Adams, made speeches in support of Eden's contention that the situation required a firmer approach to Mussolini, with Britain insisting on concessions to overcome genuine fears as to Italy's intentions. In view of this it would be inaccurate to assume, as Maurice Cowling has, that "Eden and his entourage misunderstood Chamberlain's opinions and made the wrong assumptions. They . . . did not make the serious point that he was over-optimistic".² The Premier's optimism, in fact, was basic to their case, as it was to that of the opposition parties, and although it was Greenwood who put the matter most succinctly - that whereas Eden had stood for faith and works the Prime Minister stood for blind faith - these words reflected the approach of the majority of those critical of Chamberlain's course.

During the course of the two-day debate a total of 26 speakers voiced dissatisfaction with Eden's resignation and the course Chamberlain had decided upon. While the brunt of the criticism was

¹ House of Commons Debates, 22 February, 1938, Cols.209, 218.

² Cowling, Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy 1933-40, p.176.

made by 11 Labour and 4 Liberal opposition speakers, 7 Conservatives, in addition to Eden, Cranborne, and Nicolson, the National Labourite, were among the critics. Only 13 supported the Government's course, and in fact three of those, Amery, Boothby and Richard Law,¹ were soon to join the dissidents.

The latter three were of the opinion that Mussolini, as a realist, would sincerely welcome the opportunity of extricating Italy from the steady drift towards, what would be for his country, a disastrous war. "When we consider the position of Italy", said Amery, "with her new Empire overseas, her immense coast line, her vulnerable land frontiers, her limited economic resources, is it really likely that Mussolini would wish lightheartedly to commit his country to such hideous peril to its very existence?" If Britain, letting bygones be bygones and abandoning any further pretence of a League policy, could come to a reasonable understanding with Italy then the dangerous situation, whereby there was a "definite crystallisation into two hostile leagues, ourselves, Russia and France on the one side, Germany, Italy and Japan on the other, with such followers as each side may have", might be retrieved.² "I do not", said Law, "see how anybody can deny that the Prime Minister did right in attempting to break out of this appalling vicious circle of hatred, suspicious and anger", while Amery entertained the hope that "the policy which the Prime Minister has inaugurated has come in time to save the world from catastrophe".³ Thus they envisaged the possibility that success might extend beyond an understanding with Italy and bring into being "a new quadrilateral based on the co-operation

¹ MP Kingston-upon-Hull, 1931-45.

² House of Commons Debates, 21 February, Col.182.

³ Ibid, 22 February, Col.84.

and goodwill of the four great Powers of Europe", which would "do something to preserve the peace and pave the way to that ultimate building of a European commonwealth".¹

K W Watkins has written that Amery "held to the line of attempting to win Italy until the Anschluss".² On the contrary, with the seizure of Austria and the impending threat to Czechoslovakia, Amery more than ever cherished hopes of a real understanding with Mussolini. During the Easter recess he briefly visited Rome adding his efforts to those of the Government to get "something of substance" in the proposed Anglo-Italian agreement, which was just approaching completion.³ And when on the 2nd May Chamberlain commended the agreement to the House, Amery followed "to give my impression of the welcome with which the restoration of our ancient friendship had been received by the Italian people, as well as to say something of what I had seen of the better side of the Fascist regime". All the same he feared that the reconciliation had come too late to "save us from the difficult decision which would soon face over Czechoslovakia".⁴

Four other opponents of Munich, Duff Cooper, Bower, Sandys and Wolmer, all of whom supported the Government on the occasion of Eden's resignation, shared Amery's hopes of reaching an agreement with Italy. Duff Cooper's attitude to Mussolini - "a man whose earlier work in his own country I had admired" - was such that, even after he had resigned from the Cabinet over the Munich Agreement he was still "clinging to the hope of improved relations with Italy". Not until

¹ House of Commons Debates, 22 February, Col.83. Significantly Amery left Russia out of his calculations. He shared the widespread reluctance of the Conservative Party to a close association between Britain and the Soviet Union.

² Britain Divided, p.90.

³ The Unforgiving Years, p.239.

⁴ Ibid, p.244.

the Italian invasion of Albania, on Good Friday, 7 April 1939, did he abandon this hope. He wrote on the 12 April: "Another blow has fallen. Another proof has been given that friendly and peaceful relations are as impossible with Mussolini as they are with Hitler. Where there is no mutual confidence, no reliance upon good faith, there can be no friendship and no peace. Mussolini has now demonstrated that his word is worthless. He has treated the Anglo-Italian Agreement of less than a year ago as contemptuously as Hitler treated the agreement of Munich."¹ It is probable that the others, too, on the occasion of Albania's seizure, finally abandoned any illusions they may still have had about Mussolini, although Amery makes no mention of the dashing of any hopes, merely that the duce "determined not to be outdone by Hitler . . . seized Albania".²

While the dissidents were then united in a conviction that Mussolini was utterly worthless there remained the possibility that he would not be so foolhardy as to plunge his country into a disastrous war. Churchill voiced this hope in the House:

"In spite of the bad faith with which we have been treated by the Italian Government, I am still not convinced that Italy has made up her mind, particularly the Italian nation, to be involved in a mortal struggle with Great Britain and France in the Mediterranean."³

What the Anschluss did do for Amery, however, was not to shatter his vision of Anglo-Italian partnership but any prospect of a deal

¹ The Second World War - First Phase, pp.195, 207.

² The Unforgiving Years, p.310.

³ House of Commons Debates, 13 April, 1939, Col.15.

with Hitler, and this was where he, as well as the above Members, began to diverge noticeably from Chamberlain's policy. Whereas the Prime Minister was fortified in his conviction of the urgent necessity of coming to terms with Germany, they were equally convinced that the rape of Austria removed any real possibility of a worthwhile agreement with Hitler. Consequently, Amery intervened in the memorial debate over Austria to advise the Government to tell the Germans "in language as plain and simple as we can make it that the first German soldier or aeroplane to cross the Czech border will bring the whole of the might of this country against Germany".¹ With that speech Amery, in effect, abandoned his persistent opposition to any further European liability, recognising that with Germany acting as she was, Britain could no longer remain impervious to what was happening on the Continent. That same day The Times published a letter of his outlining the policy he would advocate in the immediate future:

"Austria has fallen. The discussions with Italy have come too late to save her, even if they may help to avert further disaster from Europe. But let us remember what it is that has fallen with her.

She has fallen, because she has dared to assert not merely her external independence as a State, but her right to decide for herself whether she is to be a Christian as well as a German State, her right to maintain equality before the law, religious toleration and the ordinary decencies of civilised life within her own borders . . . For the time being the reign of brute force, of racial hysteria, of mechanised barbarism has prevailed.

¹ House of Commons Debates, 14 March, 1938, Col.87.

What of ourselves? Clearly there is an end of all discussion for a settlement with Germany. For the rest we can only read the writing on the wall, press on with greater determination with our rearmament, secure such good will as we can in Europe, stand close on France, and above all, strengthen the bonds, political and economic, which hold the Commonwealth together."¹

Noticeably absent was any reference to collective security or to Russia in his scheme of things, doubtless because he believed that co-operation with Italy would "help to avert further disaster from Europe".

When the vote was eventually taken Greenwood's motion of censure was defeated by 330 votes to 168, a majority of 162. The Government's total of 332, including tellers, was made up of 295 Conservatives, 29 Liberal Nationals, 5 National Labourites, 2 Nationals, and 1 Independent Liberal, J P Maclay, the Member for Paisley. The minority of 170 consisted of 144 Labourites, 18 Liberals, 3 Independents, 3 I.L.Ps, 1 Communist and 1 Conservative.² With total Government strength standing at 422 seats it becomes apparent that a sizeable proportion of the National Members did not take part in the division. The voting figures, in fact, reveal that, excluding whips and officials, 87 supporters of the Government, that is 80 Conservatives, 3 Liberal Nationals, 2 National Labour and 2 Independent Nationals, were conspicuous by their absence. According to The Times lobby correspondent 11 Conservatives and 1 Liberal National were paired against 12 Labour Members, and most of the remainder were either ill

¹ The Times, 14 March, 1938.

² The Independents were Rathbone, T Harvey and Salter; the latter two entering the House in 1937, as a result of by-elections in university seats.

or abroad, but "about 25 Conservatives abstained".¹

The small number of abstentions does not accurately reflect the dislike of Chamberlain's Italian enterprise felt within the Government ranks. Not a few of those who voted for the Government did so with a complete lack of enthusiasm because they feared the whips too much to abstain.² Nevertheless a decisive defeat of the vote of censure was to be expected as very few supporters could feel able to abstain or vote for it considering the terms in which it had been drafted by Labour's executive. However, a small group of MPs, led by Spears, did try to move an amendment to the Labour motion which left out the words after "office" so that it would have read "this House deplores the circumstances in which the late Foreign Secretary has been forced to resign his office". The other Members associated with Spears were Cartland, R A Cary,³ Crossley, B Cruddas, P T Eckersley, Emrys-Evans, Hills, Macmillan, Macnamara, E Makins, G Nicholson, Nicolson, M Patrick,⁴ R A Pilkington,⁵ and R H Turton.⁶ As the amendment was not called a statement was given to the Press so that the Members concerned might make known their point of view.⁷ All these Members except Cruddas, Eckersley,

¹ The Times, February 23, 1938.

² Nicolson, for example, puts Bernays and Mabane, both Liberal National Members, into this category. Letter dated 22 February, 1938, Diaries and Letters, p.325.

³ MP Eccles, 1935-45.

⁴ Entered Foreign Office 1919, serving in Cairo, the Hague, Berne, Moscow; MP Tavistock, 1931-42; Parliamentary Private Secretary, Eden, twice in the thirties; executive member of the League of Nations Union.

⁵ MP, Widnes, 1935-45; travelled extensively in Europe, Russia, the Middle East, Africa and America.

⁶ MP Thirsk and Malton, 1929-74.

⁷ Daily Telegraph, 23 February, 1938.

Makins and Nicholson abstained from voting on the censure motion.

Other than these members it has proved difficult to track down any further abstentionists, for no other reason than that the absence of a given name does not equal a lack of confidence in the Government. As has been noted, many there were that were ill, abroad or paired, and unfortunately there is no way of knowing who these definitely were, and therefore a certain amount of deduction is required to trace those declining to support the Government on this occasion. Removing from the 87 members (the total number of absentees), known offenders, either in the past or in the immediate future, as over the Munich Agreement, it is possible to isolate, other than those above, 12 possible abstainers: Atholl, Bracken, Richard Briscoe,¹ Churchill, Hubert Duggan,² Sir Sidney Herbert, Dudley Joel, Hamilton Kerr,³ Keyes, Leonard Ropner, Thomas and Tree.⁴ To their number I have included another seven members, not voting on the 22nd, but able to do so on the 23rd, too soon perhaps to have arrived home from abroad, recovered from an illness or whatever, and this being so it is unlikely that they would have missed the most important debate in three years. These were Lord Balniel,⁵

¹ Served in the diplomatic corp; attache British Embassy in Berlin 1923; MP Cambridgeshire, 1923-45.

² MP Acton, 1931-43.

³ MP Oldham, 1931-45; Parliamentary Private Secretary, Duff Cooper, 1933-38.

⁴ Eight of these were present on the 23rd, while the others were known sympathisers.

⁵ Balniel told Harvey that he had listened to the Prime Minister's speech and was aghast at what he had said and believed that there had been a "tremendous miscalculation by the Government of the effect in the country of AE going". Harvey, 23 February, 1938.

Viscount Castlereagh, A Hopkinson, G Palmer, H Selley, S Storey and J Withers. This brings the total to 33 possible abstentions, including Eden and Cranborne, eight more than The Times figure of 25, although 2 of the former were not Conservatives.¹ Adams, who voted against the Government, can also be added to the list of dissidents.

Some members of this group were "habitual suspects", such as Adams, Atholl, Bracken, Cartland, Churchill, Hills and Macmillan, but they had on this occasion been joined by such respectable back-benchers as Briscoe, Macnamara, Patrick, Ropner,² and Turton.³ Together the dissidents had declined to support the Government on a motion of censure and although abstention, it may be said, was not the most courageous of Parliamentary gestures, some of those participating had ensured that their absence from the voting lobby was well publicised.

An analysis of the 32 Conservatives in their number (including Adams) revealed that their average age at the 1935 election was 41 years 5 months, 8 years lower than the party average. The figure would be more impressive if the elder statesmen, Churchill, Hills, Keyes, Selley and Withers, aged 61, 68, 63, 64 and 72 respectively, were omitted. It cannot have been entirely accidental that the majority of Eden's supporters were young both in actual years or in terms of parliamentary service. In education the group was similarly unrepresentative, with a higher percentage attending public school and university:

¹ Rock records that about 50 Conservatives abstained, Appeasement on Trial, p.37. Thompson puts the figure at 21, The Anti-Appeasers, p.153. The first is too high while the second is too low.

² MP Sedgefield, 1923-29; Barkston Ash, 1931-64.

³ Macmillan, Winds of Change, p.538.

	<u>Edenites</u>	<u>Party</u>
Public School	86.7%	56.2%
University	70.0%	60.9%

More important perhaps was the armed forces and official services slant of the group:

	<u>Edenites</u>	<u>Party</u>
Land	10.0%	9.7%
Professions	30.0%	32.3%
Armed Forces and Official Services	46.7%	19.4%
Business	6.7%	40.9%

Surprisingly, at a period when the business element was rising as never before, only 6.7% could be referred to as such.

Turning to the constituencies, one member was unopposed and only eleven had majorities of 10,000 or more. This is in sharp contrast to previous occasions of dissent when the majority of those involved had safe seats, normally exceeding 10,000 votes. Here the majority did not hold such safe seats, in fact 12 of them occupied seats which had belonged to the Opposition in 1929. As their majorities were narrower, they had much more to fear from the wrath of the party whips and the Conservative Central Office as a result of their intransigence. Several members, however, including Adams, Emrys-Evans, Joel, Macmillan, Spears, and Nicolson, of the non-Conservatives, sat for marginal industrial areas, where the 'liberal' vote, which was attracted by Eden's record in connection with the League, might make the difference between re-election and defeat.

The Manchester Guardian's reporter depicted the break between Eden and Chamberlain in terms of collective security: "Chamberlain has set the Government's course on a new road leading anywhere but Geneva . . . he regards the League as defunct." "The long latent

antagonism", the report continued, "within the National Government ranks to what they call League ideology at last becomes open and affirmed."¹ There is some evidence for these assertions. Certainly Channon felt that Eden's support within the party derived from "The Left", the pro-Leaguers, and an examination of the abstainers strengthens this view.² Thirteen of them have already been distinguished as firm advocates of the League of Nations, including Palmer³ and Withers⁴, both absent on the 22nd but present the following day.⁵

On the 24 February, two days after the debate, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the supporters of the National Government met. Both Emrys-Evans, the Chairman and Nicolson, the Vice-Chairman, offered to resign on the grounds they had spoken against Chamberlain's policy and subsequently abstained on a vote of confidence. "The room was packed and there was one great shout of 'No!' That sounds splendid but what it really meant was that they thought our resignation would embarrass the Government, as indeed it would. Several people got up quite shamelessly and suggested we should not resign at once but merely do so later when feeling had diminished."⁶ Apart from

¹ Manchester Guardian, 23 February, 1938.

² The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.49.

³ MP Cambridge University, 1926-39; member of the New Commonwealth Society.

⁴ MP Winchester, 1935-45; executive member League of Nations Union.

⁵ Another notable feature of the group was that it included 10 members, some already referred to as pro-League, who were gravely concerned with the threat posed by Nazi Germany: Adams, Atholl, Bracken, Cartland, Churchill, Crossley, Emrys-Evans, Macmillan, Nicolson and Spears.

⁶ Nicolson, letter dated 25 February, 1938, Diaries and Letters, p.326.

Nancy Astor the meeting was unanimous in favour of their not resigning. Within a fortnight, however, both were "put through the hoops" and asked whether they were 'pro-Chamberlain' or 'pro-Eden'.¹ As a result Nicolson resigned on 7 April and the Committee met on 5 May "to liquidate finally the internal difficulties that arose on Mr Eden's resignation by electing new officers".² Emrys-Evans did not stand and loyal Chamberlainites were installed into the key positions on the Committee.

On the other side of the House the Labour Party issued a manifesto condemning the foreign policy of the Government and demanding a general election. The resignation of Eden was described as "a crowning act of humiliation" and the Government was accused of "capitulating to the encroachments of the dictators".³ The party pledged uncompromising opposition to any agreement with either Fascist Italy or Nazi Germany on the basis indicated by the Prime Minister and demanded a clear declaration that Britain stood for the enforcement of treaties against "lawless forces". It also wanted an immediate assurance to Czechoslovakia that Britain and the other League Powers would fulfil their obligations to maintain her integrity and independence.

The following month the party conducted a special eight days' campaign, beginning on the 6th, to present a "Peace and Security" policy to the electors. The campaign was planned several months before but the circumstances surrounding Eden's resignation made the

¹ Nicolson, letter dated 25 February, 1938, Diaries and Letters p.333

² The Times, 5 May, 1938.

³ Ibid, 24 February, 1938.

new propaganda effort particularly relevant to recent events, and brought into sharper contrast the foreign policy of the National Government and that of the Labour Opposition. One thousand meetings were arranged in the constituencies and Attlee, Greenwood, Cripps and other leaders went on speaking tours.

Similarly the Liberal Party joined the chorus of disapproval. On Saturday, 26th, the party had arranged a demonstration, in Hyde Park, protesting against the Government's course. A few days later Sinclair, speaking at a meeting of the Council of the Liberal Party Organisation, held at Caxton Hall, paid tribute to Eden as "a great Foreign Secretary. A man to whom progressively minded men and women, irrespective of party, looked to champion the rights of freedom, democracy, international justice and peace".¹

Undoubtedly the Liberal and Labour encomiums were strained, and certainly the Conservative Member for Southend had reason to find the situation incongruous:

"the Socialists now proclaim Eden as their saviour and leader. Eden, the man whom they have been attacking for years!"²

Of course they had bitterly attacked his abandonment of sanctions and his non-intervention policy in the Spanish Civil War, but he now appeared in the light of a champion of collective security sacrificed by a reactionary Prime Minister in his eagerness to do a deal with Mussolini. Myth or not, his resignation had clearly salvaged his reputation, shaking off any responsibility he held for the conduct

¹ The Times, 3 March, 1938.

² Diary entry, 21 February, 1938, The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.145.

of affairs prior to that date, and thereby the foundation was laid for his later career. There is therefore much justice in Taylor's comment that Eden, "the man of strong words, acquired retrospectively a mythical reputation as the man who favoured strong acts and became a symbol of resistance to Chamberlain's policy".¹

On February 25, Eden was due to address a constituency meeting at Leamington, and this, as he confessed to his secretary, placed him in an "extremely difficult position" as he had to "decide what his future attitude should be". Harvey, ever ready with advice, told him to make a speech setting out his faith and then "wait and see - either there would be an immediate reaction from the country which would upset the Government or there would be no immediate reaction and in that case Eden should sit back, let the Prime Minister have his run and then attack when he was getting on the rocks".² It does appear that Eden followed this advice and at the Leamington meeting merely repeated his case for resignation. Thus it was not a fighting speech, and, as Harvey recorded, "the Cabinet are much relieved. Halifax told me it was an awfully good speech".³

Eden was absent from the country during the month of March, at his sister's villa at Cap Ferrat in the South of France. Thus he does not deserve Randolph Churchill's censure that following the Anschluss "Eden conspicuously failed to add his views to those of Churchill in protesting against this unlawful act of violence".⁴ In April he

¹ English History 1914-45, p.423.

² Harvey Papers, the entry for 22 February, 1938.

³ Ibid.

⁴ R Churchill, The Rise and Fall of Sir Anthony Eden, p.140.

arrived back and, to quote the same source, "did not attach himself to the more powerful and growing group of 60 or 70 members which Churchill had gathered round him".¹ In fact Churchill had no such following, for his group consisted of Bracken, Sandys and, on occasions, Boothby, a membership which gave the impression of being "more bitter than determined, and more out for a fight than reform".² Rather he met with a number of Conservatives, most of whom had abstained on the vote of censure of 22 February, and who shared the same opinions about the "threatening international dangers".³

Hugh Dalton's diary is very informative about the thinking of some of Eden's associates. On 7 April Dalton ran into Cartland, whom he spoke to at some length after the House had risen. Cartland said that they now had a Fuhrer in the Conservative Party; the Prime Minister was getting more and more dictatorial. It was astonishing how the bulk of the party followed him blindly, though there had been great perturbations both at the time of Eden's resignation and when Hitler took Vienna. Apparently Eden had been got rid of as a result of activities "pursued over many months" and as evidence of this Cartland related how Lord Swinton, under the influence of drink at a dinner party some time the previous year, had announced that Britain's foreign policy must be remodelled, that Vansittart must go, and that a group of four - the Prime Minister, Hoare, Simon and himself - must run foreign policy in the future. Someone had asked "what about Eden?" Swinton had replied, after some

¹ R Churchill, The Rise and Fall of Sir Anthony Eden, p.142.

² Nicolson, letter dated 9 November, 1938, Diaries and Letters, pp.377-8.

³ Eden, The Reckoning, p.32.

abuse of his colleague, "He will either have to do what we tell him or go."¹

There had been, he continued, several occasions on which Eden might have resigned, and quoted the Chamberlain/Mussolini correspondence and the Halifax visit to Berlin as examples. But in each case it would have seemed a question of personal pique. Dalton interrupted to say that the right time for him to have resigned was over Abyssinia, with which Cartland agreed, adding that it was always very difficult to judge the right time for resignation. When Eden did resign the old gentlemen in the Government and the sly people in the Conservative Whips' Office put round the story that it was partly through personal pique, and partly that poor Anthony was completely exhausted by the strain of the Foreign Office and had lost his grip and judgement. The second explanation, in particular, had "infuriated" Eden. "Now they were trying to treat him like the Duke of Windsor, and persuade the world, and particularly the Conservative Party, to forget all about him. But this would not be possible, because he had just come back from a holiday in France, by all accounts very full of fight".

Cartland thought that some 40 Conservatives had been so deeply disturbed by the Austrian affair that they would be prepared to vote against the Government in favour of some alternative combination. Now, however, the 40 had shrunk to about 20, of whom he was one. It was quite astonishing how many of his colleagues were still terrified of the Communist bogey; he agreed with Dalton that the Anti-Comintern Pact was simply an anti-British and anti-League pact with a title

¹ Harvey also recorded this occurrence, diary entry 6 February, 1938.

that would be "dust in the eyes of the simple". On the other hand, he said, "it was astonishing how few Tory MPs realised the imminent danger to this country from the continual strengthening and diplomatic successes of Germany. He supposed that some would never realise it until German aeroplanes were over London".¹

If Eden regarded Chamberlain as treacherous and was "full of fight", as were some of his associates, it is not surprising that scholars have wondered why Eden did not go on to attempt to break the Chamberlain administration. "Since he believed the policy he deplored inimical to his country's interests, was it not his duty to denounce appeasement openly as being destructive of Britain's safety? Should he not have devoted his power and prestige to organising opposition to a course which he considered disastrous?"²

It has even been argued - an opinion resting on contemporary views - that Eden could have broken the Government had he challenged it.³

The views of Duff Cooper and Hamilton Kerr have already been alluded to, but they were paralleled within the Opposition. "If Eden had been big enough", wrote Bevan at the time, "he could have ruined Chamberlain", while Gallacher claimed that a concerted move on the part of the Government's opponents, including Eden, would have finished Chamberlain in the Commons and in the country.⁴

¹ Diary entry, 7 April, 1938, Dalton Papers.

² Rock, Appeasement on Trial, p.44. Louis Broad has also argued that many Conservatives would have followed Eden's lead had he chosen to give one, and the resulting effect on British policy might have been significant. Anthony Eden: Chronicle of a Career, p.107.

³ Connell, The Office: A Study in British Foreign Policy and Its Makers, p.270.

⁴ Foot, Aneurin Bevan, p.272; Gallacher, The Chosen Few, p.54. That the concerted move was lacking Gallacher did not put down to Eden. "Only the Labour Party could have given the leadership to such a movement and the Labour Party was not prepared to take the responsibility. It decided to pursue its own course, independent of all other sections

Why then did he not attempt to break Chamberlain? Three reasons have been put forward and the first is that he was constitutionally incapable of leading a revolt. Temperamentally, it is argued, Eden was not built for opposition, as A J Cummings noted:

"He is a man of sensitive feelings. I doubt very much whether he enjoys the rough and tumble of political controversy. I am quite sure it must be utterly distasteful to such a man to be at variance with his colleagues and friends in the Cabinet."¹

There is much in the view that Eden could not by nature be combative, viewing the hurly-burly of politics with those he knew as almost ungentlemanly. Years later he recalled how he valued the comradeship between Labour and Conservative in the War Cabinet, when party politics did not matter, and subsequently found it "very difficult to get passionately worked up about people with whom I felt such affection".²

The second, and the view that Eden put forward in his memoirs, is that in the circumstances it was political folly to contemplate a collision course with Chamberlain. He admits that he received encouragement to form a new party in opposition to the Prime Minister's

4 (continued from previous page)

of progressive opinion and so the opportunity passed". Gallacher, The Chosen Few, p.54.

¹ Quoted in W R Mogg's Anthony Eden, p.76.

² Radio Times, 17 October, 1974. See also Channon's diary entry for 24 February: "Anthony Eden makes a big speech tomorrow at Leamington. There is some apprehension lest he be too bitter: but I believe not: firstly because he is a gentleman, and secondly because he is too shrewd a statesman to burn his boats irretrievably. Already there is talk of him coming back, like Sam Hoare, in the autumn." The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, pp.146-47.

foreign policy and that he actually considered the idea during the next few months, but that he rejected such a course on the grounds that it was just not "practical politics".¹ "Within the Conservative Party, I, and those who shared my views, were a minority of about thirty members out of nearly four hundred. Our number might be expected to grow if events proved us right, but the more complete the break, the more reluctant would the newly-converted be to join us".² This conviction that nothing could be accomplished without the party may well have been a cautious approach, but it was one shared and acted upon, Eden records, by Cranborne and by "the few Conservatives with whom he and I were in contact".³ Consequently, while still critical of the Government's foreign policy, Eden claimed that he avoided aggravating the split in the governing party and remained loyal. With little alternative he utilised reasoned and careful persuasion in favour of the formation of a National Government, including the Labour and Liberal Parties, to carry out his policy of rearmament and getting to grips with the approaching menace.

Apart from the view that the former Foreign Secretary had no option politically but to hide his light under a bushel, it has been suggested that Eden was "playing a subtler game, expecting the Administration to collapse and the country to rally behind him as the great national leader".⁴ In support of this view Randolph

¹ Urged on him by 30 MPs, including Lloyd George. D Bardens, Portrait of a Statesman, p.200.

² Eden, The Reckoning, p.4.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Thompson, The Anti-Appeasers, p.148.

Churchill's biography of Eden is adduced as evidence, even though the writer admits that it is a "hostile and frequently unreliable study". According to Randolph, Eden sought the advice of Stanley Baldwin who said that "if his resignation should create a political crisis involving Chamberlain's position and were he consulted by the king as to whom he should invite to form a Government, he would recommend Eden. Baldwin and Eden saw each other frequently at this period and went so far as to draw up a list of names for an alternative Government".¹ Further proof is drawn from Vansittart who, when he advised Eden to wait and resign on a bigger issue, recalled him defending his decision by saying: "They will not be able to stand it".²

The argument that the ex-Foreign Secretary was calculating that the Government would collapse as a result of his resignation and that he would be called upon to become Prime Minister is interesting but hardly convincing. However much Eden would have liked this to happen he must have known that governments do not fall - outside a general election - without being pushed, something which he conspicuously failed to do at the time of his resignation. And why, if this view is accepted, within days of the resignation, when it must have been apparent to Eden that the Government far from "not being able to stand it" had weathered the storm successfully, with his help, did he not attempt to make the best of a miscalculation and break it then? No, his conduct becomes quite inexplicable by such an interpretation. The simplest explanation of Eden's conduct

¹ The Rise and Fall of Sir Anthony Eden, p.149.

² I Colvin, Vansittart, p.193.

is that he did not want - nor did he have it in his nature - to try to break the Government. Only this can account for the mildness of his resignation speech when he "proved once again how much there was to be said on the other side of the question".¹ "My judgement may well be wrong . . . my right honourable friend the Prime Minister and my colleagues take a different view. They believe in their policy, and they believe in their method, and they may be right . . . It may even be that my resignation will facilitate the course of these negotiations. If so, nobody will be more pleased than I."² And how else can we explain his failure to continue his "arguments from a back bench in the House of Commons during the next few weeks" but deciding to go abroad to his sister's villa in France?³ This was hardly at the centre of affairs, anxiously awaiting the King's commission. Neither, by any stretch of the imagination, were his tactics, upon his return to the Commons, three months after his resignation, threatening to the Government.

What seems more likely, therefore, is that Eden - bearing in mind earlier divergencies - had come to the conclusion, in the light of the latest difference, that of the timing and conditions for talks with Italy, that he could no longer continue to work with Chamberlain. Therefore, he had decided to resign, not with the intention of leading a full-blooded attack on the administration - he could hardly do that on such an issue - but to await either Ministers' acceptance in the light of events, of his point of view (which he would remind them of

¹ Aneurin Bevan, p.272.

² House of Commons Debates, 21 February, 1938, Cols.47-8.

³ The Reckoning, p.3.

from time to time) or, should they blindly continue their course and ignore realities, the eventual break-up of the Government. Either way Eden's own prestige would be enhanced and his return to power, with a freer hand, seemingly inevitable. Above all there was the added possibility that he might emerge as the new Prime Minister, assuming Chamberlain, whom he had no wish to serve under again, would be so discredited by his foreign policy as to be unable to continue in that office.

Eden was therefore keeping his options open, and was intent, as Harvey had advised, on sitting back and letting the Prime Minister "have his run". In a significant passage from his memoirs he recorded that the Cabinet "with some doubters, had taken its decision and now events must speak. When the attempt to negotiate with Mussolini and Hitler failed to produce results of value would be the moment to point the moral and try to influence British policy".¹ This impression of waiting upon events to prove his diagnosis correct is reinforced by the conversation he had with the Prime Minister after his return to the Commons, when he was invited by Chamberlain to rejoin the Government. Eden declined on the grounds that he "could not yet discover the improvement in Anglo-Italian relations which he had mentioned. Chamberlain assured me that this was taking place and so I added: 'Well, perhaps we had better see first how all this works out. If the future is as good as you believe, we can, if you wish, have a talk again.'"² Further support can be adduced from passages in Harvey's diaries. Harvey recorded

¹ The Reckoning, p.3.

² Ibid, p.17.

a conversation with Eden in June, in which the ex-Foreign Secretary had decided not to intervene in a forthcoming debate over Spain. Harvey's comment "I said I was sure he was right: events were passing out so exactly as he (Eden) foresaw that it was more dignified to be silent"; and his earlier advice - following Swinton's resignation the previous month - "not to speak yet . . . events seem to be moving fast in his favour and it is better that he should not appear to seek to precipitate them. He can afford to sit back", seem to refute any other interpretation.¹

Seen in the light of waiting upon events the jigsaw of the mild resignation speech, the retreat to France, and the unimpeachable conduct afterwards, including the avoidance of Churchill, takes shape. Eden, the true Conservative, was working on the belief that time - coupled with reasonably polite pressure within the party - would necessitate the amending, if not the reversing, of Chamberlain's foreign policy and the reconstruction of the Government with himself included, hopefully as head of a truly national government. Although he occasionally muttered about forming a new party or co-operating with Labour these were temporary inconsistencies, for Eden had no real desire - indeed he did not have it in him - to rock the boat.² Rather Chamberlain would do it for him so that Eden, with his striking national image as a result of his detachment from

¹ Diary entries, June 20 and May 20, 1938.

² Aneurin Bevan, p.273. Some time later Bevan taunted Eden with his tameness. "The honourable Member for Ebbw Vale", said Eden, "will perhaps forgive me if I do not follow him in the definition of what he is pleased to call 'yes men'. I do not know that I should be accepted as an unexceptionable authority on that subject". Bevan retorted: "The right honourable Gentleman is not a 'yes man', but he still wears the same tie." Ibid, pp.272-3.

political conflict, his depressed areas tours and general speeches on topics such as 'Democracy and Young England', could then step in and steer Great Britain out of the dangerous waters into which the previous administration had taken her.¹

This makes purely academic the view that Eden could have overthrown the Government, as certain observers considered. The Government, Eden hoped, would fall anyway, and the Conservative Party - minus Chamberlain and his chief lieutenants - would only willingly place itself into his hands if he kept them clean. Such a non-Brutus role was, as we have seen, in line with his character as well as the practical politics angle. A successful revolt, as Eden clearly saw, would have required a much more substantial number of rebels than the 32 that abstained, considering the Government's majority was in excess of 200. Perhaps if Eden had presented a stronger case for resignation and then made an outright attack on the Government the numbers of his supporters would have grown, but that is not to say that they would have been sufficient to overthrow it. In any case the path of revolt was fraught with danger and possible failure for Eden, his associates, and the party he hoped to lead, and it was a path he never trod, neither in 1938 nor at any subsequent time.

It is necessary to add that rumours did circulate of a plot, in which Eden was supposedly involved, to overthrow the Government. While he was holidaying in France, in late March, it began to be rumoured that a strong and influential body of opinion in the Conservative Party, convinced that Chamberlain had lost grip of the

¹ Nicolson, diary entry 11 April, 1938, Diaries and Letters, p.334. Eden, according to Thomas, was to make speeches indicating he stood for postwar England against the old men.

international situation, was pressing for his resignation. A new coalition government would then be formed with Churchill as Prime Minister and Eden as Foreign Secretary and both the Opposition Parties strongly represented in the Cabinet. It was "calculated that there would be so large a breakaway from Chamberlain in the Tory Party that this breakaway plus Labour plus Liberal would command a majority in the House of Commons. It was said that five Cabinet Ministers - Hore-Belisha, Morrison, O Stanley, Ormsby-Gore and Elliot - were prepared to resign from the present Government and join such a new one". Apparently Attlee "at the beginning had been not unfavourable to the idea. Later he had changed his mind. Greenwood had been much interested and Morrison even more so. Such a Government would have sought allies everywhere and made a definite commitment to Czechoslovakia. It would have actively explored the possibility of bringing the Russians right into a scheme of mutual guarantees. But the idea died away within a few days. By the following Monday there was nothing left of it."¹

According to the Daily Herald the "moving spirit" amongst the Conservatives was Nicolson, but the affair is not even mentioned in his Diaries and Letters.² Channon appears to have been convinced of the genuineness of the plot. His diary entry for the 17 March reads:

"The House of Commons is humming with intrigue today, and the so-called "Insurgents" are rushing about, very over-excited. They want to bring back Eden and their

¹ Dalton, diary entry, 8 April, 1938. Dalton Papers.

² Daily Herald, 18 March, 1938.

Shadow Cabinet is alleged to include Lloyd George, Winston and Eden. Shakes Morrison and Leslie Belisha are said to be concerned in this wild scheme, but I think they are innocent."¹

It is likely that the affair was largely rumour, as on a previous occasion in 1936 when Chamberlain, Churchill, Croft and Grigg had met at Winterton's home, although Cartland's comment to Dalton that 40 Conservatives had been prepared to vote against the Government in favour of an alternative combination gives some slight credence to parts of it.

Having determined upon what Asquith would have termed 'wait and see' the question that Eden now had to face was what his tactics were to be while the Government "stagger along more and more discredited, politics getting much more bitter, losing bye-elections and all support from the 'floating-vote', and further resignations later".² It was here that Baldwin's advice seems to have been paramount. When or why Eden sought the advice of his former leader is unclear, but according to Thomas he was in constant consultation with Baldwin while he was in the South of France.³ The latter favoured Eden's "staying outside (the Cabinet) and occupying his time by studying the depressed areas and unemployment". His role would be to constitute himself the leader and spokesman of the floating vote which the

¹ Diary entry, 17 March. The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, pp.151-2. Channon listed the insurgents as: Churchill, Sandys, Nicholson, Gunston, Tree, Emrys-Evans, Spears, Cazalet, Macnamara, Amery, Nicolson, Ropner, Cartland, Atholl, Adams, Boothby and Bracken.

² Harvey, summary of Eden's views, entry for 27 February, 1938.

³ Nicolson, diary entry 11 April, 1938, Diaries and Letters, p.334.

Government had now lost and thus become "an alternative head of the National Government for all those, and they were in a majority, who did not want the Prime Minister's present Conservative trend any more than a Labour Government". He was to make speeches on the theme of "moral and material rearmament", higher and broader speeches than the Prime Minister made, and the study of industrial conditions would all be part of this campaign. Eden "need not, and perhaps better not make any purely foreign affairs speeches at all at present".¹

The relationship with Baldwin was doubly important, as the earlier quotation from Randolph Churchill implied. Eden apparently realised the "immense importance of S.B.'s approval and is obviously thankful to have it . . . S.B. will be essential for the 'switch-over', however it may come from Neville to A.E."² Eden's ex-secretary, Harvey, also noted the significance of Baldwin's support:

"The difficulty of course that all see is how A.E. is to succeed N.C. It is impossible to foresee how circumstances will fall out but I feel sure S.B. will play a vital part in securing the succession. A.E. will have difficulty with his own party unless S.B. weighs in."³

Clearly Eden and his associates were expecting Baldwin, who presumably had committed himself, to recommend to the king that the successor to Chamberlain, once his ministry broke up, should be the ex-Foreign Secretary.

¹ Harvey, diary entry, 22 April, 1938.

² Ibid.

³ Harvey, diary entry 1 June, 1938.

Apparently as the year 1938 advanced Eden's attitude hardened and he became determined never to "come to terms with Chamberlain or allow the latter to profit by his return to the Cabinet. He regards Chamberlain as having been definitely treacherous".¹ He was also becoming more and more reconciled "to the idea of Number 10". Harvey commented that "he feels it inevitable now. What he would have liked best, I think, would be to remain at the Foreign Office with a Prime Minister he could work with".² The conviction of the coming dissolution of the Government was fully shared by Eden's closest colleagues. Following the resignation of Lord Swinton in May, Thomas thought "the rot" would "go very fast now", and by the next month he had the "firm impression that the Government was beginning to break up".³

In retrospect, Eden's resignation, instead of being the most important sitting of the House of Commons in recent years, passed off relatively quietly. Nevertheless, the departure of the Foreign Secretary was a significant marker in the growth of opposition to the Government's foreign policy. Its importance lies in the fact that over 30 Conservative MPs abstained from voting on a motion of no confidence, the first real breach in the Government's majority. Dissenters there had been before, as over the pace of rearmament, but they had not taken their opposition to such lengths. The resulting split in the Conservative party was vital. Divisions became far more acute than they had been since 1922: the battle over appeasement being more important than dissension over India.

¹ Nicolson, diary entry 11 April, 1938, Diaries and Letters, p.334.

² Harvey, diary entry 22 April, 1938.

³ Ibid, entries for 16 May and 1 June, 1938.

C H A P T E R V ITHE CZECH CRISIS OF 1938

The origin and development of the Czech crisis are so well known and so thoroughly traced as to preclude any need for repetition here, except in general outline. Despite Germany's peaceful assurances to Czechoslovakia on the occasion of the Anschluss, it became increasingly clear that the German Government intended to force a settlement of the Sudeten question. Encouraged by Hitler, the Sudeten German leader, Henlein, issued a programme of demands which included full autonomy for the German areas and the revision of Czechoslovakia's foreign policy. With the tension increasing, the attitude of the British Government was a vital question. Already Chamberlain had been asked to give some pledge of support for Czechoslovakia, should her independence be threatened, but he had refused. When the National Council of Labour had proposed that the peace-loving countries, particularly Britain, France and Russia, should unite in a common stand against aggression, the Prime Minister had replied that this would only divide Europe into two opposing blocks, and so far from contributing to peace, "would inevitably plunge us into war". Rather, every possible step should be taken by Britain and France to help remove the causes of friction in Europe, including encouraging the Czech Government to urgently seek a settlement of questions affecting the position of the German minority. In his "off the record" remarks to journalists on 10 May, Chamberlain set out his position in more detail. Britain and France would not fight for Czechoslovakia in its present boundaries, and

that he looked forward to a peaceful solution, followed by a four-power pact to preserve the peace of Europe; the fourth power to be Italy, to the exclusion of Russia.

Certain members of the Labour party had kept an eye on Hitler's ambitions regarding Czechoslovakia for several years before he made his moves to destroy that nation. In March, 1936, for instance, Phillips Price had drawn attention to the German minority in the one democratic republic which remained in the sea of dictatorships, and had suggested that the Sudetens "might easily become the object of attention of the Gentlemen in Berlin".¹ Once Austria had been incorporated into Germany, Labour immediately recognised that this raised the question of the German-speaking minority in the western part of Czechoslovakia, and when Austria was discussed in the Commons on 24 March the party pressed Chamberlain to give a prior guarantee of involvement in a war occasioned by some incursion upon the integrity or independence of Czechoslovakia. The Prime Minister turned this down flat, as he did their proposal that the peace-loving nations should unite to withstand the aggressor.

When on 24 April, at Carlsbad, Henlein demanded not merely local autonomy but a reorganisation of the Czech state into a system of five or six national groupings, Labour objected that it would put key positions in Nazi hands and, in effect, destroy Czechoslovak power. Its view was that not only Czech independence but Britain's vital interests were concerned. A statement issued shortly afterwards emphasized that, should there be war, it was essential that Germany be compelled to fight on two fronts, and Czechoslovakia with its

¹ House of Commons Debates, 1936, Col.1510.

fortified mountain barrier was of immense strategic importance for an eastern front.¹

The virtually unanimous conclusion drawn from the May crisis by Labour, including its militant Left, was that the brave stand taken by the Czechs, with British, French and Russian backing, had called Hitler's bluff for the first time. Greenwood, whose criticism of Hitler and Mussolini was becoming the most outspoken in the party declared:

"Hitler has said that he accepts the independence and integrity of Czechoslovakia. I don't believe a word of it. If it suited his cards to march his troops there I do not see how this country could keep out of it."²

At the same time Cripps, in a speech that indicated that the Left's ire against Fascism was now as great as any other wing of the party, said that he was "convinced that if the French stand firm today the British people will stand with them, whatever Chamberlain may say or threaten".³

Nevertheless, the party was not reckless. While supporting to the hilt the firmness that the Powers had shown towards supposed German aggressiveness, the Daily Herald warned that if crises were to be avoided, real grievances must be removed.⁴ Attlee, for example, recorded his hope that Lord Runciman might solve the Czech problem by agreement.⁵ This, of course, reflected Labour's traditional

¹ Labour's pamphlet Hitler's Threat to Czech Democracy, June, 1938.

² Daily Herald, 23 May, 1938.

³ Ibid, 21 May. The Left's attitude throughout the Czech crisis is admirably illustrated by a letter of Paul Goulding to the New Statesman on 17 September: "I am alarmed to find that I seem to be almost the only member of the Left-wing in England who does not contemplate a war with Germany, in defence of Czechoslovakia with crusading zeal."

⁴ Daily Herald, 24 May, 1938.

programme towards Germany but there was more to it than that. The basic reason why Labour restrained its truculence was from sensitivity to Government allegations that the party was out to provoke war. In June, for example, Oliver Stanley, the President of the Board of Trade, asserted that to cast a vote for Labour was to vote for war, and that had Labour been in power for the last three years, Britain would have been involved in three wars.¹ Although the use made of the party's stand was somewhat unscrupulous, but within the rules of party warfare, Labour could not complain. Until quite recently Labour had deliberately misconstrued the Government's rearmament policy on the same lines.

The summer months saw German pressure on Czechoslovakia again stepped up, with corresponding danger of a general European war. The parliamentary party, convinced that Hitler was using the Sudetens to get control of the entire country, gave steady support to the threatened people. In July James Walker, MP for Motherwell, was sent as one of the fraternal delegates to the Czech Socialist conference to demonstrate Labour's sympathy. And the same month Labour Members made clear their fears that Lord Runciman, who had been sent to Prague to mediate, might be tempted to sacrifice the future for the sake of temporary relief.²

Labour's leaders became aware by late August that the Germans were massing armed forces close to the Czech frontier; early in

5 (from previous page)

Daily Herald, 1 September, 1938.

¹ The Times, 13 June, 1938.

² House of Commons Debates, 26 July, 1938, Cols.2969-70.

September they drafted a declaration to place before the Trades Union Congress. The result, Labour and the International Situation, declared that the British Government must leave no doubt in the mind of the German Government that it will unite with the French and Soviet Governments to resist any attack upon Czechoslovakia"; the Labour movement also asked that Parliament be immediately summoned. The TUC accepted this statement, following George Hicks' explanation, which included a plea that the Czech Ministers had gone to the limit of their powers in accommodating the Sudeten demands, and to go further - as the British Government appeared to want - would endanger their country's independence.

On the 13th Chamberlain decided upon the unusual step of a personal appeal to Hitler. Labour, willing to try any honourable means of avoiding war, welcomed this dramatic move, and Attlee and Greenwood warmly approved, but warned the Prime Minister against any sacrifice of Czechoslovakia's integrity. On the 17th the Prime Minister made known the results of his Berchtesgaden meeting to a delegation from the National Council of Labour, composed of Dalton, Morrison and Citrine. They immediately informed him they were hostile to severing territory from Czechoslovakia and handing it over to Germany, and they thought that a joint intimation by Britain, France and Russia, which was proposed in their declaration, would deter Hitler. Chamberlain, however, was convinced that unless a solution was found to the problem "we should be faced with a movement into Czechoslovakia"; either the principle of self-determination was accepted or the alternative was war. Dalton interrupted to point

out that their argument had been directed to preventing war: a warning should be given, and Hitler's dangerous illusion, that if there was a war Britain would not be in, destroyed. In reply, Chamberlain proceeded to undermine the Labour case by declaring that neither France nor Russia were prepared to fight and, as far as Britain was concerned, this was not the moment to accept a challenge. Dalton, insistent, declared that to give way to Hitler might mean that he would think it worthwhile to try something else, and Britain might then find herself in an even weaker position. However, Chamberlain countered by saying that the choice was between a war today as a certainty as against a possible war in years to come. The meeting ended when Citrine informed the Prime Minister that he had put them in a very embarrassing position. The Labour leaders would still be wanting to stand up to Hitler without knowing the true facts of the situation, which, as the meeting has been in confidence, they could not reveal in full.¹

Despite the shock of the deputation, Labour resolution held, and was even strengthened by rumours of the Anglo-French plan. On the 18th Attlee addressed a meeting at Limehouse Town Hall, in his own constituency. He expressed deep sympathy with the Czechs but insisted it was a wider question than just Czechoslovakia. "The question was how long could the world live under a militarist menace, and how, sooner or later, would a war break out?" It is

¹ Summary of a record of that meeting on the 17th of September, found in the Cabinet records. In effect, against the carefully constructed case of Chamberlain, some of it highly contentious in retrospect, the resolution of the Labour leaders took a nasty setback. This impression is not communicated in their own accounts of what happened. Dalton, Fateful Years, pp.176-183. Citrine, Men and Work, pp.361-66.

interesting to note that towards the end of the speech a crowd of about 500 people assembled outside the hall and shouted in unison "We want peace; Attlee wants war".¹

The following day after definite news of the Anglo-French plan and the possible dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, Labour held a protest meeting in Trafalgar Square, and followed this up by publicly declaring that any planned partition, based upon the threat of German military action, was "a shameful betrayal of a peaceful and democratic people and constitutes a dangerous precedent for the future".² Churchill was so impressed by the declaration that he phoned Attlee and said "Your declaration does honour to the British nation".³ Dalton later heard that this had been an attempted overture for some form of concerted action and that Churchill "was huffed" that Attlee did not make a warmer response. Nevertheless, Dalton too shared the opinion that any concerted action between Labour and other critics of the Government was less useful at this stage than outwardly separate action. It would not, he felt, strengthen any appeal of the dissident Conservatives, Liberals or Labourites if they joined together in opposition to Chamberlain's Czech policy. By contrast Alexander, more than any Labour leader, was itching for more contacts with other critics of the government, so much so that Dalton felt bound to warn him of the danger of upsetting a large number of Labour Members.⁴

¹ Daily Herald, September 19, 1938.

² Labour Party Conference Report, 1939, p.15.

³ Dalton Papers, 20 September, 1938.

⁴ Ibid.

As part of this 'separate action' Attlee and Greenwood visited Chamberlain on 21st and told him that the Anglo-French Plan was "an absolute surrender" and one of the "biggest disasters in British history".¹ This sharper tone than before was evidence of Labour's decision to turn on the heat, and to force the Government to "stand fast for peace and freedom". To maximise this pressure another deputation, including Dalton, Morrison, Alexander and Citrine to represent the National Council of Labour, was arranged the same day. As the Prime Minister was indisposed, Halifax met them at the Foreign Office. They told him of their indignation and shame at the pass to which this country had come; refuted the earlier suggestion that France and Russia were unwilling to go to the assistance of the Czechs, and added they were not nervous about the future if a determined stand were made now against Germany. From their own sources of information they had reason to believe that Hitler's internal position was by no means strong, and that the alleged strength of German armaments was exaggerated. Although Halifax attempted to reassure them that the Government was taking all these matters into consideration, the deputation was deeply dissatisfied.² At one point, according to Dalton, one of the deputation rose from his chair and said: "Lord Halifax, listening to you, we are ashamed to be Britishers".³

On 22 September Chamberlain flew to Godesberg to implement the Anglo-French plan, while in Britain a Labour national protest campaign of some 2,500 meetings took place. As Labour had warned,

¹ Dalton Papers, 21 September, 1938.

² Cabinet Records. Deputation from the National Council of Labour, 21 September, 1938.

³ Dalton Papers, 21 September, 1938.

Hitler made new demands including the immediate surrender of the German areas and the non-destruction of military installations. The Czechs refused, and, at last, Britain and France conferred with Russia, which pleased Labour as a return to something like collective action. Attlee promised full support from his party and urged the government to give a strong lead.¹ A climax appeared in sight. The fleet was mobilized; trenches were dug in Hyde Park, and gas masks made available, while Hitler continued to threaten force unless the Sudetenland transfer was completed by 1 October.²

Ministerial and public opinion appeared to be stiffening. Labour attempted to increase that resolution by means of a statement of the party position which was to be forwarded to the Prime Minister and subsequently published in the press. Dalton drafted the statement but Attlee subsequently added a few words. In short, it called on the British Government to leave no doubt in the mind of the German Government that it would unite with the French and Soviet Governments to resist any attack on Czechoslovakia. "Whatever the risks involved, Great Britain must make its stand against aggression."³ Simultaneously Fred Bellenger, on his own initiative, sent a letter to The Times, which declared that he was "prepared to advocate, both in Parliament and the country, resistance by all means at our disposal to German designs to alter the map of

¹ Daily Herald, September 26, 1938.

² Morrison had written to the Prime Minister on 24th to urge the Government to give instructions for the London anti-aircraft defences to be made ready and put into position as a precautionary measure. Such action had already been taken in Berlin. Cabinet Papers, 24 September, 1938.

³ Daily Herald, 27 September, 1938.

Europe to suit the German Government's lust for world hegemony. It will mean great sacrifices for all classes, and even the holding in abeyance of Labour's cherished ambitions, but the threat to democracy is so great that it is incumbent on us to take up the challenge - or perish."¹

Meanwhile, all Labour meetings over the weekend, 24-25, had been converted into protest forums and a great demonstration was held in the Empress Hall, Earls Court on Monday 26th. That the Labour Party was ready to make a stand against aggressive action on the part of Germany, was clearly indicated by Attlee and Dalton, amongst others, to the demonstration. "You have read the appalling document", said Attlee of the Godesberg memorandum, "of course the Czechs cannot accept it." Believing that a strong and united stand by France, Russia and Britain in support of Czechoslovakia would prevent war, he was nevertheless ready to accept the alternative. "If war should come - which God forbid - we must meet it with the courage which our people have displayed in the past. I do not believe our cause can be beaten because it is the cause of humanity. I would urge you all in these dark days to be firm in your resistance to wrong and oppression."²

It is possible, as two newspapers implied, that the numbers attending the demonstration were poor: only 5,000 according to the Manchester Guardian, and 6,000 according to The Times, although the Daily Herald generously estimated 10,000. When linked with the Limehouse meeting on 18 September, the basic weakness of Labour's whole agitation against appeasement during September is revealed -

¹ The Times, 27 September, 1938.

² The Times, 27 September, 1938.

and this is also true of that of the Liberal Party and the Conservative dissidents - that no great mass of the unhappy and bewildered British population rallied decisively behind their leadership. Rather the reverse was true: most people, many of whom were ill-informed on foreign affairs, wanted to think that Chamberlain's conciliatory action towards Germany would avert war. "The Prime Minister's policy up to and including Munich", W W Hadley noted, "was unquestionably approved by the great majority of his countrymen."¹

Nevertheless, the parliamentary party supported its leaders' stand. On the 26th the party, with only half-a-dozen pacifist dissentients - Dalton spotted Lansbury, Leach, McGhee and Wilson - passed a resolution approving everything done by the leadership since Parliament had adjourned for the summer recess.² It follows that throughout the same period the pacifists had steadfastly opposed the leadership's course, although they saw their endeavours as attempts to stave off the possibility of war. On 9 September Lansbury had telegraphed an appeal to Hitler, urging him to invite the leading statesmen of Europe to meet in conference and face to face discuss not merely how to avoid war, but to get rid of the conditions which made it possible:

"I have travelled the whole world seeking peace, urgently trying to find a statesman who would give a new lead. You are speaking to the world on Monday . . . I beg you give this appeal your immediate and favourable consideration. These

¹ Munich: Before and After, p.110.

² The Fateful Years, p.198.

days are too serious and too dangerous for delay. Call European statesmen to the Council Chamber. Throw out a new challenge. Bid them join you in giving up reliance upon armaments, violence and war, and join together in a mighty effort to build international relationships, on the basis of co-operation, common sense and truth.

'Blessed are the peacemakers' - May you be one."¹

Lansbury, encouraged by his colleagues, sent telegrams to other heads of state urging conciliation. One of these was to Benes, the Czech President, advising him to accept Hitler's Godesberg demands on the grounds "the world's peace may now depend upon your accepting further sacrifices and giving way before the further demands . . . This is the sacrifice Christ made, an unconditional sacrifice . . . To accept the German terms now may be the greatest, strongest act possible to statesmanship, releasing new spiritual forces . . . Friendship to aggressors, without limit, is the way of Christ."²

The pacifists also made two appeals to the Prime Minister; one on the 22nd and the other on the 27th, shortly before Chamberlain flew to Munich. The first had been issued by the Peace Pledge Union and taken to Downing Street by Salter, Lansbury and four others. This reaffirmed their conviction that nothing could justify a resort to war, and reiterated the pacifist panacea of a conference to revise existing treaties.³ The later statement was made public on

¹ Lansbury Papers. In fact Hitler's speech on the 12th was "brutal, bombastic, and dripping with venom against the Czech state". W L Shirer, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, p.469.

² Found in the Lansbury Papers and dated 26 September.

³ The Times, 23 September, 1938.

the 27th and represented the Parliamentary Pacifist Group, the Peace Pledge Union, the Society of Friends and the Independent Labour Party, and said that deep causes lay behind the war tension, and, should conflict arise over Czechoslovakia, that country would provide "only the incidental occasion for it", like Belgium in 1914. It went on:

"The danger of war arises from the injustice of the treaties which concluded the last war and the imperialist economic rivalries which they embodied . . .

The threat of war will continue until world supplies are made available to all peoples on a basis of co-operation and social justice.

By its imperialism during recent years the British Government has aggravated the evils of world distribution, and thereby has a heavy responsibility for the present crisis.

We repudiate, therefore, all appeals to the people to support a war which would in fact maintain and extend imperialist possessions and interests whatever the incidental occasion.

For the democratic countries which resort to war the immediate result would be the destruction of the liberties of the people and the imposition of totalitarian regimes.

If war comes, it will be our duty to resist and organise such opposition as will hasten the end of the war . . . by the building of a new world order based on fellowship and justice."¹

¹ The Times, 28 September, 1938.

Among its signatories were Maxton and Stephen of the ILP, and McGhee, Salter and Wilson of the Labour Party.

Despite the activities of a handful of pacifists, Labour had stood firm and consistent during the September days, ready to range itself behind the Government should Germany take aggressive action. It favoured a united stand by France, Russia and Britain to deter Germany, but should the deterrent have failed Labour could not but have gone to war in defence of Czechoslovak integrity. In retrospect, it seems clear that the bulk of Labour Members would not have sacrificed the Czech nation in the name of appeasement as did Chamberlain. Symptomatic of this was Inskip's remark to the Cabinet on 31 October of the "importance of the Government spokesmen in the forthcoming debates not taking up a position which might appear to associate the Government with the attitude of the Labour Party, which was now more bellicose than that of any other party".¹

Like the Labour Members, the majority of Liberal MPs stood firm over Czechoslovakia. The occasion for Chamberlain's announcement of Runciman's mission, on 26 July, revealed Sinclair setting out his party's attitude. While welcoming the appointment of Runciman "in an advisory capacity", he emphasized the importance of supporting Czechoslovakia against excessive demands. It seemed evident to him that Germany was considering another military coup. If she were left in any doubt as to Britain's determination to resist aggression against Czechoslovakia, the Government would bear a heavy responsibility for the resulting catastrophe. Now was the time, Sinclair concluded for Britain to "stand firm for our principles and for our ideals of

¹ Cabinet Minutes, 1938.

peace, freedom, justice and international good faith".¹

Sinclair's firm stand was supported by the intervention of Mander and Richard Acland. Mander pressed a policy of collective security upon the Government. "A little bit of it" arose suddenly on 21 May, he observed, but the Government should not rest content with that casual alignment of forces. It should be thought out, planned, organised, so that the whole world would know exactly where everybody stood and what would happen to an aggressor. If the extreme demands of the Sudeten Germans were met, a precedent would be set which must inevitably be followed by similar agitation and propaganda by Germans in Switzerland, Denmark, France, Poland and even in Brazil. Acland's major plea was that the least Britain could do was to stand firm and quit nagging the French to follow a course obviously detrimental to their own safety.²

As Parliament recessed soon after the Runciman debate, and most MPs disappeared from London, the Liberal leaders remained in close contact with the situation. Sinclair later said, in his speech during the Munich Debate, that he had been in close and frequent consultation with men of all parties throughout the crisis, including "enthusiastic supporters of the Government and with supporters of the Government who are not so enthusiastic". He also paid tribute to the Prime Minister "for the frankness and courtesy with which he has discussed these issues during the recent crisis with those of us who do not belong to his party".³

¹ House of Commons Debates, 26 July, 1938, Col.1145.

² Ibid, Cols.1163-1178.

³ Ibid, 3 October, 1938, Col.69.

Unfortunately, and in contrast to Labour, and the Conservative dissidents, there is no record of the Liberal discussions with the Government.

From the Samuel Papers we have evidence that on September 11, with the deepening of the crisis, Liberal MPs were recalled to London for consultations with the peers and officers of the party. Following Hitler's speech on the 12th, in which he declared that "if these tortured creatures do not receive justice and help, they can get both with us", the party met to decide whether to issue a statement of policy and if so in what form. They met at the Liberal Central Office in the morning and at Lord Rea's house in the afternoon.

David Lloyd George was strongly in favour of a statement of policy being issued. He was of the opinion that neither the British nor the French Governments appeared willing to take effective action and Hitler, well aware of this, was behaving aggressively as a result. If Chamberlain had earlier made it clear beyond doubt where Britain would stand in the event of an aggression the position would never have reached its present phase. Pressure should be applied, he felt, to persuade the British Government to eradicate any misapprehension on Hitler's part. This argument eventually won the day but partly on the grounds that as Labour had already stated its position Liberals should certainly do the same.¹ It was subsequently decided to send the following letter to the Prime Minister over the signatures of Sinclair and Crewe, the leader of the Liberal peers, and to publish it afterwards:

"Dear Prime Minister,

Herr Hitler's speech at Nuremberg still left hopes

¹ Samuel Papers, note of a meeting held on 13 September, 1938.

that the German minority question in Czechoslovakia might still be settled by negotiations. On the other hand, it did not appear to exclude the use of force by Germany should it be found impossible to satisfy Herr Hitler's unspecified but apparently unlimited demands on behalf of the Sudeten Germans. In such circumstances, nothing is more likely to lead to war than any doubt in the mind of the German rulers as to where Great Britain stands.

We are therefore anxious to assure His Majesty's Government that we will wholeheartedly support any further steps they may take to make it clear beyond doubt to the world that an unprovoked attack upon Czechoslovakia cannot be regarded with indifference by Great Britain, and that if France were to be involved in hostilities consequent upon such an attack this country would at once stand firmly in arms by her side."¹

The letter was sent to Chamberlain at midday on the 14th. Sinclair made arrangements for its publication but received an intimation of the Prime Minister's proposed visit to Hitler, with the suggestion that perhaps that might affect their decision on the matter of publication. After consulting his colleagues Sinclair decided it would be inopportune to publish, and it never was.²

The Liberal leaders continued to follow the crisis closely, and when news of the Anglo-French terms became unofficially known,

¹ Samuel, Memoirs, pp.266-67.

² John Bowle, Viscount Samuel, p.368.

the Council of the Liberal Party Organization met at the National Liberal Club to consider them. Sinclair used the occasion to deliver a devastating attack on Chamberlain's policy. He spoke of Czechoslovakia, in the centre of Europe, as an outpost of freedom and democracy, but overshadowed by the armed might of Germany. Round its fringes lay large German-speaking populations which, "we are told", suffered intolerable injustice. "Since when?" Talk of justice and self-determination was worthless for "we have merely submitted to Herr Hitler's demands." The situation, in fact, was so grave Parliament ought to be summoned.

"We have witnessed one retreat after another in the face of aggressive dictatorships . . . In the light of these past events the results of the Berchtesgaden meeting bears all the resemblances of a hurried, disorderly and humiliating rout.

It is not too late for firmness. There is great need of it. We are told that Hitler only wants to settle German problems. Then what are his forces doing in Spain? In a recent debate in the House of Commons I gave reasons for believing that Germany and Italy were pursuing a definite policy in co-operation aiming at world empire.

That can only be stopped if those nations which believe in peace and freedom and justice and order stand firmly together, and if they make it clear to the people in those great countries that there is no enmity in our hearts against them, but that if they use force and violence we will resist them."¹

¹ Liberal Magazine, October, 1938.

Feeling at the meeting was high and so the Council, with only one dissentient, adopted the following resolution:

'The Liberal Party condemns the Government for initiating, without consulting Parliament, yet another surrender to force, in reversal of the policy proclaimed by the Government two weeks ago, at a time when a firm lead could have preserved peace with honour. It records its view that the Government's proposals, in so far as they correspond to Press reports, cannot prove workable, are unlikely to preserve peace, and will confront Europe in general, and this country in particular, with ever increasing demands from Hitler, backed in each case by ever-increasing force. No lasting solution of the Czech problem can be obtained in isolation. It should be part of a general European settlement, an essential element in which would be the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Spain forthwith. The Liberal Party demands the immediate reassembly of Parliament.'¹

The Anglo-French plan and the subsequent Godesberg demands led the Liberals, like Labour, to launch a campaign to arouse sympathy for the Czechs and to force the Government to strengthen its hand. A mass meeting of members of the Liberal Party was called in Hyde Park on Sunday 25th. The purpose was announced as a protest against "the surrender of the Czechs to the demands of Hitler".² At the demonstration a resolution - similar to the Council's - urging the Government to make a firm stand against German aggression and

¹ Viscount Samuel, p.370.

² The Times, 23 September, 1938.

demanding the immediate recall of Parliament, was carried. Arrangements had been made for a deputation to visit Downing Street to present the resolution to the Prime Minister after the mass meeting.

The September days also witnessed a change of attitude on the part of David Lloyd George. He had viewed the Sudeten-German crisis at first with some indifference. He had little sympathy with the way in which the Czechs had insisted in 1919 on incorporating into Czechoslovakia the Sudeten Germans, and subsequently denying them any real form of local autonomy. Furthermore he intensely disliked Benes, whom he once dubbed "that little French jackal".¹ When Hitler began pushing his demands to the verge of unleashing an European war, Lloyd George finally made up his mind about Hitler.

The change of front is best indicated by a speech he delivered on 26 October, at a luncheon of the London Free Church Ministers, held in the City Temple. It was broadcast to America. Hitler, he said, was not out to redress grievances. "What he wanted was to get rid of a democratic and a free country which was contiguous to his own, where the principles of liberty, equality and justice were freely administered . . . What he wanted was not a redress of grievances but the wiping out of that small democratic State." Then he turned on the Government and declared "we handed over a little democratic state in Central Europe . . . we handed it over wrapped in the Union Jack and the Tricolour to a ruthless dictator". Bitterly he concluded: "we have descended during these years a ladder of dishonour rung by rung. Were we going, could we go, any lower?"²

¹ F Owen, Tempestuous Journey, p.74. The difficulty of explaining these views, while at the same time opposing Munich, as Lloyd George did, resulted in his silence during the Munich Debate. A J Sylvester, Life With Lloyd George, p.219.

² Liberal Magazine, November, 1938.

On 1 November Chamberlain told the House of Commons in no uncertain terms: "It is not one of the characteristics of totalitarian States, at any rate, that they are accustomed to foul their own nests. I do strongly deprecate all the statements made by persons in responsible or even irresponsible positions, who take opportunities of broadcasting to the world or in other countries in particular that their own country is in a state of decadence". Attlee rose to object to the remark, but Chamberlain assured him that he was not the person he had in mind: "Others have gone a good deal further than the right honourable Gentleman, but the observation which he has made gave me an opportunity of expressing an opinion which I think is widely held".¹ Neville Thompson has seen this charge as directed against Chamberlain's own followers, "Winston Churchill in particular" in an attempt to stamp "out dissent and restoring order to the ranks of his party".² Churchill, it is true, had broadcast his appraisal of the Munich Agreement to the United States on 16 October, but his remarks are noticeably more restrained than Lloyd George's ten days later. Considering this, the dates of the broadcasts, and the animosity felt by the two men it is most likely that Chamberlain was referring to the virulent attack by Lloyd George on the 26th.

Over the same period a number of Conservative MPs who shared similar opinions about the threatening international situation, met together to discuss them and consider what action should be taken. They did not meet in a body but rather in groups. From their

¹ House of Commons Debates, 1 November, 1938, Cols.73-4.

² The Anti-Appeasers, p.191.

writings there is a division of opinion about how many groups existed. Macmillan refers to two only, the "Old Guard" of Churchill and his devoted supporters, and Eden's "Glamour Boys".¹ By contrast Boothby mentions the existence of three: a Churchill, an Eden and an Amery group, the latter of which he was a member. Amery's memoirs appear to support this view, although it is worthwhile remembering that in parliamentary groups, composition is fluid and there is evidence that Amery's existed only for the duration of the Munich crisis and thereafter constituted a wing of the Eden group. "We (Amery and Eden) soon found ourselves", recorded Amery after the agreement, "the nucleus of a group of like-minded Conservatives who begun to come together at frequent intervals to discuss the situation up to and, indeed, after the outbreak of war."²

The exact date of the formation of the Eden group is unknown. It has been placed before the resignation, immediately after, and, by Eden and Macmillan, "during" the summer of 1938.³ There is no evidence to support the former view, and with Eden out of the country during March it seems unlikely that a group could have been formed then. However, it does appear that the Tory dissidents of 22 February began associating soon after the actual debate, though without Eden being present. This can be gauged from the conversation that Ronald Cartland held with Hugh Dalton on 7 April, when the former revealed information that he could only have received from

¹ Winds of Change, p.548.

² The Unforgiving Years, p.298.

³ The Rise and Fall of Sir Anthony Eden, p.154; Wheeler-Bennett, Munich, Prologue to Tragedy, p.183; The Reckoning, p.32; The Winds of Change, p.548.

those close to the ex-Foreign Secretary.¹ Cartland was also able to give approximate figures of those Conservatives who were prepared in March/April to vote against the Government in favour of some alternative combination, indicating that some co-operation if not meetings must have taken place. It is probable that with his return in April, Eden joined in the contacts, and that from these the Eden group eventually emerged, possibly in the spring but no later than the early summer of 1938.

According to Macmillan the Eden group began to have regular meetings during the summer months, as the new crisis approached. These, presided over by Eden, took place in various houses; sometimes in that of Thomas in Westminster and sometimes at Patrick's. Eden recorded that Thomas and Patrick shared the unofficial secretarial duties, while Macmillan remembered Emrys-Evans acting as secretary.² No minutes were kept and there was no compulsion to follow any decisions reached. Outside it was variously dubbed 'The Eden Group', or by the Government Whips' Office, 'The Glamour Boys'.

The numbers rose gradually and after Munich, Macmillan recorded, "reached thirty or more". Eden himself did not put the figure so high: "by the end of the year there were between twenty and thirty of us".³ With no records kept and those attending the group not able to remember the names of all their colleagues,⁴ there is no way

¹ Diary entry, 7 April, Dalton Papers.

² The Reckoning, p.32; Winds of Change, p.549.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The Anti-Appeasers, p.167.

of tracing the complete membership, but it definitely included the following: Cranborne, Crossley, Duggan, Eden, Emrys-Evans, Sir Sidney Herbert, Joel, Granville Lancaster, Richard Law, Nicolson, Patrick, Thomas, Tree, and Wolmer. After Munich Amery, Bower, Cartland, Duff Cooper, Gunston, Macmillan and Spears became associated with the Edenites, if they had not been already.¹

The membership, wrote Eden, "was a fair cross-section of the party; some had held high office, others were to do so, either in the war or later. Our discussions were entirely free-for-all and not burdened by either the prolix or the tedious, nor did our widely spaced ages seem to inhibit anybody".² To Macmillan, the great benefit of belonging to the group was that he, and the other members, found themselves far better instructed in the inner significance of what was happening than ever before.³

Thompson has written that "Here was a group which should have had considerable influence on the House of Commons in the months before Munich. Its central figure was one of the most popular politicians in the country and other MPs had automatically gravitated to him because they shared his views on foreign policy and saw him as a symbol of resistance to the dictators".⁴ This view, however, is mere wishful thinking. Any hopes of having considerable influence

¹ Thompson (p.168) puts Boothby and Sandys amongst the Edenites. They were not. Nicolson's account of the 3 September, 1939, meeting of the group refers to "the usual members" being "enlivened by the presence of Bob Boothby and Duncan Sandys of the Churchill group". Diary entry, Diaries and Letters, p.420.

² The Reckoning, p.32.

³ Winds of Change, p.549.

⁴ The Anti-Appeasers, p.168.

on the House of Commons had effectively gone in February when the administration had so easily withstood the departure of the most popular politician in the country. After that it is inconceivable that Chamberlain, having provoked and withstood a political crisis, would have gone back on the course that produced the break, on the considered advice of a handful of his followers. In any case the tactics of the Edenites - which did not, at that date, include the more senior Amery, Duff Cooper and Wolmer - were not such as to create an immediate effect on policy. They were working on the belief that events would prove their diagnosis correct, and this coupled with reasonably polite pressure, rather than overt opposition, would lead to the replacement of the discredited Chamberlain Ministry by a national, hopefully Eden-led administration, pledged to a different foreign policy.

Consequently there was nothing belligerent about the tactics of the Eden group, which had no intention whatsoever of creating a parliamentary stir that would harm Eden's chances, and which was 'bound' to come anyway with or without their efforts. Thus although the membership remained critical of the government's foreign policy they avoided aggravating the split in the governing party. Rather than widening existing gulfs they attempted to bridge them. Nicolson, in fact, wrote of Eden as being "terribly worried by the fact that foreign affairs are splitting the country into two hostile and even embittered groups. He is himself determined to do everything to prevent such a split".¹

The Eden tactics were in contrast to those of the Churchill group. Nevertheless W R Mogg is exaggerating the differences between the two

¹ Diary entry, 11 May, 1938, Diaries and Letters, p.339.

when he writes: "the men who followed Eden were not at all sympathetic to those who followed Churchill. Whereas Eden's strong appeal was for loyal Conservatives who had gradually come to lack confidence in Neville Chamberlain, Churchill's companions had had their tomahawks at the ready from the beginning".¹ Churchill, it is true, was at all times more belligerent than Eden but even he realised the danger of taking things too far, and sensed the necessity of remaining a loyal grouser. Symptomatic of this was Chamberlain's birthday in March 1938:

"That month a round-robin, collected haphazard from some 150 Conservative members who chanced to be in the House, in wishing Chamberlain joy of his 69th birthday assured him of their wholehearted confidence; the fourth name on the list was that of Churchill."²

Yet there was a substantial difference of approach, which it would be unwise to minimize. While, in company with Eden, Churchill was willing to utilise, within the Conservative party, reasoned (but more forceful) persuasion to stiffen Government policy, he was also ready, on occasions, to mobilise support outside its ranks for that same object.

Generally speaking the Edenites feared association with Churchill, and it has even been said that their leader, despite his great reputation for independence and political courage, was reluctant even to be seen talking to Churchill.³ Credence is given to this fear of

¹ Anthony Eden, p.79.

² The Life of Neville Chamberlain, p.306.

³ B Gardner, Churchill in his time: A Study in a Reputation, p.203. A recent analysis of rebel groups reinforces the view that they "go to great lengths to keep certain MPs from joining them; they believe that the addition of members 'who revolt over anything' and

association by the fact that Sandys once asked to attend one of the Eden group meetings and he was left in no doubt that his presence was not required.¹ Spears has attempted to explain the Edenite reluctance to link their fortunes with Churchill:

"some members of the group led by Eden . . . which included several of Winston's personal friends and genuine admirers, held that Churchill was not trusted by the public, which was convinced that he was erratic and dangerous. This was the avowed reason for his not being a member of the Eden group."

Privately Spears also thought that fear of Churchill dominating it, "as he invariably did any body of men with which he was connected, had weight with some".² Macmillan, however, throws a different light on the relations between the two, by writing that Churchill was himself in constant consultation with Eden, but agreed that it was wiser to keep himself and his immediate followers apart for the time being. "Churchill had been so long in virtual opposition that Eden would be more likely to attract hitherto loyal supporters of the Government who were now beginning to doubt."³ Whatever the truth of the matter, it was significant that the mounting hostility towards the Government in the Conservative Party did not group itself round Churchill.

3 (continued from previous page)

'cranks' does more harm than good to their cause". R J Jackson, Rebels and Whips, p.293.

¹ Quoted in R R James, Churchill, A Study in Failure, p.335.

² Spears, Prelude to Dunkirk, p.19.

³ Winds of Change, p.549.

The true extent of Churchill's isolation within the Conservative Party is eloquently illustrated by his "group" for it really only consisted of Bracken and Sandys.¹ Bob Boothby was rarely a member, although he is often referred to as such. Whatever the cause, the close friendship that had existed at one time between the two men was definitely cooling by 1937, and it ended in 1940. Symptomatic of the change of relationship was the way Boothby aligned himself with Amery's group during the Munich crisis. Other members associating with Amery included Spears, Gunston, Bower, Cartland and possibly Macmillan.² Excepting Amery and Bower, their views were closer to the Churchill group than to Eden's, in that no great faith was placed on reasoned and careful pressure upon the Government, but more upon belligerency. These differences were to be demonstrated during the Munich crisis and in its aftermath.

As the summer months passed and the pressure upon the Czechs increased day by day, the small bands of Conservative dissidents could only watch. Parliament recessed early in August, and the dissidents scattered throughout the country, though the leaders of the respective groups remained in close contact with the situation.³ Churchill, Eden and Amery appear to have spent much of the month of September in London, near the centre of action.⁴ All three remained

¹ Thompson regards Bracken as Churchill's "only follower in Parliament", recording Sandys as an Edenite. The Anti-Appeasers, p.170.

² Boothby, I Fight To Live, p.164.

³ That is not to say that none of the lesser-known dissidents remained in close contact with Whitehall. Apparently Boothby had an interview with the Prime Minister on 2 September, in which Chamberlain had given him the impression of resolution and determination. Nicolson, Diaries and Letters, p.359.

⁴ Eden did go on a motoring tour of Ireland but while there he received messages from Vansittart warning him of the growing danger of the Czech situation and advising him to return to make his views known to the Government.

in close contact with the Government, by letter or by meeting either Halifax or Chamberlain. Churchill records two such meetings, while Eden mentions repeated contacts with his successor at the Foreign Office. Amery, too, recalled meeting Halifax and holding an extensive correspondence with both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary.

The three rebels-in-chief shared a concern about the dangers of any hesitation in making Britain's position clear and were in favour of some action being taken to demonstrate to the German Government that Britain was in earnest. Amery, for example, summed up the situation thus: "the Government have to avoid . . . Grey's mistake and leave them (the Germans) in no doubt where we stand".¹ Churchill, in a letter to Halifax, sent at the end of August, advocated two steps which would go some way towards deterring violent action by Hitler:

"First, would it not be possible to frame a Joint Note between Britain, France and Russia stating (a) their desire for peace and friendly relations; (b) their deep anxiety at the military preparations of Germany; (c) their joint interest in a peaceful solution of the Czechoslovak controversy; and (d) that an invasion by Germany of Czechoslovakia would raise capital issues for all the three Powers? . . . The second step which might save the situation would be fleet movements, and the placing of the reserve flotillas and cruiser squadrons into full commission."²

Eden, too, in his meeting with Halifax on the 9 September, pressed the Government to clear up any possible misapprehension the

¹ Diary entry, 11 September, 1938, quoted in Cowling's Impact of Hitler, p.226.

² The Gathering Storm, p.257.

Germans might have that if a conflict were to break out in Central Europe, it could be localized. If there were a European war and France were involved, Britain, it should be stated, would also be in "up to the neck". He then made two further suggestions: that the Opposition leaders be consulted, and that some action be taken, either by a concentration of ships or by other means, to avoid the "danger that Hitler still did not understand our real position". Whereas the words which the Government used might be twisted or ignored, any action which Britain took must at once be reported to Hitler.¹ As the Government rejected such a course, the Prime Minister adopting the view that it would increase the likelihood of war, Eden wrote to The Times pointing out the dangers of any hesitation in making Britain's position clear:

"We have often been told that the war of 1914 would never have come about had the attitude of this country been clearly understood in time. Whatever we think of this statement it is the duty of each one of us, press and public as well as Government, to take every step in our power to prevent such a repetition of tragedy."²

Interestingly enough this was the same line as advocated by a wide range of opinion, as Harvey commented in his diary:

"By not telling Hitler again and more definitely of the likelihood of our coming in we are taking a very great risk in view of what we know of German military concentrations and of persistence of reports that responsible Germans,

¹ The Reckoning, pp.21-22.

² The Times, 12 September, 1938.

especially Hitler, do not believe we would ever move.

This would be the view of A.E. and Winston, let alone of Labour and the Liberals."¹

Meanwhile Amery, although pressing upon the Government a policy of firmness, was willing to go further than either Churchill or Eden in meeting the Sudeten grievances. In two letters to Chamberlain and at an interview with Halifax at the Foreign Office he put before the Government two ideas: firstly that "Czechoslovakia should declare itself neutral like Switzerland and terminate her treaty with France" in exchange for guarantees; secondly, that it would be "possible and justifiable" to press the Czechs to give up the North Western corner of Bohemia with a million Germans in it".² Although it might be argued that the Munich Agreement was founded on these twin principles, that settlement, in fact, went much further than Amery envisaged or desired. He realised that "everything depends on the actual extent of the concession asked. If it is based on the idea that Germany is entitled to every local district which contained a predominate Sudeten majority, even at the cost of depriving Czechoslovakia of any reasonable economic or strategic frontier, then it will not be only unacceptable to the Czechs but discreditable to ourselves. The Czechs will fight and we shall be drawn in in spite of ourselves. Cession should be confined so as not to reduce Czechoslovakia to a mere economic tributary of Germany, defenceless except for the international guarantee. That Hitler

¹ Harvey, entry 10 September, 1938.

² Prime Ministers' Papers, 1/249, 'Czechoslovakia and discussions with MPs'. Letter dated 17 September. In arguing for her neutralisation Amery wrote: "I have always felt that the one really justified grievance of the Sudeten Germans has been that their resources and their lives were at the disposal of a Government whose policy was hostile to Germany and allied with Germany's most likely enemies."

should have it all his own way for a policy of brutal interference and disregard of all the ordinary decencies of international intercourse would be disastrous for the future."¹ Symptomatic of Amery's firmer approach to the question was his further advice to the Government:

"It is surely intolerable that Germany should not only permit the organisation of Sudeten volunteers on her territory, but, in fact, organise and equip them, and then let them loose against Czech frontier posts. Is it really impossible to tell him that negotiations must come to an end if that sort of thing goes on?"²

Naturally the Anglo-French plan caused considerable dismay. Churchill, returning from a visit to Paris, where, according to Harvey, he and Louis Spears gave "bad advice" to French politicians, presumably encouraging them to stand firm, issued a statement demanding the immediate recall of Parliament.³ Not mincing his words he called upon the nation to realize "the magnitude of the disaster into which we are being led."⁴ The partition of Czechoslovakia under Anglo-French pressure amounts to a complete surrender by the Western Democracies to the Nazi threat of force . . . Acceptance of Herr Hitler's terms involves the prostration of Europe before the Nazi power, of which the fullest advantage will certainly be taken . . .

¹ Prime Ministers' Papers, 1/249, Letter dated 19 September, 1938.

² Ibid.

³ Harvey, entry for 21 September, 1938.

⁴ Churchill had earlier described Chamberlain's decision to go to Berchtesgaden as "the stupidest thing he had ever done". Harvey entry for 15 September, 1938.

The idea that safety can be purchased by throwing a small State to the wolves is a fatal delusion".¹ Amery also recognized the plan to be far in excess of his suggestions to the Government. "These terms not only deprived Czechoslovakia of any possibility of defending herself, but involved the complete disruption of its economy. They amounted to nothing less than its destruction as an independent state."² Eden, though deeply distressed by the terms was more restrained, declaring that appeasement "must not be at the expense either of our vital interests, or of our national reputation, or of our sense of fair dealing".³

On the 23rd Hitler's Godesberg terms became known. Eden telephoned his disapproval to Halifax, grieved that a British Prime Minister should undertake to forward such terms to Prague, as to an evil-doer. "Hitler now required not merely the cession of German-speaking districts, but also the immediate military occupation of a larger area. Our fleet had not been mobilised and the Fuhrer's intuitive flair for exploiting his opponents' weakness had emboldened him to press his advantage."⁴ Eden's fellow dissident, Amery, fearful that the Cabinet might press terms of this sort, sent a strong letter to Halifax and followed it up by an equally firm letter to Chamberlain, written in time for the Cabinet meeting on the 25th. After establishing that Czech acceptance of Hitler's "final offer" would be an act of

¹ The Times, 22 September, 1938.

² The Unforgiving Years, pp.267-68.

³ The Reckoning, p.26, from a speech to his constituents and broadcast to the United States.

⁴ Ibid.

"folly and cowardice", he argued that Britain was bound to tell Hitler that "the demand is in our opinion unreasonable, that we cannot blame the Czechs for rejecting it, and that if, instead of considering reasonable alternatives, he invades Czechoslovakia, he must realise the consequences? Any other course would not only be futile, as the Czechs would be bound to reject it, but would make us so ridiculous as well as contemptible in the eyes of the world . . ." Then, in what must have appeared something in the nature of a veiled threat, he pointed to the danger in the Prime Minister's position: "if the country and the House should once suppose that you were prepared to acquiesce in, or even endorse this last demand, there would be a tremendous revulsion of feeling against you".¹

Amery then wrote to The Times, attempting to define the issues at stake:

"The issue has become very simple. Are we to surrender to ruthless brutality a free people whose cause we have espoused but are now to throw to the wolves to save our own skins, or are we to stand up to a bully? It is not Czechoslovakia but our own soul that is at stake."²

Meanwhile Churchill, being far from inactive, released another statement for the press. It called for clear and resolute action to avert the catastrophe into which Europe was drifting:

"There is still one good chance of preserving peace.

A solemn warning should be presented to the German Government in joint or simultaneous Notes by Britain, France and Russia

¹ The Unforgiving Years, pp.273-74.

² The Times, 26 September, 1938.

that the invasion of Czechoslovakia at the present juncture would be taken as an act of war against these powers."¹

With the crisis deepening the various dissident groups began to take shape again. Amery records two meetings of his associates at Spears' office on the 26th and 27th September. On the first occasion he found a number of members, not named but presumably the members of his group: Spears, Boothby, Bower, Cartland, Gunston, and Macmillan. They were all "desperately keen about pressing the Government to make it clear that we were in direct touch with Russia in order to impress the Germans, who have taken our non-contact with Russia as a clear proof that we do not mean to go in". As part of the agitation they wanted to issue a public declaration stating that they were for co-operation with the Soviet Union, but Amery strongly objected to this proposal and nothing seems to have come of it. The following day he found the same conspirators, particularly Macmillan, "very wild, clamouring for an immediate pogrom to get rid of Neville and make Winston Prime Minister before the House met". Amery poured cold water on that sort of talk.²

From Nicolson's diary, however, it appears that Churchill was most active in assembling the National rebels. Nicolson recorded three such meetings, two of which were at Churchill's flat in Morpeth Mansions. On the 22nd there were present Wolmer, Bracken, Nicolson, Churchill and Sinclair, from the House of Commons, and Lords Cecil, Lloyd and Horne. Nicolson recorded that the conversation boiled down to this. "Either Chamberlain comes back (from Godesberg)

¹ The Times, 27 September, 1938.

² Amery, diary entries for the 26th and 27th September. Quoted in Thompson, pp.177-78.

with peace with honour or he breaks it off. In either case we shall support him. But if he comes back with dishonour, we shall go out against him."¹

Four days later a much fuller meeting took place at Churchill's flat where Grigg, Sinclair, Amery, Macmillan, Boothby, Spears, Bracken, Law, Cecil, Lytton and Horne gathered. They discussed whether Chamberlain would "rat" over the Godesberg demands but thought it unlikely. In the event of war "we shall press for a Coalition Government and the immediate application of war measures. Above all, the blockade must be put into force at once. Then national service, even if it entails conscription of capital. Then at once we must get in contact with Russia. Winston says (and we all agree) that the fundamental mistake that the Prime Minister has made is his refusal to take Russia into his confidence".² It is likely that Nicolson's report was inaccurate on this point for Leo Amery did not agree. As at the meeting in Spears' office, he struck a note of discord: "I was all for pressing the Government privately on this, but thought putting Russia in the forefront would not help with wavering Conservatives."³

Thompson has written that on both occasions Amery's "sense of proportion" was probably "better than his colleagues". "Such stern and unbending Tories as Lloyd and Grigg may have been swept away with enthusiasm for co-operation with Russia in the heat of the moment, but it is unlikely that they were real converts. If the Government had made any agreement with the USSR these were the very

¹ Nicolson, diary entry, 22 September, 1938. Diaries and Letters, pp.363-65.

² Ibid, pp.366-67, diary entry, 26 September, 1938.

³ The Unforgiving Years, p.278.

people who would soon have been regretting it". This will simply not do, and neither will his comment that "neither Churchill nor Eden had any real alternative to the Government's Czechoslovak policy".¹ Grigg, far from being a "stern and unbending Tory", was an ex-Liberal who had only joined the Conservatives in 1931, and as to Lloyd, he, throughout the crisis, urged the "need for drastic and courageous action" and "begged" the Government not to consider "any surrender in Czechoslovakia which would in fact spell the end of the democracies".² And there could be little as drastic for an unbending Tory than co-operation with the Soviet Union, which incidentally he continued to favour until August, 1939, hardly a transient enthusiasm. Moreover, what Churchill, and in a lesser way, Eden, was advocating, with an admirable sense of proportion considering the circumstances, was the necessity of making clear that in the face of Hitler's threats Britain and France meant business, and that this could only be done by clear warnings, fleet movements and the like, and, where Churchill presumably diverged from Eden, putting Russia to the forefront. Such a course, particularly the inclusion of the Soviet Union in the front - admittedly distasteful to Conservative prejudices - was an alternative, if 1939 is not to become incomprehensible, to Government policy in the previous September. In retrospect it could be argued that it was Chamberlain who more nearly lacked a 'real' alternative as the sudden switch away from the Munich policy to the half-hearted pursuit of collective security, including Russia, in the spring and summer of 1939 indicates.

¹ The Anti-Appeasers, pp.178, 173.

² Harvey, entry for 12 September, 1938.

The day before the Munich Agreement was signed a further meeting, possibly connected with Focus, occurred at the Savoy. This time the meeting was much more comprehensive, including representatives of the three major parties: Churchill, Nicolson, Sinclair, Megan Lloyd George, Salter and Arthur Henderson. The consensus of opinion was that Chamberlain was going to run away again and that they must stop him. Churchill proposed to send a telegram to the Prime Minister saying that if he imposed further onerous terms on the Czechs, they would fight him in the House. He wanted to get Eden, Attlee, Sinclair, Cecil and Lloyd to join him in the telegram begging him not to betray the Czechs. However, Attlee, despite the pleas of Noel-Baker, refused to sign without the approval of his party, while Eden refused on the grounds that it would be interpreted as a vendetta against Chamberlain.¹

Eden's attitude at this stage is indicated in a revealing interview with Nicolson on 19 September. Although Nicolson found him "in the depths of despair" he didn't "wish to lead a revolt or to secure any resignations from the Cabinet". His own position in the country was then discussed and Nicolson suggested "that he is losing a great deal of ground in the country. I say that this does not matter in the least, since he will get it back, and I merely mention it in fear that he may be conscious of it himself and abandon the wise attitude he has followed hitherto of remaining quiet." Eden replied that he did not feel he had lost ground in the country at all, and that in any case he was young and could wait until popular favour returned to him.² Eden, then, it appeared was still

¹ Nicolson, diary entry 29 September, 1938. Diaries and Letters, pp.371-72. See also Lady Violet Bonham Carter's introduction to Spier's Focus, pp.11-12.

² Nicolson, diary entry 19 September. Diaries and Letters, pp.360-61.

waiting upon events and, unlike Churchill, not willing to attempt to make them. This presumably lay behind his refusal to sign the telegram.

Neville Thompson, although basically correct, is nevertheless a little harsh in observing that the various dissenters were unable to work together or formulate a common policy.¹ As we have seen, the dissidents had held their respective group meetings but they do not appear to have organised a joint meeting until the Munich Debate; yet it is only fair to add that Churchill and Amery had come together on the 26th at Morpeth Mansions, and Amery was also in contact - at least by telephone - with Eden.² As to a common policy all favoured "the Winston policy of organising all states who will be against aggression and of so confronting the gangsters with a ring of force".³ Yet to Churchill this meant public contact with Russia, while Amery was not anxious to put Russia to the forefront, although willing to press the Government privately, and Eden, despite his efforts for the Russian alliance in 1939, makes no mention of that country whatsoever during the September days. But Thompson does the dissidents less than justice when he adds "they never attempted to draw up a statement of their views and present it to the Government or bring pressure to bear on their leaders by stating what they would do if their views were not accepted or at least considered".⁴ On the contrary, the Churchill telegram was an attempt to do just that:

¹ The Anti-Appeasers, p.175.

² Amery, diary entry 25 September, 1938, The Unforgiving Years, p.275.

³ Harvey, diary entry, 17 September, 1938.

⁴ The Anti-Appeasers, p.175.

state their views to Chamberlain and threaten to fight him if he ignored them. It is uncertain whether or not there were other attempts to bring pressure to bear on the Prime Minister. Certainly a fighting spirit had been displayed at Churchill's flat on the 22nd, when the opinion was that if Chamberlain "comes back with dishonour, we shall go out against him". Three days later Amery had personally informed Duff Cooper and Hore-Belisha that the Government, "if it ran out over Czechoslovakia", could not "stand up against the battery of criticism that would be directed upon it from every quarter of the House", sentiments he had expressed in his letter to the Prime Minister the same day, when he had warned Chamberlain of the "tremendous revulsion of feeling" that would take place in the House if he was prepared to "endorse" the Godesberg terms.¹ Nevertheless the fact remains that throughout this critical juncture, despite public statements, interviews with Ministers, letters, telephone calls and group meetings, the dissidents had little, if any, influence on Chamberlain's foreign policy. This was, of course, partly due to their not acting unitedly as a pressure group, but more important was that at no point did they, nor perhaps could they, and neither did Eden and others want to, threaten the Government's survival.²

The importance of the debate on the Munich Pact is illustrated by the length of Parliamentary time set aside - four days (October 3rd - 6th). According to Parliamentary custom, Duff Cooper, since he had resigned his post as First Lord of the Admiralty because he could no longer support the Government's policy, opened the debate

¹ Amery, diary entry 25 September, 1938, The Unforgiving Years, pp.275-76.

² Chamberlain's administration, according to Eden's tactics, was to be given enough rope to hang itself, and he was not going to be involved in a lynching party.

with a personal explanation. He did not criticise the previous foreign policy of the Government. Indeed he was not in a position to do so, because he had been a member of it. Instead he criticised the Munich episode as an isolated occurrence. He said that he could well understand the reluctance of the British people to go to war on account of Czechoslovakia and yet if war had come the fighting would not have been for that country but in accordance with the sound, traditional foreign policy of England, in order to prevent one Great Power dominating by brute force the continent of Europe.

Touching on the events of recent weeks he explained with what difficulty he had concurred to the acceptance of Hitler's demand for self-determination, but that he and the Cabinet could not accept the terms of the Godesberg memorandum. Cooper's personal position would have been stronger had he earlier refused to accept the Berchtesgaden terms as a compromise - to accept Berchtesgaden but refuse Godesberg was to go one mile and refuse to go another. He then admitted that "the great and important" concessions secured at Munich were a "great triumph for the Prime Minister", but they were still not good enough, as the final terms provided for little more than the invasion of the country, an unnecessary humiliation. This was due, as he saw it, to the great defect in British policy in recent weeks, the failure to convince Hitler that Britain was, in certain circumstances, prepared to fight. This was the "deep difference" between him and the Prime Minister. While Chamberlain believed in addressing Hitler in the "language of sweet reasonableness", Duff Cooper believed him more open to the "language of the mailed fist". Neither did he think it possible to come to a reasonable settlement of outstanding questions with Germany, whereas Chamberlain did. "The Prime Minister may be right. I can assure you, Mr Speaker, with the deepest sincerity,

that I hope and pray that he is right, but I cannot believe what he believes. I wish I could. Therefore, I can be of no assistance to him in his Government. I should only be a hindrance, and it is much better that I should go."¹

Cooper's speech reveals the widespread confusion, shared by all members, as to the advantages or otherwise of the Munich terms.

"When he returned from Munich", Cooper wrote, "the Prime Minister was able to persuade me, as well as my colleagues, that he had accomplished a great deal there, and that the Munich terms differed substantially from those of Godesberg. We were, in fact mistaken, for even The Times newspaper admitted a few days later that the Germans had already got more than Godesberg would have given them."² The impression that the terms constituted a "great triumph for the Prime Minister" put Chamberlain's opponents at a distinct disadvantage. Even Churchill described the agreement as £1 17s 6d rather than the £2 demanded at Godesberg.

Chamberlain, who followed Cooper, reiterated his belief that his action had avoided war, and that he had been right in taking it. His purpose since taking office had been "to work for the pacification of Europe" even though the "path which leads to appeasement is long

¹ House of Commons Debates, 3rd October, 1938, Col.40. Cooper: Foreign Office, 1913-17; MP Oldham, 1924-29; St George's, Westminster, 1931-45; Financial Secretary to War Office, 1928-29; Financial Secretary Treasury, 1934-35; Secretary of State for War, 1935-37; First Lord Admiralty, 1937-38. His resignation over Munich, as Eden's the previous February, has obscured the fact that he shared the responsibility for all that had happened until then. His love of France - and his vehement hostility to Germany gave him the reputation of being somewhat unbalanced in his views on international affairs.

² Old Men Forget, p.244.

and bristles with obstacles". "Now that we have got past it (Czechoslovakia)," continued Chamberlain, "I feel that it may be necessary to make further progress on the road to sanity", seeing "sincerity and goodwill" on both sides of the Anglo-German declaration.¹

In reply, Attlee, while paying his tribute to Chamberlain's great exertions in the cause of peace, contended that "the events of these last few days constitute one of the greatest diplomatic defeats that this country and France have ever sustained. There can be no doubt that it is a tremendous victory for Herr Hitler. Without firing a shot, by the mere display of military force, he has achieved a dominating position in Europe which Germany failed to win after four years of war. He has overturned the balance of power in Europe". Skilfully criticising Government policy throughout the crisis, he drew out Britain's failure "to build up the forces that would stand against aggression" as the missing vital factor. "After the events of the 21st May two things were obvious - the designs of Herr Hitler and also the fact that they could be stopped, because they were stopped then by the resolution of the Czech Government. The prime weakness throughout the whole business has been that the Government have never tried to get together the powers that might stop it."

But once Attlee moved from considering "the background of these events" to "the future" his speech became confused. Instead of developing the idea of collective security to prevent future aggression, Attlee called for a peace conference, "which will endeavour to deal

¹ House of Commons Debates, 3 October, Cols.47-49.

with the causes of war that are affecting this world", and for Germany to rejoin the League of Nations, hardly convincing propositions in the light of his earlier remarks.¹ Consequently Naylor has written that Attlee "faltered at the very last, in imagining that a peaceful settlement of Europe could be built upon the ruins of Czechoslovakia - that after all had been Chamberlain's purpose in going to Munich".² Yet Attlee did not "imagine" that a new world could be built - that was Chamberlain - but rather expressed a hope that it could, "if the world (including Germany) can take a lesson from the events of these months".³

The idea of a conference was to figure in other Labour speeches and in the Labour amendment of censure to the Government's vote of confidence:

"That this House cannot approve of a policy which has led to the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia under threat of armed force and to the humiliation of our country and its exposure to grave dangers, and realising the intense desire of all peoples for a lasting peace demands an active support of the method of collective security through the League of Nations and the immediate initiation by His Majesty's Government of proposals for the summoning of a world conference to consider the removal of economic and political grievances which imperil peace."

A question clearly arises: why did Labour, in view of its straightforward attitude prior to Munich, allow itself to be befuddled by thoughts of a conference after the settlement? The reason was that Labour was

¹ House of Commons Debates, 3 October, Cols.51-66.

² Labour's International Policy, pp.251-52.

³ House of Commons Debates, 3 October, Col.6.

faced with a post-Munich situation in which Chamberlain envisaged a Four Power Pact of the Great Powers to preserve peace, which the party regarded as a "pact against liberty; it will be a pact like that of the Holy Alliance of a hundred years ago . . . And liberty will be attacked not only abroad, but in this country, too. If the Prime Minister wants to walk with the dictators, he will have to conform to their wishes"; and wanted to set out an alternative that would not run the same risks.¹ The conference proposal, therefore, as was the suggested German return to the League, was not a sign of Labour's "faltering at the very last" but rather a desire to offer something by way of an alternative to a Four Power Pact. That Labour did not place as much weight on a conference as upon collective security - also clearly set out in the amendment - can be gauged from the contributions of other spokesmen during the four-day debate.

Sinclair, who followed the Labour leader, spoke of the "flood of relief and thanksgiving which has swept over the world since the Munich Conference". So great was the Prime Minister's popular triumph that Cooper's resignation was "nothing short of an act of political heroism". Yet although the nightmare was over, why, he asked, did it loom so close? "The policy which brought us to the edge of war, from which we were extricated only at the price of immense sacrifices by a small and weak nation . . . was the policy of the Prime Minister . . ." And he believed that Britain would rue the day when the Government "sold the pass of freedom in Central Europe", and discredited the forces of moderation in Germany. "We have not only given the Sudetenland to Germany, but we have restored Germany to Herr Hitler". Nor was it a victory for negotiation over

¹ House of Commons Debates, 3 October, Col.64.

force. That suggestion was flagrantly untrue.

Sinclair's concern went beyond the government's past actions; he faced the problems of the present and the future in the light of Munich. Deploring the cold-shouldering of Russia during the crisis he was convinced that she was needed "now more than ever before to restore the balance of power in Europe . . . His Majesty's Government will be making a disastrous mistake if they go on truckling to Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini and leave Russia standing outside, on the mat." He declared himself in favour of the peace conference "of which the leader of the Opposition talks", and hoped that Germany and Italy might return to the League "that we may once again be able to settle the affairs of the world through the League". Less confused than Attlee he sensed that "before that happens" the Government must "call upon the men and women of this country to rally to the defence of freedom and justice, and we may yet save ourselves by our exertions, and democracy by our example".¹

The Opposition leaders seated, Eden joined in the tributes to the Prime Minister. "We all owe him, and every citizen owes him, a measureless debt of gratitude for the sincerity and pertinacity which he has devoted in the final phase of the crisis to averting the supreme calamity of war." That over he warned that foreign affairs could not be continued on a basis of "stand and deliver". Successive surrenders brought only successive humiliation, and in turn, more humiliating demands. The dangers into which Britain had run could only be met and overcome by "a revival of our national spirit, by a determined effort to conduct a foreign policy upon which the nation can unite . . . and by a national effort in the

¹ House of Commons Debates, 3 October, Cols. 66-77.

field of defence very much greater than anything that has been attempted hitherto".¹

Lansbury then declared his great admiration for the Czechs who had "shown themselves the most Christian people in Europe".² He went on to argue that nothing would have been gained from a war, a sentiment with which Victor Raikes, the Conservative Member for South East Essex, agreed. War might have been waged in revenge for the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, but the whole state would have been destroyed before anything effective could have been done to prevent it. Interestingly enough this argument was conspicuously absent from similar debates a year hence. Raikes' colleague, Richard Law then rose to address the House. Law, Bonar Law's youngest and only surviving son, made what both Nicolson and Macmillan thought, an outstanding contribution to the debate. He was a recent rebel, having backed the Government at the time of Eden's resignation. His intervention was both brief and effective. He poured scorn upon those that viewed the settlement as a "powerful foundation upon which to build our hopes of a great new era of peace and happiness to mankind". To believe that was to assent to the proposition that men "who have risen to power through violence and treachery, who have maintained themselves in power by violence and treachery, who have achieved their greatest triumph through violence and treachery, have suddenly been convinced by the magnetic eye of the Prime Minister (it can only have been done by his eye, because it was done through an interpreter) that violence and treachery do not pay". Britain had now obtained, he went on, "by peaceable means, what we have fought

¹ House of Commons Debates, 3 October, 1938, Cols.77-88.

² Ibid, Col.89.

four wars to prevent happening, namely the domination of Europe by a single Power".¹

From the Labour benches Dalton rose to complain that Chamberlain "was hustled, intimidated and out-manoevred by Hitler". The latter's triumph in Czechoslovakia was one stage in a "well-thought-out process laid out very clearly in Mein Kampf . . . a process aiming at the domination of Central and Eastern Europe and then of the whole of Europe". The great danger in the continuance of Chamberlain's policy would be more friends, more allies sacrificed until Britain was left to face the military might of Germany alone. The only answer was a league of states which would accept as their premises common resistance to aggression and the peaceful settlement of all disputes.²

Though attacked during the debate, Chamberlain was not without supporters. The ex-leader of the Labour Party and five Conservatives defended the Prime Minister, including Sir Samuel Hoare, who argued that the course Chamberlain had taken was the only one open to a responsible Government.³ Jerking the House back to the position as it was less than a week before, he reminded Members that Britain then stood on the verge of a terrible abyss. By a last possible effort the Prime Minister averted catastrophe. It was said that he should have given an ultimatum to Hitler before the Nazi rally at Nuremberg. An ultimatum then would have plunged Europe into a world war. Besides the Prime Minister was a mediator: how could he act in that role and at the same time issue threats and ultimatums? But time after time

¹ House of Commons Debates, 3 October, 1938, Cols.113-4.

² Ibid, Col.149.

³ The others were V Raikes, C T Culverwell, Sir A Southby and Sir A Lambert-Ward.

Britain's position had privately been made as clear as possible to Hitler. In any case the criticisms aired in debate did not "represent . . . the great body of our fellow-citizens not only in this country but in the Dominions and in the whole Empire . . . They are grateful to the Prime Minister for having persistently retained the policy of peace and mediation. They do not take the view that war is inevitable. They believe that under his wise guidance we may succeed in creating a new Europe in which men and women can go about their business in peace and security."¹

The attack on the Government continued for three more days. Though the Opposition Parties led the charge, Conservative criticism was also conspicuous, although this was somewhat incongruous with the gratitude expressed in the same speeches. Lord Cranborne, for example, testified to "relief and deep personal gratitude" to the Prime Minister and directly afterwards to the people's "abiding sense of shame". Giving away territory "that belonged to somebody else" in order to avoid embarrassment to yourself was not an auspicious way of beginning a new era of peace and justice.² Sir Sidney Herbert's language was in greater disaccord. He spoke of the Prime Minister's "magnificent" work for the country and the world, and then of Britain's "desperate humiliation" and dishonour.³

Participants in the debate and commentators since have seen in Herbert's intervention the effective "killing" of the idea of a dissolution.⁴ It was known that Chamberlain's close friends and

¹ House of Commons Debates, 3 October, 1938, Col.162.

² Ibid, 4 October, Col.233.

³ Ibid, Col.242.

⁴ Macmillan, The Winds of Change, p.570. See also Eden's The Reckoning, p.33 and Thompson's The Anti-Appeasers, pp.186-89.

advisers were pressing on him the advantage of a General Election on the 1918 model, in which he would be presented as the man who saved the peace. But such a plan "was destroyed in less than twenty minutes by a speech by one of those figures, so influential inside the party, although almost unknown to the public, who at critical moments often exercise decisive authority".¹ Herbert is pictured as a highly respected back-bencher whose loyalty to the Government was beyond question (in fact he had been consorting with Eden since February), and whose intervention was all the more effective because through failing health, the result of severe wounds, he was rarely provoked to speak in the House. Rising at 7.30 he began to address an empty House, but when "his name went up on the boards, Members trooped in", although they only had seventeen minutes - the length of his speech - in which to do so.² In blunt terms he said the Conservative Party "can be led, not bullied". There could be no greater iniquity than to force a General Election at this time when from a national point of view nothing could be gained and much lost:

"There may be some tiny Tammany Hall ring who want such a solution but my solution would be quite different. I ask the Prime Minister here and now to do something quite different. I ask him to make his Government really national, to broaden its basis, to invite the Labour Party into it . . .
 . . ."³

His speech, apparently "went home".⁴

¹ Winds of Change, p.570.

² Ibid.

³ House of Commons Debates, 4 October, 1938, Col.244.

⁴ Macmillan, p.571.

But was Herbert's intervention the "chief factor" preventing a snap election to take advantage of the Government's newly won popularity?¹ In retrospect it is hard to prove or disprove, although it seems unlikely. Perhaps more telling was Lord Halifax's advice on the drive from Heston to Downing Street. Chamberlain would find people "who would urge him very strongly to have an immediate election, which these advisers would recommend as being greatly in the interest of the Conservative party. I told him that I thought he ought to resist that counsel, for he was no longer only a party leader: for better, for worse, what he had just done had made him a national leader and he must act accordingly".² Chamberlain did act accordingly, and it is likely that his decision, possibly influenced by Halifax, was in agreement with his own inclination rather than resting on a warning from a Conservative dissident, however much respected. Whatever else may be said about Chamberlain, he was not incapable of thinking in national terms for himself, as his decision to quietly stand down from the premiership in May 1940 was to show. In the closing speech of the debate Chamberlain scotched rumours of a snap election: "I have two reasons why I should prefer not to have a General Election now. One is that that feeling of relief and thankfulness, which everyone knows has been so conspicuous, goes far beyond the reach of any party. I do not at all wish to capitalise on a feeling of that kind for the sake of obtaining some temporary advantage. The second reason is this. Honourable Members may have noticed the tendency of a General

¹ Thompson, The Anti-Appeasers, p.186.

² Fulness of Days, pp.199-200.

Election to magnify differences. It is possible that we may want great efforts from the nation in the months that are to come, and if that be so, the smaller our differences the better".¹

Amery took the opportunity to air the views he had already pressed on the Government. Britain ought to have declared herself earlier: Germany's leaders "were profoundly convinced that we would not face the issue, and all our guarded words and our actions - or I ought to say our inaction - during these months only confirmed them". Turning to the settlement he wondered whether the future student of history would say of it that it represented anything other than the "triumph of sheer, naked force, exercised in the most blatant and brutal fashion". In fact he could see no substantial difference between Hitler's Godesberg demands, which Britain had refused, and the Munich terms. But he added, "I am not asking the House to blame anyone, least of all the Prime Minister, who has had to face a terrible responsibility and who knows far better than any of us those weaknesses in our defences for which we might have been paying today a dreadful price."²

The Conservative Member for Berwick, John McEwen, said the issue still was whether or not the country should have gone to war. Maxwell Fyfe, the future Home Secretary, enlarged on this: let members say "at what stage they think this country ought to have gone to war or threatened war." The mothers and wives of Britain would not have supported a war in which their husbands and sons would have died in order to "keep Carlsbad and Marienbad under the Czechs". And as to those that suggested Britain should have gone to war over the method of cession he would have been "ashamed" to ask any man . .

¹ House of Commons Debates, 6 October, 1938, Col.548.

² House of Commons Debates, 4 October, 1938, Cols.199, 202, 204.

. . or any woman to give up her man to die either for cession or for methods of cession".¹

From the other side of the House Morrison charged that the recent crisis arose out of the Government's persistent cold-shouldering of the League of Nations since 1931. On a bitter note, and one which the Government supporters interrupted, Morrison accused the Government of betraying the Czechs. "The fact that yesterday the Prime Minister came to the House with a proposal for a loan to Czechoslovakia and an immediate credit of £10,000,000 is, perhaps, the most conclusive evidence that the Government feel some dishonour and some discredit".² His fellow Labourite, Wedgwood, witheringly quoted Patrick Henry: "Is life so sweet and peace so dear as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?" Liberal Geoffrey Mander avowed Chamberlain's policy would inevitably lead to war. Hitler was interested in grievances only insofar as they enabled him to pursue his aim of European domination. To R T Gibson, the Labour Member for Greenock, Britain was like a Samaritan who "took the clothes off the wayfarer and handed them over to the robbers".³

On the third day of the debate, Sir John Simon moved that the House approve the policy of the Government by which war had been averted and support its efforts to secure a lasting peace. In what was an effective speech he quoted from Shelley's great lines about hope. 'To Hope . . . till Hope creates from its own wreck the thing it contemplates". Like so many supporters of the Government he applied what he thought was the real test. The Munich terms contained "drastic conditions, very harsh stipulations. Let each

¹ House of Commons Debates, 4 October, 1938, Col.247-8.

² Ibid, Col.178.

³ Ibid, Col.272.

member ask himself whether, if he had been Prime Minister he would have rejected those terms. The real test is this. We are at peace today, with these Munich terms in operation, which were accepted by the French who were under fixed treaty obligations to Czechoslovakia, though we were not. How many amongst us are there who, if we could undo what was then done, would reject the settlement to which the Prime Minister put his hand on Friday and instead - because it was the only alternative - would fling the world into the cauldron of immediate war?"¹ No sooner had he resumed his seat than Greenwood moved that Simon's motion be amended to read that the House could not approve the Government's policy. It was at this stage that Churchill intervened, with what Dalton called "quite the best speech in the four days debate".² When he described the agreement as "a total and unmitigated defeat", an angry hubbub broke out on the Government benches, and it was some time before he could resume his speech. Nevertheless, it was probably one of his greatest orations, and even Channon, a violently pro-Chamberlain MP noted how it "discomforted the Front Bench".³ The Western democracies had been "weighed in the balance and found wanting". And Munich was not the end; it was only the beginning - "the first sip, the first foretaste of a bitter cup which will be proffered to us year by year unless by a supreme recovery of moral health and martial vigour, we arise again and take our stand for freedom as in olden time".⁴

¹ House of Commons Debates, 5 October, 1938, Col.1349-50.

² Diary entry, 5 October, Dalton Papers.

³ The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.172.

⁴ House of Commons Debates, Col.1373.

Sir Henry Page Croft said Czechoslovakia was so vulnerable that it would have been a crime to urge her people to resist when they would have been destroyed before help could reach them. Breaking party lines Sir Robert Young declared that he had told his constituents that he would be no party to a war which could be avoided by the delimitation of frontiers. If the Sudeten Germans "wanted to go to a Nazi hell, then I said, let them".¹ Similarly Labourite Ernest Thurtle, while arguing that the Government were blameable for the situation which had arisen, felt the Prime Minister was justified in taking risks for peace and, for himself, he would rather have the Munich Agreement than war.

A valuable contribution to the debate was made by Richard Acland who rose to "bear witness" to what he had seen and heard in Czechoslovakia during the last few days. He spoke of the tyranny suffered by the Czech minorities in the Sudeten German areas: of a woman in Prague with the mark of a swastika branded on her chest with a red hot iron, and of a baby, eight months old, branded on its face. He quoted a conversation he had had with a staff officer. "What have you gained from all this?" he said. I said, "An arbitration treaty with Germany." "God help you", he replied, "because that is what we had."²

From the Labour benches Cripps complained that the Government had never had a constructive policy for peace and merely tried to prevent war when the danger of it became imminent. He appealed to Ministers to take up Labour's demand for collective security while there was yet time:

¹ House of Commons Debates, Col.1402.

² House of Commons Debates, 5 October, 1938, Cols.382-91.

"Let us . . . set out to protect what remains of law and order and justice in the world by an alliance of those nations which still believe in these great principles of civilisation. A league of such nations, ready to welcome into their midst any and all who will support these foundations of our civilisation, will yet be strong enough . . . "¹

Nicolson felt that the Government had abandoned the policy Britain had pursued for over two hundred and fifty years, that of preventing the domination of Europe by a single power. Now with the Munich capitulation Germany was the dominant power in Europe. Dismissing the claim that those who stood for moral standards and a settled pattern of international relations were afflicted by a Foreign Office mentality, Nicolson declared: "I thank God that I possess the Foreign Office mind".² It was a speech reminiscent of Cooper's, who like Nicolson had served in the Foreign Office.

The final day's debate was largely anti-climax. There was less criticism of past policy, more emphasis on the need for the rule of law and collective security. Noel-Baker, for example, concentrated mainly on the failure of the Government to make more use of the League of Nations, arguing that in the Covenant system lay the only hope for the future. Similarly Ellen Wilkinson spoke of the "only hope for this country is to build up a collective security system through the League, and no improvisation, however well meant or followed by the prayers of the people or the Prime Minister, can take its place".³ For the dissident Conservatives Gunston spoke of the

¹ House of Commons Debates, 5 October, 1938, Col.417.

² Ibid, Col.433.

³ Ibid, 6 October, 1938, Col.527.

possibility of "setting up a new league", and expressed the hope that the Prime Minister would explore every avenue in order to get "national unity":

"I do hope that it will be possible for the Prime Minister to announce a foreign policy which can unite the nation, and make it easy for us who at this moment are estranged from his policy to unite in our efforts to make this country of ours strong and of firm counsel in the nations of the world."¹

The Independent Labour Party Member, John McGovern, rose to ask Churchill and others who say "stand up to Hitler", "Do they suggest that we should have gone to war in these circumstances, with the tremendous loss of life that would have taken place in that catastrophe?" He felt that under the circumstances "the right thing was done".² This was the judgement also of Grigg, who had attended the meeting at Morpeth Mansions on 26 September. In view of this it is somewhat surprising to find Grigg asking and answering the question: "Would the Prime Minister be right in these circumstances . . . to lead the people of this country and of the Empire into war? I am bound to say that my answer, every day and every night throughout that period, right to the end, was, 'No'." The key to his attitude was his comment that the rearmament programme and the organisation of the country was not sufficiently developed to meet the crisis which had come. But he believed it was possible to develop the strength to "build up peace on a broader basis" by rallying the nations "which

¹ House of Commons Debates, 6 October, 1938, Col.539.

² Ibid, Col.533.

want decent behaviour" and "military reorganisation on a very large scale".¹

Attlee's speech closing the Opposition's case was pitched lower than his previous one, and the Prime Minister noted this when he made the final speech on the Thursday afternoon. The Government, Attlee said, were asking for a vote of confidence and calling upon the House to support its efforts to secure a lasting peace. "Everybody in this House and in the country will want to see efforts made for a lasting peace. Everyone wants to see these efforts succeed".² But there was nothing in the Government's methods and policy which they had pursued for the last seven years to suggest success. In reply, Chamberlain contended that if British policy were based on the view that any sort of friendly relations with totalitarian states were impossible, that the assurances given him personally were worthless, and that those states were bent upon the domination of Europe, then war was inevitable. This being so "we must arm to the teeth", making "military alliances with any other Powers whom we can get to work with us". Some members referred to this as "collective security" but to the Prime Minister it was only a return to entangling alliances and power politics - "a policy of utter despair". Not believing in the inevitability of war Chamberlain set out the alternative: "we should seek by all means in our power to avoid war, by analysing possible causes, by trying to remove them, by discussion in a spirit of collaboration and goodwill". Undeterred by the strictures of his critics Chamberlain closed the debate firm in the conviction "that by my action . . . I did avert war. I feel

¹ House of Commons Debates, 6 October, 1938, Cols.535, 537.

² Ibid, Col.541.

perfectly sure I was right in doing so."¹

The Prime Minister's closing remarks - as did those of his ministers - reveal that it was on the fundamental issue of war and peace that the Government based their case. "I feel convinced by my action I did avoid war" said Chamberlain, while Simon asked "How many of those among us are there who, if we could undo what was then done, would reject the settlement to which the Prime Minister put his hand on Friday, and instead - because it was the only alternative - would fling the world into the cauldron of immediate war?" These and other contributions to the debate convincingly support Sir John Wheeler-Bennett's argument that on this issue, save for Cooper, "no member of the House was sufficiently of himself to stand up in his place and say that the terms of the Munich Agreement should have been rejected at the price of war".² But the same writer goes too far when he comments that "it was clear from the debate that very few of the Prime Minister's critics, had they been responsible for the direction of affairs, would have picked up the gage". On the contrary the opposition elements - the Labour and Liberal Parties, save for a handful of members, as well as the Conservative dissidents - while pressing on the Government a policy of firmness, believing that a strong and united stand by Britain, Russia and France would prevent war, were ready, if such had not been the case, to face the alternative. "If war should come", said Attlee, on the 26th, "we must meet it with the courage our people have displayed in the past", and similar statements emanated from the Liberals and Conservative dissidents

¹ House of Commons Debates, 6 October, 1938, Col.545.

² Munich, Prologue to Tragedy, p.184.

prior to Munich. Thus, Naylor, in his assessment of Labour policy in the thirties, has written that "given power, Labour would have reaped the consequences of war in 1938: the party could not but have gone to war in defence of Czechoslovak integrity", and certainly the Liberal Party and the dissident Conservatives would have acted similarly.¹

But the fact remains that none of the opposition elements, during the four day debate, openly stated that the Munich terms should have been rejected at the price of war, although a few days earlier they would have been willing to pay that price to prevent a mutilation of Czechoslovakia on the Munich scale. Were they being inconsistent in evading the issue of peace and war, as Wheeler-Bennett has assumed, or did they have reasonable grounds in acting as they did?² A point that Wheeler-Bennett has minimised is that the opposition members were none too sure that there would have been a war, and were ever conscious, indeed some were convinced, of the possibility that a determined attitude on the part of the Prime Minister might well have averted war with Germany and prevented the division of Czechoslovakia and the humbling of France and Britain. This view rested on two assumptions. Firstly, the belief that Hitler was bluffing in his

¹ Labour's International Policy, p.260.

² Wheeler-Bennett also maintains that the party's failure to interrupt Chamberlain's speech of the 28 September in order to protest against the acceptance of the Berchtesgaden terms illustrates its avoidance of the central issue of peace and war. Considering the circumstances in which the sitting was held it is not surprising that members became hysterical and did not appreciate (with a few exceptions) the full import of what was happening. It was, in Nicolson's phrase "a Welsh Revivalist meeting", and no great significance should be placed upon it. Diary entry, 29 September, Diaries and Letters, p.372.

resoluteness for war, as they felt he had been in May. In fact Hitler may then have been innocent of aggressive intent, but the crisis resulted in the view that he gave way to a display of force thereafter finding favour. Naturally Government supporters had tried to undermine this view during the debate. "I know that there are not a few people", said McEwen, "who consider that it would not have meant war, and that had we but made a firm stand at one stage or other of the proceedings, Germany would have climbed down . . . It is based wholly on the assumption that Hitler was bluffing, but we have no right to make any such assumption".¹

Was Hitler, then, bluffing or not? It is true that the German General Staff were strongly opposed to war and at the Nuremberg trials General Keitel declared that Germany would not have been strong enough to fight in September 1938. Yet Hitler had continually overruled his General Staff. The secrecy of his partial mobilization on 27 September does not suggest bluff; he had been in a black mood at Munich and his remark to the S.S. afterwards that "that fellow Chamberlain has spoiled my entry into Prague" implied that he really had been hoping for an excuse "to smash Czechoslovakia". But a local war to crush a neighbour, which was what Hitler had been working for, was somewhat different from the general war that seemed probable in the days prior to Munich.² Certainly Mussolini dreaded being dragged into a European war and this may have given Hitler cause to think, although from what we know of German diplomacy during the

¹ House of Commons Debates, 4 October, 1938, Col.208.

² Hitler's policy was similar in 1939. He strove to isolate Poland, and partially succeeded with the Russian Pact. On 3 September an embarrassed Hitler told his chiefs that "against all his hopes, now war against England was imminent". "It was an embarrassment such as I had never noticed in Hitler", according to Admiral Raeder, testifying at Nuremberg. The Guardian, 1 January, 1970.

Polish crisis he himself may well have been averse to fighting a war that would automatically escalate to several fronts. Maisky, the Soviet Ambassador, may well have been right - in 1938, as well as 1939, from when this comment is drawn, when he told Lord Halifax that Hitler was not a fool, and that he would never start a war against major powers on two fronts, "a war he would be bound to lose".¹

The other assumption in the mind of the Government's critics was the chance of an upheaval in Germany, either overturning Hitler or forcing him to reverse his policy to avoid war. Wheeler-Bennett, in his Nemesis of Power tells the story of how the German Generals, convinced that nothing would stop Hitler starting a war which would be the end of Germany, had planned his arrest upon the declaration of war on Czechoslovakia, but their plans were upset first by Chamberlain's flight to Godesberg and then irreparably by his agreement to negotiate at Munich.² In fact the British Government was aware, through secret emissaries from Germany, of this tentative scheme, but they could hardly be expected to shape their policy simply on the strength of such information. In any case one must not under-estimate the technical difficulties, the personal risk, the struggle of divided loyalties involved in any attempt to supplant Hitler. And if Munich did ruin a plan to remove him, it is legitimate to ask why the eventual resistance of the West twelve months later did not favour a similar coup, although it might be argued that the war then took place in more favourable circumstances for the Germans. In fact, no coup materialized until July 1944 and was then a failure - as indeed the doubts of the conspirators suggest it could well have been in September 1938, even if it had been attempted.

¹ The Guardian, 1 January, 1970. Quoted from a Cabinet record of a meeting held at Geneva on 21 May, 1939.

² Nemesis of Power, p.425. See also The Gathering Storm, pp.274-77.

Of course it is possible that Hitler might have succumbed to a coup. Certainly on this assumption Munich can be blamed for the appalling holocaust of the Second World War. It seems more probable however, that if the West had stood by Czechoslovakia Hitler would have remained in power whether or not war ensued. Such speculation reveals that the question of peace and war was not absolutely clear-cut, and thereby it provides grounds - however slender this may be in retrospect for the case of the Government's critics - for the views of those on both sides of the divide. Consequently Naylor is perhaps a little too conclusive in taking the view that "the alternative to Munich was war, and war alone", a view that he himself somewhat undermines by remarking that the possibility of the generals acting, had Chamberlain stood up to Hitler, "remains to intrigue the speculative mind".¹

But there was another reason why they hesitated to nail their colours more firmly to the mast. Chamberlain's policy was unquestionably approved by the great majority of his countrymen, if not most other peoples. Peace had been saved at the eleventh hour and as Amery commented "the whole world breathed again, and was grateful to the man who had delivered it from the abyss of war. Congratulations and heartfelt blessings poured in on Chamberlain from every quarter . . . from tens of thousands of simple folk all over the world".² The view that most Britons were "delirious with enthusiasm" for what Chamberlain had done is supported by a survey conducted by Mass Observation at the time of the crisis, although this also reveals that the "widespread enthusiasm turned to questioning and even hostility" when the actual

¹ Labour's International Policy, pp.252, 258.

² My Political Life, p.282.

terms of the partition were being carried out.¹ This, however, was not to be for some days, and consequently, during the debate, critical speakers were only too aware that the people of Britain would not have endorsed the rejection of the Munich terms, which the Government argued could only have been done at the price of war. The opposition elements were therefore daunted from making too fierce an attack on the Government and compelled, in effect to tone down their speeches of condemnation, through fear of antagonising public opinion, and paving the way for Chamberlain to take advantage of their outright opposition by calling a snap election. Although intensely disliking the settlement and the bilateral agreement with Hitler, they nevertheless managed to let their heads get the better of their hearts and did not make much capital out of Munich, until it was safe to do so.² It was too popular, at least momentarily, in the country, as Emmanuel Shinwell recalled:

"The Labour Opposition, fearful that Chamberlain would go to the country and be returned with an even larger Tory majority on the votes of an electorate who had been informed that they had just escaped being blown to pieces in their homes, did nothing but attempt to score minor party points."³

¹ Britain by Mass Observation, quoted in J P Jupp's MSc thesis, The Left in Britain, 1931-41, p.73.

² Even the comparatively mild terms of Labour's motion censure resulted in a letter from George Lambert to The Times announcing that if "this motion is persisted in tomorrow, it will be a clear duty, however much we MPs may dislike it, to immediately let the country decide whether or not the Government has its confidence. Foreign policy involving issues of war or peace is too momentous to let drift". The Times, 6 October. Lambert was the Member for South Molton.

³ I've Lived Through It All, p.144.

A criticism of the opposition, in its broadest sense, that Wheeler-Bennett surprisingly did not go on to make is that if war had resulted from the pursuit of its policy in 1938 very little thought had gone into the question of how Britain and her proposed allies would have fared vis à vis Germany. From reading speeches and memoirs a certain naivety or ill-founded optimism becomes evident in the general assumption that the forces available were more than a match, collectively speaking, in a struggle with Germany. Although it was recognised that Britain had a certain leeway to make up in the air there appears to have been no fundamental examination of other weaknesses within the proposed allied camp. Perhaps this is asking a little too much of politicians who lacked the full resources and information available to Ministers of State, but it is a telling criticism and one which will be returned to later.

Apart from the issue of peace and war the debate throws light on the differences of approach and emphasis between the Government and its critics and amongst both sides as well. On the Government side - that is those supporting the administration at Munich - two inter-related tendencies appear to emerge: the one, while accepting that there would be no relaxation in the rearmament programme, placed greater emphasis, if not enthusiasm, on the development of that new era of which the Prime Minister was confident the foundation had been laid at Munich; the other, while hopeful of the eventual outcome of Chamberlain's initiative, was equally convinced of the urgent necessity for making use of the breathing-space acquired by Munich to complete the rearmament programme as rapidly as possible so as to prevent Britain finding herself in a similar situation in the near future. The two tendencies were apparent at a Cabinet meeting held on 3 October. The Minister of Health, Walter Elliott, asked the

Prime Minister for guidance on the question of armaments, mentioning that "one view which is strongly held in certain quarters was that we must never again allow ourselves to get into the position in which we had been in the last few weeks, and that every effort should be made to intensify our rearmament programme".¹ Following Halifax's appeal that he hoped nothing would be said which would preclude proper consideration of the need for such intensification, Chamberlain made his own position clear. Ever since he had been Chancellor of the Exchequer, he had been oppressed with the sense that the burden of armaments might break our backs. This had been one of the factors which had led him to the view that it was necessary to try and resolve the causes which were responsible for the armaments race. He thought that we were now in a more hopeful position, and that the contacts which had been established with the Dictator Powers opened up the possibility that we might be able to reach some agreement with them that might stop the armaments race. It was clear, however, that it would be madness for the country to stop rearming until we are convinced that other countries would act in the same way. For the time being, therefore, we should relax no particle of effort until our deficiencies had been made good. "That, however, was not the same thing as to say that as a thank offering for the present detente we should at once embark on a great increase in our armaments programme".²

Four weeks later, again in Cabinet, Chamberlain spoke of his policy as being solely one of appeasement:

¹ It is interesting to note that Elliot was one of the ministers disturbed by Chamberlain's activities during September. The others were Cooper, Oliver Stanley, Winterton and Earl de la Warr.

² Cabinet Minutes, 3 October, 1938.

"We must aim at establishing relations with the Dictator Powers which will lead to a settlement in Europe and to a sense of stability . . . A good deal of false emphasis has been placed on rearmament, as though one result of the Munich Agreement had been that it would be necessary for us to add to our rearmament programme. Acceleration of existing programmes was one thing, but increases in the scope of our programme which would lead to an arms race was a different proposition."¹

Seen in this light the defence of Munich - and by implication a criticism of the alternative course propounded by the opposition - that it was an astute act of diplomacy by which the Prime Minister had cleverly bought time to complete Britain's defences is quite unfounded. Quintin Hogg, for instance, argued that Munich "was an absolutely legitimate step in the circumstances of 1938, and that, but for Munich, the war which would have broken out might have followed a course less favourable even than the events of 1939-41". In support of his view he quoted Field-Marshal Lord Birdwood, who wrote "there has been some criticism (much of it wise after the event) of Chamberlain's conduct of the Munich negotiations; but to my mind he deserved our deepest gratitude for winning us that all important breathing space before the storm broke. Without that year . . . we should have found ourselves in little better case than some of the countries which the Nazis have ravished".² The extra year may or may not have had that effect, and it has to be

¹ Cabinet Minutes, 31 October, 1938.

² Birdwood, Khaki and Gown, p.430.

admitted that the Chiefs of Staff advised delay - "from the military point of view time is in our favour, and that, if war with Germany has to come, it would be better to fight her in say six to twelve months time, than to accept the present challenge" - although their report does not lend any support to the alarmist language of Birdwood. But one thing is certain, that Chamberlain's course in September 1938 was not dictated by Britain's unpreparedness for war, and this holds true even if it is conclusively settled that it would have been in Britain's interest to challenge the Nazis in 1939.¹

That is not to say that this was not in the minds of some of Chamberlain's supporters. There were those on the Government side it is true, including some of Churchill's rearmament lobby associates like Grigg and Page Croft, who viewed the settlement partly in these terms but clearly Chamberlain - the chief architect of appeasement - did not. Although it later became convenient to defend Munich in breathing space terms, and embarrassing, if not politically dangerous, to mention the golden era that was expected to flow from it, this should not blind us from the essential truth that the latter view was

¹ 'Note on the question of whether it would be to our military advantage to fight Germany now or to postpone the issue', Cabinet Memorandum 544, 20 September, 1938. The Note surveyed British and French strengths and weaknesses - the overwhelming naval superiority, the rough balance in land forces, German superiority in air power through which lay "Germany's only chance of obtaining a quick decision" - as at September 1938, and then assessed the position in six to twelve months - sea power virtually unchanged, Germany stronger on land than France and Britain, German air ("the crux of the whole matter") superiority greatly reduced "provided that we make the necessary effort to catch her up, or at least greatly reduce her lead . . . By so doing we shall have heavily insured ourselves against the greatest danger to which we are at present exposed; indeed by substantially reducing Germany's only chance of a rapid decision, we shall have provided a strong deterrent against her making the attempt."

uppermost in Chamberlain's mind when he signed the pact. Cooper, still a Cabinet member at Munich, was to be intensely aroused by this retrospective and what he felt to be false defence of Munich, and, mindful of the fact that it undermined any criticisms of the conduct of foreign affairs leading to the settlement, attempted on several occasions to rebut it:

"I did my best . . . to denounce a false belief which still exists and which occasionally makes its appearance . . . It is asserted by those who are insufficiently acquainted with the facts, that the policy which culminated at Munich was dictated by a lack of preparedness for war, that the country could not possibly have gone to war owing to the deficiency of armaments. Had this been true it would have constituted a fearful indictment of the Government. But it was not true. No Minister had any doubt, so far as I am aware, as to the ability of Great Britain to win the war that threatened in 1938. Owing to the shortage of anti-aircraft precautions, much damage and suffering might have been sustained in the early stages but there was no reason to fear the ultimate result."¹

Far from thinking Munich a necessary evil in view of Britain's lack of preparation, Chamberlain "thought it was a satisfactory outcome of a very difficult situation and also that it was the beginning of a more hopeful period and that he would be able to settle other questions in the future".²

¹ The Second World War, p.82.

² Ibid, p.77.

From the dissident Conservative side came a strong appeal for "a great national effort" to alert the British people to the fact that all was not well in Europe and that sacrifices of one kind or another might soon be demanded of them. This involved "an effort at rearmament the like of which has not been seen", especially to the establishment of security in the air, as well as other measures, including the compilation of a national register, the mobilisation of industry and the setting up of a Ministry of Supply. This was coupled with a call for a new kind of national government, which did not necessarily mean the resignation of Chamberlain, though most dissidents hoped for this, but at least the inclusion of men like Churchill and Eden in the Cabinet, as well as members of the Opposition Parties. Neither the Labour nor the Liberal Party shared this notion, for they had already passed the point where co-operation in a Chamberlain Government was even a vague possibility. The previous May, in fact, Lord Halifax had made a private approach to Ellen Wilkinson on the need for a national government "on a wider basis than at present". She told him how much the Labour Party "hated the Prime Minister . . . Labour would be prepared to co-operate provided the Prime Minister went".¹

Lord Halifax also suggested this course to Chamberlain in the taxi on the way back from Heston: "by the time he (Chamberlain) met the House of Commons on Monday he ought to have reconstituted his Government, bringing in Labour, if they would join, and Churchill and Eden. He seemed surprised, but said he would think it over. Nothing happened however, and I have often wondered whether or how the course of history might have been changed if he had acted in the sense that

¹ Harvey, diary entry for 12 May, 1938.

I suggested". Halifax need not have wondered: Labour would not have joined in 1938, and nor did they in the supreme crisis of war; and neither would Chamberlain have invited them knowing that their inclusion would have meant the modification of the foreign policy for which he had striven so hard and unceasingly throughout 1938.¹

Appeals for a return to the principles of the League were powerfully voiced by both the opposition parties as well as the dissident Conservatives. Although this was a somewhat nebulous suggestion in the minds of some Labour members, for the majority of Labour and other Government critics the collective approach really amounted to a defensive alliance of contented powers, which would be basically confined to Europe, but able to confront the aggressor with overwhelming force. In effect, it was argued that Britain, with a powerful navy and an increasing air force, was herself relatively secure and, therefore, able to take the lead in setting up a coalition of France, Russia and the states in Eastern Central Europe. Once their forces were co-ordinated the great coalition would either be a deterrent to Germany or should that fail, a victorious alliance.

Such an alternative to the continuance of appeasement rested, like that policy itself, on a series of shaky assumptions, just as it always had. France was bitterly divided and demoralized - the more so now after Munich - her Government irresolute and her strength persistently over-estimated by Government and critic alike. Churchill, for instance, wrote in April 1938, two years before the disastrous campaign of 1940, "Those who know France well . . . see what is not

¹ Fulness of Days, p.200.

apparent to the careful observer. They see the French Army always on the watch. Part of it mans the ramparts around the country. The rest constitutes the most perfectly trained and mobile force in Europe".¹ Contrary to Churchill's mobility view, the French General Staff were highly pessimistic over their chances of penetrating the Siegfried Line: "une bataille de la Somme modernisee" General Gamelin predicted gloomily.

The third great partner in this combination was Soviet Russia, and her intentions were somewhat uncertain - she might have been content to remain neutral while the European Powers exhausted themselves in war - while as an ally she was an unknown quantity. Perhaps if those pressing for a Russian alliance had foreseen the Finnish Campaign of 1939-40 their resolution might have been shaken, but of course, one must also take into account the supreme efforts of the Russians after 1941. Also envisaged was the support of the smaller European states, but that was not altogether a source of strength, as the events in Poland, Yugoslavia and Greece were later to show. But Czechoslovakia might earlier have proved a different kettle of fish: the 36 divisions of the Czech army, aided by their Sudeten fortifications, were likely to have given a good account of themselves.

Overall, however, there seems to have been a certain ill-founded optimism amongst the opponents of appeasement - Labour, Liberal, Conservative alike - concerning the strength of their alternative and how it would fare, if it failed to preserve peace, and war did break out. Very little thought or detailed examination appears to have been given to the military strengths and weaknesses of the various

¹ Churchill, Step By Step, p.38.

countries, rather the assumption seems to have been made that, taken as a whole, warts and all, the proposed combination would either deter Nazi Germany from making war or, should that fail, ultimately have the measure of her in the ensuing struggle.

Nevertheless, one must not forget that Chamberlain's appeasement policy also rested on a series of assumptions, perhaps somewhat flimsier assumptions than the above. It is worthwhile remembering that the defensive alliance cum collective security policy - with its weaknesses, perhaps even graver by March 1939 - was the one that Chamberlain ultimately pursued once appeasement had proved barren. Before dismissing (as Thompson does) this alternative course, therefore, it would be wise to consider whether one is thereby making insensible the policy pursued after Prague in 1939. The truth is that neither policy was as rosey as its adherents presumed, although Chamberlain was to be totally disillusioned ere it was discovered that the alternative course had flaws too.

Rock has written that there was a stronger emphasis in dissident Conservative ranks "on the necessity of a great increase in armaments", as indeed there was, but he goes on to write that Labour was still reluctant to push rearmament at Munich. In fact, Labour's reluctance to support British rearmament is a continuous theme throughout Appeasement on Trial. "The country", Rock wrote, "was faced by an astonishing paradox. The Conservatives were in favour of armaments on the understanding that they would not be used, and the Labour Opposition was in favour of using armaments on the understanding that they were not to be provided. It was because of this contradiction in Labour policy that the opposition to appeasement of the dissident Conservatives appears to have been more logical, and, in fact, more

influential in the country."¹ Apart from the sweeping nature of the statement, it will just not do. True there had been an ambiguity in Labour policy, but it had ceased in the summer of 1937 when the party had abandoned its opposition to rearmament. Thereafter the party supported the Government's programme, and at Munich Dalton was moved to say that "one of the things which has given us most concern in these recent months is evidence that the defences of this country are most inadequate".²

Whatever their differences the one thing that pulled Churchill and Attlee, Eden and Sinclair, Cooper and Gallacher, together, at least in debates, was their rejection of the Prime Minister's optimistic interpretation of Hitler's intentions. Attlee felt that the crisis was due to Hitler's decision "that the time was ripe for another step forward in his design to dominate Europe", while Sinclair commended to Chamberlain Mein Kampf as the true expression of Hitler's opinions and intentions which has "never yet let me down".³ Similarly Churchill was convinced "there can never be friendship between the British democracy and the Nazi Power, that Power which spurns Christian ethics, which cheers its onward course by a barbarous paganism, which vaunts the spirit of aggression and conquest, which derives strength and perverted pleasure from persecution, and uses, as we have seen, with pitiless brutality the threat of murderous force. That Power cannot ever be the trusted friend of the British democracy."⁴ By contrast Chamberlain felt that "here was a man (Hitler) who could be relied upon when he had given his word", and

¹ Appeasement on Trial, pp.150, 323.

² House of Commons Debates, 3 October, 1938, Col.148.

³ House of Commons Debates, 3 October, 1938, Cols.54 and 76.

⁴ Ibid, 5 October, Col.370.

that Munich had "opened the way to that general appeasement which alone can save the world from chaos".¹ In retrospect, the latter was a complete mis-reading of Hitler, and of what had been accomplished at Munich, but an illusion shared - or gone along with - by the majority of the Prime Minister's supporters. This then was the real issue which divided the sides at Munich: it was not a question of peace or war but rather one of faith (coupled with works - rearmament wise, on the part of some Tories) or doubt in Chamberlain's hope of obtaining the collaboration of Germany in building a lasting peace for Europe.

The Munich issue cut across party lines (a fact which the Government spokesman R A Butler openly acknowledged in closing the debate on 5 October), and speaker after speaker, from all parties, had risen either to denounce or defend the settlement. It is not surprising, therefore, to find efforts being made to establish some form of concerted protest between the opposition elements. One such initiative had been a statement, issued in the names of all-party MPs and other notables, prior to the debate in Parliament. It said that Britain was in danger of forgetting, to its "lasting dishonour" the price of peace paid by a civilized, brave and tolerant people. "Their surrender under unbearable pressure from us, their allies under the Covenant, has involved an enormous increase in the power of the Hitlerite State . . . Had our policy this last six or seven years been different, this choice between war or submission to evil would never have arisen . . . We desire to record our protest, and our determination to stand in future for a policy which will not expose this country either to dishonour or to disaster." Those

¹ Feiling, The Life of Neville Chamberlain, p.367.

associated with the statement included Nicolson, the only National Government supporter; Liberals: Richard Acland, Mander, Roberts; Labourites: Alexander, Wedgwood Benn, Jagger, Jones, Noel-Baker, Parker, Summerskill, Wedgwood, Wilkinson; Independent: Rathbone.¹

A more interesting initiative was taken by Macmillan, who brought Dalton news that some ministers were anxious for an immediate general election to capitalize on the country's gratitude to Chamberlain. The dissident Tories were disturbed at the possibility that the vote on a motion commending the Government's action might be used as a pre-election test of party loyalty, precipitating another coupon election. Macmillan proposed a joint meeting to discuss the terms of the Labour motion, and Dalton went to Bracken's house where he found Churchill, Eden, Thomas, Bracken and some other dissidents. They were anxious to organise the maximum Tory abstention, both on the Government's motion and on the amendment, and therefore hoped that the latter would not be too patently a vote of censure. Several possible drafts, centering about collective security, were discussed as was the possibility of some co-operation in the constituencies in the event of a General Election. Dalton, encouragingly, said that if anything like a coupon election were tried there should be no great difficulty in seeing that the dissidents were given a clear run.²

¹ The Times, 3 October, 1938. This is the letter referred to in Nicolson's diary: "I go to a meeting in Spear's house, bringing with me a letter drafted by Norman Angell, and which is to go to the Press under the signatures of Cecil, Lloyd and others. I am to get more signatures. The Tories there agree with the terms of the letter, but feel it might do them harm in their constituencies. I telephone their conclusion to Angell in their presence and in so many words. I hope it makes them feel ashamed." Entry for 30 September, 1938, Diaries and Letters, pp.372-73.

² Dalton Papers. Diary entry 3 October, 1938. Also Macmillan's Winds of Change, p.569.

During the debate the Conservatives had met at intervals at Bracken's house in order to determine their course. As Nicolson put it: "Are we to vote against the Government or are we to abstain? We agree that the effect of our action would depend upon its joint character. It would be a pity if some of us voted against, and some of us abstained."¹ Apparently Churchill favoured voting against the Government, and constituting a definite rebel group. By contrast Amery plumped for abstention as enough to mark disapproval of the Government's policy without indicating general hostility. It was better not to separate from the main body as events might bring it round to their point of view. This latter course was agreed upon. However, Chamberlain's winding-up speech on the last day was "so moving" and its promise of a thorough inquiry into the whole of Britain's preparations for defence that both Eden and Amery seriously considered the possibility of voting with the Government. They were dissuaded by their "younger colleagues".²

On the day of the Commons vote, Cripps urged Dalton that Labour should make common cause with the anti-Chamberlainite Tories; he expressed a willingness to put aside socialism if they could agree on a programme to preserve democracy, rebuild collective security and control economic life. Thereupon Dalton informed him of his contacts with the Tory dissidents, which led Cripps to suggest the possibility of an agreement with Churchill, probably Amery, perhaps Eden and Sinclair as well. Envisaging a tremendous response, Cripps hoped to persuade the Labour Executive but was prepared "to break out" if the attempt failed. "This, he said, was a new and desperate situation.

¹ Diaries and Letters, p.375.

² The Unforgiving Years, p.288.

The Labour Party alone could never win. He regarded the old popular front idea as dead, but this move had bigger possibilities. On the last point I agreed with him. To split the Tory Party would be real big politics."¹ Dalton committed himself to such negotiations but pointed out the uncertainty as to which Tories would go along.

Both Attlee, "rather eagerly", and Morrison, more hesitantly, agreed to Dalton's suggestion that talks with the rebel Tories might, in Attlee's words "be very useful". Thus fortified, Dalton raised the matter once more with Macmillan, who persisted in speaking of a "1931 in reverse".² He confessed to some difficulty in welding the dissentients together: Churchill and Cooper were anxious to overthrow Chamberlain and were inclined to join anybody to accomplish that; Eden and other moderates desired "national unity" with everybody. Thereupon Dalton expressed his preference for Churchill in a scrap, as indeed he had indicated in his diary a few days earlier:

"He is much more attractive than the Edens and other gentlemanly wishy washes. He is a real tough and at the moment talking our language."³

The moderate Tories, now that the threat of an early general election had receded, would probably, Dalton felt, draw back into their shells. Macmillan replied that the Conservative rebels had better sort out their problems before holding a further meeting with Labour.

Not wishing to rush the Tories, Dalton did not resume conversations with Macmillan until 12 October, when he learned that the dissidents were still divided on the question of tactics. Many of the Tory

¹ The Fateful Years, pp.200-1

² An influential breakaway from the Conservative Party and a union of Labour and Liberals with Tory dissentients to form a Left of centre 'National' Government.

³ Diary, 3 October, 1938.

dissentients were followers of Eden, and would not move further and faster than he. Apparently Cooper was attempting to build a bridge between Churchill and Eden, and so "unite and energize" the Tory rebels. Dalton, hoping for something more concrete, attempted to arrange a meeting with the dissidents to discuss how attacks and criticism of the Government, from both sides of the House, could converge, both in the forthcoming debate on the Address and on private members' motions. Macmillan favoured this and suggested four lines of attack:

- (1) Munich in retrospect, showing how Hitler had got all he demanded, and that all the talk of guarantee to the Czechs, and of orderly and reasonable procedures, was sheer humbug;
- (2) foreign policy for the future;
- (3) deficiencies in arms and air raid precautions, with strong criticism of the Ministers responsible;
- (4) loss of trade to Germany in Eastern Europe.

This would appeal, Macmillan thought, to many business people. However when Cooper was sounded he would not come without Eden, who would not come at all. Dalton recorded that Macmillan was much disappointed with Eden and "does not know what he is playing at".¹ Of the leading critics, that left only Churchill as willing to attend such a meeting.

What then was Eden "playing at"? By now it was becoming apparent that the hope on which he had been acting since February - that events would come to his aid and place him at the top - did not seem any closer to fulfilment. It is not surprising, therefore, that some soul-searching went on in his immediate circle as to Eden's future course. His ex-secretary, Harvey, weighed up the alternatives:

¹ Diary entry for 12 October, 1938.

"Should he break away from the Party and lead a crusade in the country? Or should he stay just inside the Party, pressing rearmament. Too firm a stand now might force the Prime Minister to have an immediate election, which he might win. There must be an election within the year - a policy of attrition from within, damaging speeches from the backbenches, may be more effective in weakening the hold of the party machine and securing a more easy change-over from the Prime Minister's regime to a wider Government. I gather the balance of opinion of A.E.'s supporters in the House of Commons is in favour of the less heroic course."¹

In character, Eden plumped for that course as well, if anything performing it half-heartedly, wanting if possible "to avoid splitting up the party so as to lead a Right Coalition (Conservatives and Liberals) rather than a Left Coalition (Left-wing Tories and Labour)."² The logic was that if "A.E. goes out on a lone crusade, he must break with his party and every party machine besides his own will be against him. It is too dangerous to split the country now with Hitler at the gate. If he advocates national union, it is very difficult for any party to oppose him".³

Eden's reluctance to come off the fence effectively undercut what might have become a concerted effort to overthrow Chamberlain. In view of his refusal the Labour leaders decided to close the

¹ Harvey, entry for October 8, 1938.

² Ibid, entry for 15 November, 1938. Tom Jones noted this. Eden, he wrote, did not want to become a 'Ramsay MacDonald'. "He is popular with the Left but does not want to bang the door against his return to the Right". A Diary With Letters, p.416.

³ Harvey, entry for 10 October, 1938.

negotiations, on the grounds that a major Tory breakaway was not in sight. Retrospectively Attlee asserted that to make a go of such a combination "about forty or fifty Tories would have had to take it very seriously".¹ In his view, the root of the problem lay in the dissidents' failure to vote as well as talk against the Government: "You could never get the revolting Tories up to scratch. You couldn't get them to vote against the Government. You couldn't get them to vote on your amendment . . . they ran out. You could never get them to stand. It was the surprise of my life when eventually I did see some of them marching into our lobbies in 1940."² Attlee's judgement is not too wholly an accurate analysis of the situation. True, the Edenites did not make a stand, but then most of them did not wish to.³ Their desire was for the gradual winning-over of the Conservative Party, as events proved their diagnosis correct, and only then some form of 'national unity', including Labour. Failing that, co-operation with the Opposition was only a last resort if pressure was brought to bear upon them in their constituencies, in the event of a general election. In any case a revolt, if it was to have any prospect of success, would have required a much more substantial number of rebels than Attlee's figure of fifty, considering the Government's majority was in excess of 200, as the Munich divisions indicated. At no time did the Edenites approach the numbers necessary, and on this basis, even if close co-operation had been obtained with the Labour and Liberal Parties, any attempt to oust the Prime Minister was

¹ F Williams, A Prime Minister Remembers, p.20. -

² Ibid.

³ Save for the exception of Macmillan, Spears, Cartland and one or two others.

at best doubtful in outcome.

Although the reluctance of the Eden moderates to move against the Government must be taken as the principal factor in the failure to bring about a parliamentary front, Labour's attitude is also open to question. Attlee had written in 1937 that he would not rule out a popular front as an impossibility if a world crisis was imminent. Yet in the months after Munich a Conservative revolt - not the imminence of a world crisis - became the precondition of Labour support for a broad front. The breakdown of the parliamentary negotiations may not therefore have been completely the responsibility of the dissidents: Labour's hesitancy and insistence on the rebels making the first overt move must also have played a role. Perhaps if Labour, like the Liberal Party, had taken the plunge certain dissidents might have followed suit.

On 6 October the House divided on the Munich settlement. Greenwood's motion was defeated, 150 to 369; Simon's motion was victorious, 366 to 144.¹ Again the mere statistics of the division do not tell the whole story of the debate. Breaking down the figures it becomes apparent that the Government's vote derived from 327 Conservatives, 26 Liberal Nationals, 4 Liberals, 6 National Labourites and 6 Independents; that of the Opposition, 135 Labourites, 14 Liberals and 2 Independents.² The Government majority was 58 below its maximum strength, but this is misleading as there were 2 whips, a speaker and deputy speaker, three seats vacant and

¹ The difference in the Government vote was due to Boothby, Gretton and Raikes voting against the Opposition amendment but not for the Government motion. Significance should only be placed on Boothby's action.

² The fluctuation in the Opposition vote was because of Liberals Rothschild and White, Labourites Cape, Stokes, Thurtle, Viant and Young not voting on the Government motion.

twelve members paired in support of the motion. Of the remaining 39 a number were either abroad, as for example the Duchess of Atholl, or sick. The Times put the number at 13 but it has proved possible to trace 11 absent Conservatives and 3 Liberal Nationals. Thus we arrive at 26, the true number of Tory abstainers.¹ They were Adams, Amery, Bower, Bracken, Cartland, Churchill, Cooper, Cranborne, Crossley, Duggan, Eden, Emrys-Evans, Gunston, Sidney Herbert, Joel, H Kerr, Keyes, Law, Macmillan, Ropner, Sandys, Spears, Thomas, Wolmer and Nicolson, the only non-Conservative. Boothby is also included although he voted with the Government on the Opposition amendment but abstained on the main motion of confidence.

Among those who obeyed the party whip in the division were Patrick and Tree, members of the Eden Group, and Locker-Lampson and McEwen, members of Focus. As McEwen was the only one of this group to speak in the debate it is only possible to say why he did not abstain. Admitting that he believed in a "German menace and not merely a German Nazi menace" and that at the Rhineland crisis he was "one who at that time was in favour of making a firm stand", he felt that the Government "were right in preserving the peace of Europe at this time" rather than treating the "German challenge to Czechoslovakia on the Sudeten question as a direct threat to ourselves and gone to war".² Although he expressed admiration for the work that Chamberlain had accomplished he failed to outline his reasons for so doing, making no mention of the practicality of appeasement or the advisability of Munich in view of alleged defence shortcomings. Another man who had long been aware of the Nazi threat and yet voted

¹ Thompson put the figure at 22 (The Anti-Appeasers, p.189) while Churchill put it between thirty and forty, The Gathering Storm, p.288.

² House of Commons Debates, 4 October, 1938, Cols.208-9.

with the Government was Grigg. As we have seen, while believing that the Prime Minister "is right when he saw that there is a new dawn and a new hope in Europe at the present time", the whole tone of his speech revealed his conviction that the rearmament and the organisation of the country was not sufficiently developed to meet the crisis which had come.¹

Attempts have been made to compare the anti-appeasers with the appeasers to discover if any economic or sociological factors distinguished the dissidents from the loyalists. It is said, for instance, that the anti-appeasers were representatives of the older landed aristocratic tradition, having "a hereditary sense of the security of the state" and the "toughness of the eighteenth-century aristocracy".² Rather than concerning themselves with self-determination and notions of that sort, the Cecils, Churchill, Eden and their like, took a straightforward view of the balance of power and British survival. The appeasers, in contrast, even Halifax, "were essentially middle class, not aristocrats . . . They came at the end of the ascendancy of the Victorian middle class", a tired generation of "a class in decadence", with no principles, properly speaking to guide them in a world profoundly changing, where the Victorian landmarks were toppling over, their values inapplicable".³ It might be argued that Chamberlain, Simon, Hoare, and Halifax, whose title only dated from 1866, were late representatives of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, and it is certainly true that Salisbury, Cranborne, Eden and Churchill came from the great landed families.⁴ But

¹ House of Commons Debates, 6 October, 1938, Col.535.

² Rowse, All Souls and Appeasement, p.13.

³ Ibid, pp.114-5.

⁴ Others, such as Cooper, Macmillan and Atholl were related by marriage to the great landed families.

Lord Stanley, Oliver Stanley, Lord Stanhope and Earl de la Warr, respectively Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, President of the Board of Trade, President of the Board of Education, and Lord Privy Seal, in the Munich Cabinet, who should have had that "hereditary sense of the security of the nation" patently did not.¹ And there were plenty of non-aristocratic figures on the anti-appeasement side: Adams, Amery, Boothby and Bracken, to name but a few. Once these two facts have been established, any attempt to link together the anti-appeasers and the appeasers simply on the grounds of class bond is futile.

Another historian has attempted to quantify the differences between the "most commonly named supporters of the policy of appeasement" and the "most commonly named opponents of the policy of appeasement" with reference to "age (on the hypothesis that advanced years induce greater caution (or wisdom?)), education (on the hypothesis that certain schools at certain periods might offer distinctive nurture), military service in war-time (on the hypothesis that this might affect willingness to run the risks of war), and direct experience of foreign affairs at a high level, either as a professional diplomatist or as a politician bearing some responsibility for policy". His results, as he admits, were "not very enlightening". The average age of those supporting appeasement was very close to that of their critics (55 as against 51). A very substantial proportion of both groups had been to Eton and then either to Oxford or Cambridge, and

¹ In fact, of the 25 heirs to peerages or younger sons of peers present in the House at the time of Munich, only two were anti-appeasers. A handful of these, however, were not representatives of the older landed aristocratic tradition, their titles, like Halifax's, being of comparatively recent origin, eg Wolmer (Selborne). Eden and Churchill I have not included for they, although blood relatives of the great land-owning families, were further removed than sons.

at nearly the same time; a fact which argued against his notion that there had been a distinctive set to the education of one or the other. Neither group differed substantially in terms of active service with the forces, and the only meaningful disparity, he felt, occurred in the final category. This showed that a substantially higher percentage of the anti-appeasers had the kind of knowledge which came from close acquaintance, mainly professional, with foreign affairs, (21% as against 67%).¹

As the opponents and supporters of the Government analysed above, including civil servants, Foreign Office officials and diplomatists, eminent journalists, and public figures as well as politicians of all parties, are a rather different group from the one studied here, similar categories have been used (the same as on previous occasions) to differentiate the appeasers from the anti-appeasers within the House of Commons.² With only 25 Conservatives in the latter group, the figures for the whole of the party have been used as a comparison on the grounds that the 350 or so remaining Conservatives, the appeasers, must have approximated to the party averages. The results of the analysis are set out as follows.

¹ D L Lammers, Explaining Munich: The Search for Motive in British Policy. See the appendix, pp.13-15.

² The "most commonly named supporters of appeasement" are a somewhat miscellaneous bunch: Tom Jones, Runciman, Hailsham, Simon, Geoffrey Dawson, Inskip, Londonderry, Astor, Hoare, Stanhope, Halifax, Ernest Brown, Kingsley Wood, Neville Henderson, Horace Wilson, Lothian, Robert Hudson, Leslie Burgin, George Ball, Clifford Allen, Margesson, Barrington-Ward, W S Morrison, Hore-Belisha, Oliver Stanley, R A Butler, Dunglass. The opponents were: Horace Rumbold, Amery, Churchill, Eric Phipps, Howard Kennard, Lloyd, Vansittart, Orme Sargent, Nicolson, Dalton, Ralph Wigram, Duff Cooper, Macmillan, Eden, Cranborne, Boothby, Bracken, Sandys.

The average age of the anti-appeasers was 40 years 10 months, a difference of 8 years 6 months from that of the party (49 years 4 months), indicating that rebels largely derived from the younger Conservatives.¹ In education the comparable figures were:

	<u>Party</u>	<u>Anti-Appeasers</u>
Public School	56.2%	88%
University	60.9%	72%

The anti-appeasers on both occasions bettered the party averages, revealing a fairly substantial difference from the loyalists supporting the Chamberlain Government.

The occupation figures were as follows:

	<u>Party</u>	<u>Anti-Appeasers</u>
Land	9.7%	7.7%
Professions	32.3%	30.7%
Armed Forces and Official Services	19.4%	53.8%
Business	40.9%	7.7%

The results reveal a surprisingly high armed forces and official services slant to the dissidents, and although most of these were drawn from the forces a significant minority derived from the Foreign Office. Apart from this the other important facts are the small proportion of Conservative members who came from the ranks of the great landowners, weakening still further the view that the anti-appeasers represented the older landed aristocratic tradition, and the tiny number belonging to the business community at a time when that element was rising as never before. It is possible that this small number of businessmen amongst the anti-appeasers gave Rowse his erroneous impression that the appeasers were essentially middle

¹ Eleven were in their twenties or thirties.

class. But of course one doesn't have to be a businessman to fall into the middle class bracket, as many of the anti-appeasers did by virtue of their professional backgrounds.

The discrepancy between party and dissident figures for those involved in business raises the question as to whether such interests influenced the Government's course in 1938. Was it that Chamberlain's Cabinet thought in terms of business and economic advantage, unlike the men of 1914 who "thought in terms of strategy and military power and national prestige and who . . . paid little heed to the wails of businessmen"?¹ Whatever the truth of this matter, and it would be impossible from these researches to give a definitive answer, at least the occupation figures do not lend support to such a view. An analysis of the 1938 Cabinet - in which the Conservatives were but a part, albeit the major part (15 out of 21) - revealed how small the number of those grouped under business was. A mere three, the same figure as 1914, could be so classified; the much larger number of 9 (as with 1914) were professional, whereas 9 were grouped under armed forces and official services and land as opposed to 5 in 1914. In the light of the latter figures a case could be argued that the 1938 Cabinet was more aristocratic than that of 1914, discomfiting though this may be for the views of A L Rowse.² As with his class argument, that of occupation - for the appeasers - is not a wholly satisfactory theory, and neither is it altogether convincing for the dissidents, although here a slightly stronger case can be made, as we shall see.

¹ B E Schmitt, Origins of the First World War, p.5.

² 1938 peers - excluding, as in 1914 those of the first creation - included De La Warr, Halifax, Stanhope, Stanley, Winterton, Zetland; 1914, Beauchamp and Crewe.

Turning to the electoral results an interesting pattern emerges, as the following table indicates:

	<u>Party</u>	<u>Anti-Appeasers</u>
Unopposed	5.7%	---
Majorities exceeding 10,000 votes	37.0%	30.8%
Others	57.4%	69.2%

Of the rebels, 69.2% (18) represented constituencies where their majorities were less than 10,000, and in fact eleven had majorities of 4,000 or less, seats which could easily change hands at a general election. This, like the members supporting Eden at his resignation, was in direct contrast to previous rebellions where a majority had safe seats. Clearly, on these figures, a large proportion of Munich critics had everything to fear from the wrath of their constituency parties, whips and Central Office, as a result of their intransigence. No wonder that Macmillan, anxious about lobby rumours of a snap election, expressed fears that the Munich vote would be taken as a test of loyalty, and those that abstained would be marked down for destruction and official Tory candidates run against them.¹ Although a dissolution did not take place "the winter months were anxious and depressing to those Conservatives who had criticised and refused to vote for the Munich settlement. Each of us, Churchill wrote, "was attacked in his constituency by the Conservative Party machine, and many there were who a year later were our ardent supporters who agitated against us".²

Although a pattern emerged in the constituencies, and sociological differences existed between the anti-appeasers and the appeasers in

¹ Dalton, The Fateful Years, p.199.

² The Gathering Storm, p.291.

the House of Commons, the really significant fact to be drawn from this survey - as Lammers did from his - was the high percentage of rebels with experience of foreign affairs, either as professional diplomatists or as politicians bearing some responsibility for policy. This leads us to the basic dividing line between dissidents and loyalists at Munich; that a close involvement in international politics yielded the anti-appeasers a clearer guide to the Czech situation and the issues at stake than that which the bulk of the appeasers possessed. That is not to say that all the dissidents were intimately involved in international affairs, but that a tidy proportion were and those that were not took their lead from these.

Indicative of this was Nicolson's comment on the occasion of the votes on the Munich agreement. "We (the abstainers) sit in our seats, which must enrage the Government, since it is not our numbers that matter but our reputation. Among those that abstained were Eden, Duff Cooper, Winston, Amery, Cranborne, Wolmer, Roger Keyes, Sidney Herbert, Louis Spears, Harold Macmillan, Richard Law, Bob Boothby, Jim Thomas, Duncan Sandys, Ronald Cartland, Anthony Crossley, Brendan Bracken, and Emrys-Evans. That looks none too well in any list. The House knows that most of the above people know far more about the real issue than they do."¹ Although there is considerable truth in Nicolson's comment, Thompson has gone too far in interpreting it as proof that those that dissented "included all those on the Government benches who took a particular interest in foreign affairs". It did not. Take for instance the nine representatives of the diplomatic service sitting on the Conservative benches following the election of 1935. Of these only three, Cooper, Emrys-Evans and Sandys,

¹ Diary entry, 6 October, 1938. Diaries and Letters, pp.373-74.

actually opposed Munich while five, Briscoe, Castlereagh, Crichton-Stuart, McEwen and Patrick, entered the Government lobby.¹

Nevertheless, excluding these and one or two others the fact remains, when account is taken of Eden, Cranborne and Thomas at the Foreign Office, Nicolson from the diplomatic service, and other like Adams, Amery, Churchill, Boothby and Spears, who had always taken a close interest in foreign affairs, most of the anti-appeasers knew "far more about the real issue" than the appeasers.

An historian of the British Right, J R Jones, has written that "Appeasement was the policy of the orthodox Tories, of those who were 'progressive' or 'liberal' on domestic matters but who were not really interested in foreign affairs".² It would be a mistake, however, to assume from this statement that the Tories who had indicated disapproval of the Government's Munich policy were drawn from the councils of the die-hards. Anti-appeasement, it might equally be said, was the policy of the progressive Tories, considering the presence, among the abstainers, of Boothby, Adams, Cartland, Kerr, Law and, of course, Macmillan, to mention but a few. As the ideas of some of the aforesaid on state intervention and a planned economy were quite unacceptable to the Conservative Party, it would appear that foreign policy cut across existing party lines, so that on either side of the divide there were die-hards as well as liberals.

The opposition elements were also plagued by a breaking of party lines. While fourteen Independent Liberals voted with Labour, four - D O Evans, Griffith, Holdsworth and Jones - sided with the Government. Neither Sir Francis Acland, who was probably ill, nor

¹ The ninth, J de V Loder, entered the Lords in 1936 on the death of his father.

² The European Right, edited by Hans Rogger and Eugen Weber, p.67.

J P Maclay, who on most important issues aligned with the Government, voted. From this it appears that the Left and the Centre of the party opposed Munich while the Right, including the ex-leader of the parliamentary party, Viscount Samuel, supported Chamberlain's actions. Perhaps Munich marked the parting of the ways for Holdsworth, as later that month he left the Liberal Party and joined the Simonite Group. His constituency association, however, declined to support him and did not re-adopt him as the Liberal Candidate to fight the next election.¹

At the General Election Labour had returned 154 Members and, in the three year period prior to Munich, had won nine by-elections, making a total of 163. Turning to Labour's division figure, at first sight it appears that their numbers had slumped quite considerably from their voting potential, to 135 plus two tellers. If Alfred Short, MP for Doncaster, who died during the summer recess, is excluded it is possible to ascertain that the true number of missing Labour voters was 25. As The Times had listed 12 Government supporters as paired, and there being only two Independent Liberals absent, it would appear that at least 10 Labourites were paired in support of Labour's amendment. Furthermore, both D Williams, MP for Swansea East, and W Brooke, MP for Batley and Morley, who died shortly afterwards, were absent through illness.² Doubtless there were others, considering the high age of some Labourites, and it is possible that some were abroad. It is unlikely, therefore, that Labour abstentions amounted to any more than 13 and there seems little doubt that the bulk of them belonged to the Parliamentary Pacifist Group.

¹ Yorkshire Observer, 5 November, 1938.

² The Times, 7 October, 1938.

Labour's pacifists, in marked contrast to the parliamentary party, welcomed the Munich agreement. Doubtless they felt deeply for the Czechs, but they shared the conviction that the wrongs which war would bring would be immeasurably greater than those in the settlement. Consequently at a meeting on 5 October, over which Lansbury presided, the decision was taken to abstain from voting. The following statement was issued:

"While appreciating the sincere efforts of the Prime Minister and others to avert immediate war, a war made possible by the bankruptcy of European statesmanship, we remain convinced that violence and war cannot bring peace to the world. We, therefore, strongly oppose any intensification of the race in armaments and proposals made by eminent people for industrial and military conscription. Peace will only be secured when nations are willing to co-operate in sharing the resources and the markets of the world, and in complete abandonment by all countries of imperial, economic and political domination. We wholeheartedly support the demand for a world conference of all nations to ensure economic co-operation and the removal of territorial and other grievances."¹

Nine known pacifists' names are unrecorded in the division lists for 6 October. They were: Davies, Lansbury, McGhee, Messer, Salter, Sorensen, Wilson, Barr and McLaren. The latter two were to openly express their gratitude and approval of the settlement. Barr, during the debate, confessed that on hearing of the Agreement reached at

¹ Copy of the statement issued, 5 October, 1938, found in the Lansbury Papers.

Munich "I proceeded to the nearest post office and sent him a telegram of two words: 'Heartiest congratulations'".¹ Five months later, again in the House of Commons, McLaren asked God to "bless the Prime Minister for what he did at Munich". Praising Chamberlain's singular courage he declared that "the time has come as never before when the House must bestir itself to back the Prime Minister".² This unexpected testimonial to the Prime Minister displeased McLaren's fellow Labour MPs and became the subject of comment at a meeting of the parliamentary party, where demands were made that he should explain his statement.³

Tom Johnston also abstained, though not an outright pacifist. In his memoirs he confessed to feeling the "shame and humiliation of Munich" but "hoped secretly that Chamberlain was right that Hitler could be bought off at the expense of our acquiescence in his villainies towards the smaller nations".⁴ Johnston, in fact, displayed the hesitations and uncertainties of one having anti-war convictions while being strongly indignant at Germany's aggressive behaviour towards Czechoslovakia.

To their number may be added Sir Robert Young and Ernest Thurtle, Lansbury's son-in-law, who voted for the Opposition amendment but abstained on the Government motion. This was understandable considering the speeches they had made during the course of the debate. While both condemning the policy that led to Munich, which was why

¹ House of Commons Debates, 4 October, 1938, Col.236.

² The Times, 21 February, 1939.

³ Ibid, 23 February.

⁴ Memories, p.125.

they had voted for the amendment to the main motion, they nevertheless admitted that having got there, where in their view the question was whether "it was to be the Munich Agreement or war", they had chosen the former.¹ Neither Young and Thurtle, nor any of the individuals above, had any influence in determining Labour's official policy throughout the crisis.

Dissent at the parliamentary party's stand was thus confined to a tiny minority, largely made up of pacifists. Yet the impression remains that Labour was more widely split on the agreement than was indicated by the parliamentary vote. Duff Cooper, in an newspaper article written soon after his resignation, claimed that in the Labour Party discipline was stricter than among the supporters of the National Government but "if that discipline were relaxed there is little doubt that a considerable number of Labour members would express their whole-hearted approval of the Prime Minister's policy".² Similarly Feiling, in his biography of Neville Chamberlain, recorded that over the Munich issue the Clydesiders "passion for peace . . . rather outweighed the normal Labour view of how 'collective security' had been betrayed".³ Doubtless Labour Members were tremendously relieved that the prospect of war had, for the moment, diminished, but that is not to say that a considerable body of opinion in the party would have supported Chamberlain if the whip had not been on. According to Price, the Government's course was supported by the pacifists alone while the vast majority of the party, bitterly anti-Hitler, vehemently opposed a policy of surrender to the dictator.⁴ Furthermore,

¹ Thurtle, House of Commons Debates, 5 October, 1938, Col.425.

² Evening Standard, 15 November, 1938.

³ Life of Neville Chamberlain, p.383.

⁴ Letter to D D Giles, 14 February, 1969.

Feiling's reference to the "Clydesiders" passion for peace, is somewhat misleading, since all the Labour MPs representing constituencies bordering the Clyde, apart from David Kirkwood, voted against the Government. In fact it was the 4 Independent Labour Party Clydeside Members who sympathised with Chamberlain's actions and abstained on the vote of censure.

C H A P T E R V I I

FROM MUNICH TO WAR

The Tory Rebels

During the autumn and winter of 1938-39, many of the Conservative dissidents had to face considerable difficulties in their constituencies, where some of their leading officers were ardent supporters of Chamberlain and of Munich. The latter, as it was then suspected but only recently established, were encouraged to "persecute" their Members of Parliament by the Conservative Central Office.¹ Inevitably there were arguments and meetings of the local executive committees and, occasionally, of party supporters, when the discussion was often bitter and the voting close. The plight of the anti-appeasers was made more difficult by the fact that no Conservative newspaper in London or southern England was sympathetic to their opinions, while several were actively hostile. As a result, recorded Eden, it was "not easy for a Member of Parliament without a national following to sway the critical and convince the doubting against the power of the Party machine and the general sentiment for peace".² Those north of the Trent, however, fared better as they had the staunch support of the Yorkshire Post, whose editorials

¹ See Cooper's suspicions, Old Men Forget, p.252. For recent evidence of 'central direction' see Thompson's The Anti-Appeasers, p.192, and Rowse's All Souls and Appeasement, p.86. The latter wrote that he knew "how they (Central Office) treated their own people through my friendship with Cranborne's brother, Lord David Cecil, during these years; the letter-writing campaign against them in their constituencies, the attempts to bring them to book, force them to subscribe to what they knew was lunacy".

² The Reckoning, p.32.

showed unremitting hostility to the policy of appeasement.¹

The dissidents later testified to the bitterness with which these battles were fought. Eden wrote that:

"Differences of this depth of feeling are rare in the history of the Conservative Party. In the period from Munich to the outbreak of war they inflicted wounds which took years to heal.

I was too young to remember, except in general terms, the bitter periods of the Ulster crisis before the First World War, when members of the Conservative and Liberal Parties would not meet even at the dinner table. This later period of Munich was in some ways more disagreeable because the tensions were in our Party. Altercations were frequent and could even lead to blows, as when the late Lord Salisbury had his face slapped by an overwrought Conservative Member of the House of Commons."²

Eden's successor as Prime Minister also recorded that there have been "many conflicts in my political life which at the time were fought with energy and even anger, but they were quickly forgotten. It is only in this case that the memory dies hard".³ Cooper, too, testified to the "great bitterness" that arose. "Political

¹ The leanings of the Yorkshire Post are perhaps explained by the marriage of Eden, in 1923, to the daughter of Sir Gervase Beckett, the proprietor of the newspaper.

² The Reckoning, p.32.

³ Winds of Change, p.573.

acquaintances cut me, and one old friend, on learning that I was to speak at a ward meeting that had been arranged to take place in his house, cancelled the meeting rather than to allow me to cross the threshold".¹

Indicative of the growing tension and the tide that now ran against the opponents of Munich was a speech made by the Marchioness of Londonderry, when she opened a bazaar of the Wallsend Conservative Association in Newcastle, on 26 October. She said that members of the Conservative Party who might be described as "pink" would have to fix their course definitely in the near future. "We are living in hectic times, and in the near future we are going to be faced with an insidious campaign not only from our enemies but from the "pink" people inside our ranks . . . These "pink" people must either remain white or go red."²

Of the "pink" people Viscount Cranborne, despite his family's great Conservative tradition, confessed that he was experiencing difficulties with his "local blimps" but had managed to extort from them "after a very long wrangle, a free hand to say what I like about the Government's foreign policy. They all think the same, that I am (a) a Socialist, (b) a war monger and (c) a poison pen against the Prime Minister. I don't know what has happened to the Conservative Party. They seem to me insanely shortsighted and wrong-headed."³

¹ Old Men Forget, p.243.

² Liberal Magazine, November 1938.

³ Cranborne to Lord Robert Cecil, 16 October, 1938, Cecil Papers.

Within two weeks of Munich, Duncan Sandys informed Dalton that attempts were being made in his Lambeth constituency, and in all the others, to displace the rebel members. Shortly, he said, there would be a meeting of his executive at which "a pistol would be pointed at his head and he would be asked to promise to give wholehearted support to the Government in the future". Rather than give way he would "consider the possibility of resigning and facing a by-election".¹ Sandys, in fact, failed to give the undertaking that his executive required so that a motion of no confidence was eventually brought forward against him. On the eve of the meeting of the Association to discuss the motion, Sandys was struck down by a bout of pneumonia and it was therefore delayed and, owing to Hitler's violation of the Munich agreement, it never took place.²

Of the others apparently J P L Thomas had to face continuing opposition in his constituency, while Barbara Cartland recorded how her brother, Ronald, had to put up with "the violent disapproval" of many of the King's Norton Conservatives.³ Following protests by Conservatives in their constituencies, Boothby, Macmillan and Nicolson had to attend meetings to explain their failure to support the Government, although all three later received votes of confidence. Spears also recorded how he too faced continuing sharp criticism at the hands of some of his erstwhile supporters, criticism which was not stilled until Britain entered the war.

¹ Dalton Papers, Diaries - entry for 18 October, 1938.

² Private information.

³ B Cartland, The Isthmus Years, p.56.

Cooper, too, had a hard time. The executive committee of his division questioned him for over an hour on the Government's position and his own personal views. At length they passed a resolution respecting his action but went on to declare that they were "in complete agreement with the actions of the Prime Minister and with the policy of the Government, and are satisfied that Mr Duff Cooper, as long as he remains Member of Parliament for the St George Division, will direct his efforts and ability to the preservation of unity in the party and will support the Government, especially in the strengthening of the defences of the country". To ensure that Cooper kept in step they left themselves free to adopt another candidate at the next election, a clear warning to the ex-minister not to take things too far.¹

But what of the arch critic, Churchill? Recently it has been claimed that he managed to put off the meeting of his local association until 14 March, 1939 - the day before Hitler seized Prague. "It was clear by then that Czechoslovakia was falling apart and Germany was making overt preparations for the take-over. Churchill could afford to take a high line with his constituents".² This is incorrect. The speech that he made to a constituency meeting on 14 March was not the occasion of the association's consideration of his conduct during the Munich debate. Matters came to a head before then and Churchill found it necessary to make it clear that if a resolution of censure was carried he would resign and fight an immediate by-election. With the assistance of a strong circle of determined friends who "fought the ground inch by inch" his

¹ The Times, 12 October, 1938.

² Thompson, The Anti-Appeasers, p.194.

organisation narrowly decided by a vote of three to two not to disown him.¹ Opposition, however, did not end there, and certain branches remained in open revolt against their Member. News of the continuing difficulties that he was facing was apparently circulated in the Sunday Express, and Churchill found it necessary to write to Beaverbrook expressing annoyance and intimating that it should cease.²

Amongst the rumblings of discontent one is particularly noteworthy. It emanated from C N Thornton-Kemsley, Chairman of the Chigwell Unionist Association (where there had been a clean sweep of Churchillians at the annual election of officers, all of them being replaced by Chamberlainites) and a member of Churchill's executive. Thornton Kemsley, soon to be the victor of the Kincardine by-election, said at a Conservative dinner:

"Mr Churchill's post-Munich insurrection was shocking His castigation of the National Government, which we returned him to support, would in any other party but the Conservative Party have earned his immediate expulsion. I feel that unless Mr Churchill is prepared to work for the National Government and the Prime Minister he ought no longer to shelter under the goodwill and name of such a great party. Most of us in the Epping Division agree that Mr Churchill has overstepped the line."³

Churchill felt bound to reply, and in the first of two meetings in his division he said:

¹ The Gathering Storm, p.291.

² Young, Churchill and Beaverbrook, p.130.

³ The Times, 6 March, 1939.

"Critics in my constituency still complain of the speech I made in the House of Commons upon the Munich Agreement. I do not withdraw a single word, I read it again only this afternoon and was astonished to find how terribly true it had all come."

Nevertheless, presumably in a conciliatory gesture, he acknowledged the "fact that the Prime Minister is known to be a sincere worker for peace has had a good effect upon the populations of the dictator countries".¹ A week later, at Waltham Abbey, when the need for soft-pedalling of his views had disappeared, he witheringly attacked those people in his constituency, many active, influential people who went about complaining that he should have remained quiet during the Munich Debate. "Why should I mislead the nation? What is the use of Parliament if it is not the place where true statements can be brought before the people? What is the use of sending members of Parliament to say popular things of the moment, and saying things merely to give satisfaction to the Government whips and by cheering loudly every Ministerial platitude? What is the value of our Parliamentary institutions and how can they survive if constituencies tried to return only tame, docile, and subservient members who tried to stamp out every form of independent judgement? . . . I shall not accept any restrictions upon my free independence."² His speech was reported on 15 March. Already news had come through of Hitler's upsetting the Munich Settlement, an event which resulted in the virtual end of the pressure on the dissidents in their constituency parties.

¹ The Times, 10 March, 1939.

² The Times, 15 March, 1939.

Despite these very real difficulties the only casualty amongst the Conservative dissentients was the Duchess of Atholl. Already she had faced continuing opposition in her association, not only for her outspoken views on Germany but also her support of the Spanish Republicans. In April, 1938, she had been deprived of the whip by Chamberlain, and had suffered a further reverse when her constituency committee, believing the ludicrous accusation that she had sung the "Red Flag" at a meeting to raise aid for the Basque children, decided to reprimand her. Her troubles did not end there. During the summer recess Atholl had gone on a fund raising mission to the United States and naturally, as the visit was in aid of the Basque children, had, in her lectures, touched on the international situation. When news came through of the Munich Settlement feeling became very hostile to Britain, and Atholl attempted to explain why Chamberlain had acted as he did. Gradually, however, misleading reports of what she had said found their way across the Atlantic and the incensed officers of the Kinross and West Perthshire Unionist Association convened a meeting for Atholl to give an explanation of her conduct. Quite undeterred, the Duchess informed the general meeting of the association that she could neither support the Government's foreign policy pursued at the time of the crisis nor that since, and after considerable debate, a resolution was adopted, by 273 to 167 votes, instructing "the executive committee to recommend some other person for adoption as prospective National Unionist candidate for the next election, such candidate to be one who will support the Prime Minister's policy of peaceful understanding in Europe".¹ Atholl immediately resigned her seat and began preparations to fight the by-election as

¹ The Times, 21 November, 1938.

an Independent Conservative, against the hastily adopted official candidate, W M Snadden. Labour did not field a candidate and, under pressure from Sinclair, the Liberal withdrew.

Foreign affairs was the central issue of the campaign for, as The Times commented, "Snadden fought the by-election on the one issue of support for Chamberlain and of appreciation for what he did at Munich, in saving the country from the horrors of war".¹ Atholl, by contrast, pointed to the danger from German expansion and how it could be countered by rapid rearmament and an alliance of peace-loving nations. She received support from MPs of all parties: Dingle Foot, Wilfrid Roberts, Eleanor Rathbone, Josiah Wedgwood, and Vernon Bartlett, fresh from his victory at Bridgwater, all spoke for her. Churchill sent her a letter of encouragement, which was widely reported in the national press. It roundly condemned the idea that MPs should be "delegates of a party organisation"; praised her for the decision to appeal to her constituents ("This is the course which I have always proposed to follow should circumstances require it"); declared that her defeat would be "relished by the enemies of Britain and of freedom in every part of the world" whereas victory would have "an invigorating effect upon the whole impulse of British policy and British defence".² Despite this widespread support, the Duchess - doubtless to the acute dismay of her fellow dissenters - went down to defeat by more than 1,000 votes, although the very severe weather may have been the chief factor in her defeat.

Notwithstanding the substantial pressures from the constituencies the Conservative rebel grouping continued to function at regular

¹ The Times, 23 December, 1938.

² Ibid, 13 December, 1938. Despite such a spirited letter Churchill failed to support Lindsay at Oxford and Bartlett at Bridgwater.

intervals, discussing the situation and exchanging views and information. Nicolson revealed how in November he went to a "hush-hush meeting with Anthony Eden", and in this extract from his diary the difference of emphasis between the two rebel groupings is quite clear. Membership consisted, he wrote, of "all good Tories and sensible men. This group is distinct from the Churchill group . . . I feel happier about this. Eden and Amery are very wise people, and Sidney Herbert is very experienced. Obviously they do not mean anything rash or violent . . . It was a relief to be with people who share my views so completely, and yet who do not give the impression (as Winston does) of being more bitter than determined, and more out for a fight than reform. I shall be happy and at ease with this group".¹

In the event Nicolson, and a handful of other members were to be far from content with the cautious tone of the group. As little as two weeks later he complained that "Anthony still hesitates to come out against the Government".² Macmillan, too, felt the Edenites were oversoft and gentlemanlike, instead of clamouring for Chamberlain's removal. "No man in history has made such persistent and bone-headed mistakes, and we still go on pretending that all is well. If Chamberlain says that black is white, the Tories applaud his brilliance. If a week later he says that black is after all black, they applaud his realism. Never has there been such servility."³

Yet here was the dilemma the dissentients were in: should they go to any lengths - even co-operating with their opponents - in order

¹ Diaries and Letters, 9 November, 1938, pp.377-8.

² Ibid, 24 November, 1938, p.381.

³ Ibid, 11 April, 1939, p.397.

to upset Chamberlain and install a Government that would stand up to the aggressor nations, or should they press, loyally within the party, for the pursuit of a foreign policy of their liking as well as the formation, if possible, of a truly national administration. In short, the alternatives were to subvert or convert. The arbiter of the choice, of course, was undoubtedly Eden and he, for somewhat ulterior motives, chose the latter. 'Critic' in the New Statesman, glimpsed the basis on which Eden was working:

"he is playing not for a Tory split and a new coalition, but for the leadership of the Conservative Party on a policy which he hopes will win Labour and Liberal support. He leaves the door open for possible combinations in the future, but he sticks chiefly to safe phrases about national unity. Make no mistake about it. Mr Eden is very much a Conservative; social reform has crept into recent speeches as if by an afterthought, but really, I'm told, as the result of Lord Baldwin's reminder that national leadership is still the product of domestic as well as of foreign policy."¹

The "less heroic course", as Harvey termed it, was favoured by the bulk of Eden's followers. It is necessary to add that on occasions - which will be studied as they arise - certain of the more determined amongst them were attracted by the prospects of a rapid change in the political scene if more ruthless tactics were adopted. Nevertheless the prevailing ethos of the group remained throughout one of loyalty to the National Government, so much so that the Government whips failed to understand the *raison d'etre* of the Edenites. According to J R J Macnamara they were: "terribly rattled

¹ Critic, 'A London Diary', 19 November, 1938.

by the existence and secrecy of the group itself. They know that we meet, and what they do not like is that we do not attack them in the House. If we came out into the open they would know where they stood. What they hate is this silent plotting. It is no use our saying that we are not plotting at all, that we are too patriotic to demonstrate disunity abroad, and that we are in fact merely a ginger group discussing ginger - that does not convince them. They start from the assumption that we wish to upset the present Government, to force them to take our leaders in, and that we juniors imagine that we shall get some pickings from the victory of our leaders".¹

Eden and his followers continued to be careful about their relations with Churchill, whom they still appeared to regard as a political liability. Nevertheless they maintained a loose connection with Churchill through Sandys and, to a lesser extent, Boothby, who was of course growing increasingly apart from his old friend.

The main fear, which continued to disturb the membership of both groups, was that Chamberlain did not understand the gravity of the British situation following the Munich Agreement. That settlement, termed by Boothby, in a speech at Fraserburgh on 15 October, "Britain's greatest diplomatic defeat since the Treaty of Utrecht", necessitated a "great national effort".² Whatever the Government may have thought of the post-Munich period, the dissentients certainly viewed it as a breathing-space to do the things which ought in their view to have been done before. As Macmillan told his constituents

¹ Nicolson - record of a conversation with Macnamara 31 May, 1939, Diaries and Letters, p.402. Channon, too, saw the group as a conspiracy to "torpedo the P.M.". Diary entry for 1 November, p.175.

² The Times, 17 October, 1938.

at Stockton on 21 October:

"I see nothing before us except to strengthen so enormously the whole of our forces that we shall never again be placed in the humiliating position of having to yield to what is really nothing but a blackmailing demand."¹

Similarly Keyes called for the Government to make a "tremendous effort to rearm and reorganise the national defences on anything like the scale necessary to enable the Prime Minister to go to the next conference and meet on equal terms the dictators who have aspired to dominate the world by force of arms".²

While agreeing that the situation necessitated urgent steps to rectify the weaknesses apparent in Britain's position at the time of Munich, there was no unanimity among the dissidents on the measures required. Of the leading rebels, Eden primarily exerted his post-Munich energies in urging the establishment of a truly National Government. Although he had touched on this in the Munich debate he followed it up by articles in the Sunday Times outlining his conception of a national policy on which men of all parties might agree, and developed his ideas in speeches over the next few months. In a speech at Grimsby on 25 March, typical of many he delivered at this period, he called for the formation of a non-party government dedicated to a two-fold policy: the regimentation of Britain's industry, wealth and power; the unity of the peace-loving nations of Europe in resistance to further acts of aggression.³

By contrast Churchill continued to devote his main energies to the problems of air defence and munitions, and in the latter connection

¹ Liberal Magazine, November, 1938.

² The Times, 8 October, 1938.

³ Liberal Magazine, April 1939. Cowling wrote that "Eden made calls for a Government of national unity" after Prague. Impact of Hitler,

demanded the immediate establishment of a Ministry of Supply. When on 18 November there took place a debate, on a Liberal amendment moved by Seely and Owen, to establish such a ministry, Churchill intervened, making a "terrific attack on the Government".¹ He astonished the House by his statement that the mechanized cavalry units had certainly not more than one-tenth of the establishment required and these, of course, were only light tanks.² "They have been mechanised for over three years mechanised in the sense that their horses were taken away from them." Turning to the general situation he claimed that "we have drifted on in good-natured acquiescence for three whole years, not for three whole years of ignorance or unawareness, but for three whole years with the facts glaring us in the face. We have drifted on and we have drifted down, and the question tonight is sharply, brutally even, whether we shall go on drifting or make a renewed effort to rise abreast of the level of events". Although Churchill begged for 50 Conservatives to follow him into the lobby - not to defeat the Government but to make them act - when it came to the division a handful of Conservatives abstained, while only Bracken and Macmillan followed Churchill's course. Thus was laid bare the divisions in the ranks of the dissenters.

The Prime Minister flatly refused to create such a ministry, although five precious months later Chamberlain belatedly announced the setting-up of a Ministry of Supply with Leslie Burgin as the new

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p.251. In fact, as indicated above, the calls began some months before.

¹ The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.178.

² House of Commons Debates, 17 November, 1938, Col.438.

Minister.¹ Apparently on that occasion the House, "expecting, half-hoping, half-fearing, that it would be Winston, was amazed".²

The Munich crisis, with its dramatic 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 before, made the question of National Service foremost in the mind of Amery. He immediately got in touch with some of those with whom he had been associated in the formation of the Army League with a view to a public campaign to end the voluntary principle avowed by the Government. By the end of October a manifesto was issued which urged, as an immediate first step, the creation of a National Register covering the whole population in order to secure the proper training and allocation of all who offered their voluntary services.³ It went on to declare that the only satisfactory foundation for the future lay in the obligatory systematic training of the youth of the nation for some form of national service.

The manifesto was followed up in January by the launching of the Citizens' Service League as an offshoot of the Army League which, for the time being, was put into cold storage. MPs involved included, as well as Amery, Wolmer, Victor Cazalet, O'Neill, Colonel Ponsonby, Sir Charles Cayzer and William Craven-Ellis. Meetings were organised, advertisements in favour of universal service appeared in the national

¹ In a debate on 8 June Macmillan, commenting on the Government's conversion, said "There must be a traffic jam on the road to Damascus".

² The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, entry for 20 April, p.194.

³ Rising Strength, October, 1938.

press, and the monthly magazine Rising Strength now became Citizen Service. The activities of the Citizen Service League culminated when, on the day of a successful Queen's Hall Rally on 26 April, 1939, the Prime Minister surprised the House of Commons by adopting the principle of compulsory training.

As part of the general agitation against what were considered the half-hearted measures of the Government during the post-Munich period, on 15 November an amendment to the Address was tabled and signed in the names of 38 Members, almost all Conservatives.¹ This motion, in effect critical of the Government, announced "the urgent need of a united national policy, to expedite rearmament upon a scale commensurate with present requirements, and to take those measures for the improvement of the condition of the people and the development of trade and agriculture upon which the prosperity and security of the realm must ultimately depend". Of those associated with the amendment, 19 had abstained over the Munich Settlement; 6 had abstained at the time of Eden's resignation and not at Munich; a further 2, while supporting the Government in the division lobby on the former occasion, signed an amendment deploring the circumstances in which Eden had been forced to resign. Doubtless the other 11, all regular Government supporters drawn mostly from the Right, and including some high-ranking officers, were attracted by the call for rapid and increasing rearmament. Naturally even such a mildly critical motion called for a reply and against the 38 was a counter-motion, signed by 225 back-benchers, assuring the Prime Minister of

¹ The signatories were: Amery, Beauchamp, Bower, Brabazon, Bracken, Cartland, Cary, Churchill, Cooper, Crossley, Duggan, Emrys-Evans, Gunston, Hammersley, S Herbert, H Kerr, Knox, Lamb, R Law, Macmillan, Macnamara, Makins, Marsden, Nicholson, Nicolson, Patrick, Sandys, Simmond, A Somerville, Spears, Storey, Sueter, Thomas, Tree, Turton, Whiteley, Wolmer.

their unqualified support for his successful efforts to preserve the peace.

Within four months, a period that witnessed the Nazi entry into Prague and the abrupt reversal of British policy, another resolution was tabled in the House. It stood in the names of Eden, Wolmer, Cooper, Churchill, Amery and Keyes, and was headed "National Effort to Meet Present Dangers". The resolution was as follows:

"In view of the grave dangers by which Great Britain and the Empire are now threatened following upon the successive acts of aggression in Europe and increasing pressure on smaller states, this House is of the opinion that these menaces can only be successfully met by the vigorous prosecution of the foreign policy recently outlined by the Home Secretary; it is further of the opinion that for this task a National Government should be formed on the widest possible basis, and that such a Government should be entrusted with full powers over the nation's industry, wealth, and manpower to enable this country to put forward its maximum military effort in the shortest possible time."

Thirty-nine members associated themselves with it, and, as the Yorkshire Post commented: "These signatories include all those members, or nearly all of them, who have been associated in the last few months with Mr Eden and Mr Churchill but the motion has attracted such new names as those of F A Macquisten, Sir E W Shepperson, B Beauchamp and C G Lancaster."¹

Of the 39, 23 had abstained at Munich, 3 had associated themselves with the November motion (Beauchamp, Makins, Somerville), while 4 more

¹ Yorkshire Post, 29 March, 1939.

had abstained at the time of Eden's resignation.¹ Among this latter group was Ronald Tree, MP for Harborough, who, according to the Daily Telegraph, had given up his Parliamentary Private Secretaryship to R S Hudson, Secretary to the Overseas Department, out of sympathy with Eden and had now joined his followers.² The other 9 contained several army officers probably attracted by the "maximum military effort" called for in the motion. Within a few days, however, came a reply in the form of an amendment to the original motion. This affirmed "complete confidence in the Prime Minister and deprecated any attempt at such a critical time to undermine the confidence of the House and the Country in the Prime Minister and the Government". Although neither motion nor amendment were debated, the latter attracted 228 signatures. It was but another example of the docility displayed by the Government back-benchers that caused Nicolson to write, in a moment of exasperation, that the "ignorance of the Tory rank-and-file in regard to foreign policy is as terrifying as the prospect of a gardener suddenly driving a Rolls Royce".³

Three weeks later, when Parliament reassembled, 61 Members, led by Amery, signed a motion:

¹ The 39 were: Adams, Amery, Beauchamp, Boothby, Bowler, Bracken, Braithwaite, Cartland, Churchill, Cooper, Cranborne, Crossley, Duggan, G Duckworth, Eden, Emrys-Evans, Glyn, Gunston, Joel, Keyes, Lancaster, Law, Makins, Macquisten, Macmillan, Macnamara, Markham, Nicolson, Patrick, Snadys, Shepperson, Somerville, Spears, Stewart, Tate, Thomas, Tree, Turton, Wolmer. The missing Munich abstentionists were Sir Sidney Herbert, H Kerr, L Ropner; the other Eden abstainers were Macnamara, Patrick, Turton.

² Telegraph, 22 November, 1938. Nicolson's diary reveals that the group occasionally met at Tree's house, eg 3 September, 1939.

³ Diary entry, 14 March, 1939, Diaries and Letters, p.392.

"in favour of the immediate acceptance of the principle of compulsory mobilisation of the man, munition and money power of the nation".¹

The names of Churchill and Eden are conspicuous by their absence but Amery accounted for this. "Eden" he wrote, "feared that the advocacy of any form of compulsory service would be an obstacle to the formation of a National Government. Churchill insisted on the need for concentrating all our efforts on the demand for a Ministry of Supply".²

Despite the omission of Churchill and Eden and a handful of their followers, the number of dissentients was clearly beginning to grow: of the 61 only 21 could be accounted for among the abstainers at Eden's resignation and at the Munich debate. If one excludes these familiar faces, what picture is presented by the remainder, that is the 37 Conservative newcomers? Nothing significant, in fact, emerged from a study of age and education, but in occupation there was an armed forces and official services slant, comparable to the two previous occasions of dissent. In fact 43.2% could be classed under armed forces alone and this, when taken in conjunction with the service experience of members whose occupation fell into the other three categories, reveals that 78.4% had belonged to one branch or other of the forces.³ This perhaps indicates that the

¹ They were: Adams, Amery, W Alexander, A Beit, Boothby, Bower, Braithwaite, Cartland, Carver, C Cayzer, Christie, Cooper, Courtauld, Cranborne, Craven-Ellis, Crossley, Cruddas, Duggan, Emrys-Evans, A Evans, Gluckstein, R Glyn, A Graham, Graham-Little, Greene, Grigg, Hammersley, P Hannon, A Herbert, Joel, Keeling, Keyes, Knox, Law, Loftus, M MacDonald, McEwen, Makins, Macmillan, Macnamara, J Mellor, Nicolson, O'Neill, Patrick, Peake, Peat, Ponsonby, Pilkington, Radford, Raikes, Rankin, S Reed, Sandys, Smiles, B Smith, Somerville, Spears, Wardlaw-Milne, Wilson, Wolmer, Wright.

² The Unforgiving Years, p.300. According to Cowling, Eden actively discouraged his group from supporting conscription when Chamberlain refused to accept it. Impact of Hitler, p.251. From the list of signatories to the motion it does not appear that he was very successful.

latest recruits to the Conservative malcontents, apart from being older, better educated and from safer seats, as the voting figures show, reflected a growing feeling in Parliament, amongst but not solely restricted to members with a martial background, of the need for preparations on a scale commensurate with the dangers of the situation.¹

Unlike previous motions, when an amendment was tabled by loyal Government supporters congratulating "His Majesty's Government on its decision to retain the voluntary system", very few members associated themselves with it. Doubtless the agitation of the above members, coupled with that in the country, played some small part in overcoming Chamberlain's hesitation, leading to the Government announcement, only 8 days after Amery's motion, of compulsory military training for six months of all men between twenty and twenty-one.

With the German seizure of Prague the National Government's policies - both in defence and foreign affairs - came closer to the critics and inevitably the persecution that had been going on since October 1938 was relaxed. Nevertheless the dissenters, instead of closing ranks, continued to make known their dissatisfaction with the Administration's policies, criticizing more vigorously than before, as the violation of the Munich Agreement seemed to prove that they had been right all along. The intensified agitation of the dissidents caused a good deal of irritation in Government circles. On one occasion, according to Channon "Neville was in a rage" and delivered himself of "an angry tirade against the 'Glamour Boys'".²

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They included 2 Brigadier Generals, 1 Major General, 2 Colonels, 5 Lt. Colonels, 6 Majors, 8 Captains, 3 Lieutenants and 1 Wing Commander.

¹ 19 of the 37 had majorities in excess of 10,000.

² Diary entry for 5 May, 1939, p.197.

Channon for his part, had no doubt that Cooper, Eden, Cranborne and, above all, Churchill saw themselves as an alternative Government and felt bound to warn Dugdale, the Government whip, that the dissidents were "becoming restive".¹

Certainly Eden was becoming restive, but not so much with the Government as with his own role over the previous twelve months. By now it was beginning to dawn on him that his interpretation of future events had been erroneous, and instead of elevating him to the premiership, appeared to have diminished his chances of that office. By April he was of the opinion that he should definitely have attacked the Government the previous year, although he could see no value in doing that now.² Thus he no longer spoke of succeeding Chamberlain but more of regaining office, almost at any price. Harvey recorded that Eden was "anxious about the future and the question of his rejoining the Government. Halifax and Stanley have both told him that they want him back but there has been no sign from the Prime Minister. Stanley wants A.E. back with a view to a future combination by A.E. and Halifax, the latter as P.M. and the former as leader of the House of Commons. A.E. would like to work with Halifax in such circumstances and as a preliminary, in order to ensure Halifax's succession, he would like to return soon after Spain has been cleared up. But he feels that by Whitsun at the latest either the P.M. must ask him back or he, A.E., must be free to take an independent line at the election."³

¹ Diary entry for 3 May, p.196.

² Harvey, diary entry for 16 April, 1939.

³ Ibid, entry for 22 February, 1939.

Harvey was of the opinion that although Eden wanted "to be back dreadfully", and "cannot bear to be out of things", he should really prepare himself to be out for a "year or two".¹ Both Harvey and Thomas agreed that Eden should continue to devote himself to the study of internal questions and generally constitute his group on the basis of a New Deal, acting as a ginger group to the present Government and preparing to be the next. "He should inspire the Conservative Party to renew itself and to seek to catch the imagination of the people and of the youth - much as Disraeli had done in the last century". The weakness in such a course of action - significantly for Eden's premiership of the fifties - was, according to Thomas, that Eden was "really only or much more interested in foreign affairs".²

A few days after Prague Eden told Harvey that Churchill and he might soon be invited to join the Government and asked for advice should that contingency arise. Soberly Harvey warned that should the offer materialise he ought to "get in some more of his own followers too (eg Bobbety) or at least insist on, say, Crookshank being brought into the Cabinet - otherwise he risked finding himself again, as last year, unable to enforce his views". Significantly Eden's ex-secretary commented in his diary that "he is over-optimistic of the likelihood of the Prime Minister doing this".³ Eden's optimism lasted at least into the following month, for he again told Harvey on 16 April that he had "some reason for thinking the Government were now thinking of enlarging its basis" by the inclusion of he and Churchill. He

¹ Harvey, entries for 9 March, 16 April, 1939.

² Ibid, 9 March, 1939.

³ Ibid, 19 March, 1939.

would not, however, go back without Churchill, and did not think the latter would go without him. Once again Harvey attempted to dampen Eden's optimism:

"I said I was sure the Prime Minister would not bring him back unless forced to do so: this might happen through a press campaign, or by a revolt in the Cabinet or by pressure from the Central Office."¹

It was Churchill rather than Eden who advanced from the wings onto the stage of the political scene as 1939 progressed, with the latter remarking to Harvey in May that "Winston is fast becoming a possibility as Prime Minister".² That this happened was in part surprisingly due to the Edenites. At the end of June, according to Harvey, there was "great activity" in the Eden group, and what this amounted to was a fresh campaign for the broadening of the Government. Macmillan was to fire the first shot by sending a letter to The Daily Telegraph expressing the urgent need for a national reconstruction. It was hoped that Lord Camrose (the proprietor of The Telegraph) "would take it up and start a press campaign" for the immediate inclusion of Eden, Churchill and Labour. Apparently Camrose was in favour of the campaign, possibly influenced by Eden, who went to see him on the 30th, and it was agreed that the opening shots should be fired on Monday 3 July. The campaign began with a strong article in favour of Churchill being brought back with no specific mention of Eden, an omission that led Harvey to suspect that Camrose preferred the former.³ Channon described the occasion:

¹ Harvey, entry for 16 April, 1939.

² Ibid, 8 May, 1939.

³ Ibid, entries for 30 June, 1 July and 4 July, 1939.

"The Berry (family name of the Camroses) cat is out of the bag, and today The Daily Telegraph produces a full leader of a column and a half demanding the inclusion of Winston Churchill in the Government. It is quite threatening, and the Prime Minister is taken aback by it . . . by the afternoon it was clear that a conspiracy had been hatched. The press lords are to combine in an attempt to force the Prime Minister into inviting Winston into the Government. The Edenites have joined them, hoping to get a Cabinet seat for Eden too.

In the lobby of the House of Commons I overheard Jim Thomas say to Anthony "We cannot count on the Evening Standard. They will let us down." What a clumsy group of plotters they are. But Winston's supporters contend that an invitation to him to join the Cabinet now would be a warning to Hitler that we mean business."¹

Whether the other press lords joined in by prior agreement or not, at all events the campaign continued on the 4th with the News Chronicle and the Yorkshire Post taking up the call to include Churchill. The Daily Mail did so on 5 July, arguing that Churchill's "drive and ability" would be an "asset to the country".² Other newspapers, including the Manchester Guardian, joined in, and the campaign culminated with the Daily Mirror on the 13th describing Churchill as "the most trusted statesman in Britain . . . The watchdog of Britain's safety. For years he pressed for the policy of STRENGTH which the whole nation now supports".

¹ Diary entry for 9 July, 1939, p.204.

² Daily Mail, 5 July, 1939.

After the Mirror article the campaign died down with no sign whatever of a move at No 10. There have been various suggestions as to why Chamberlain did not then include Churchill, thereby neutralising this discontent and strengthening the Government. It is quite true, as the latter suggested, that Chamberlain feared that his entry would be regarded by Hitler as a hostile manifestation, contributing to a worsening of relations between the two countries.¹ We know from the Prime Minister's diary that he did not wish to do anything that might be regarded as a 'challenge' to the dictators.² But was that the sole reason for Churchill's exclusion? Neville Thompson has argued that Chamberlain was unlikely to be anxious to work with a "troublesome, disagreeable" man who had attacked his policy and conduct of affairs so vigorously in recent months.³ In a related vein Sir Samuel Hoare considered that Chamberlain resented "outside pressure. The more, therefore, the Press clamoured for Churchill's inclusion, the less likely he was to take any action".⁴ In fact much of the clamour, far from emanating from Tory circles where there was a "persistent and deep-rooted prejudice" against Churchill, came from outside and was thus unlikely to move Chamberlain.⁵ Whatever the reason, and the

¹ The Gathering Storm, p.315.

² Life of Neville Chamberlain, p.406.

³ The Anti-Appeasers, p.209.

⁴ Templewood, Nine Troubled Years, p.387.

⁵ Spears, Prelude to Dunkirk, p.19. Sinclair, for instance, during the N. Cornwall by-election called for national unity and the return of Churchill to the Cabinet. Liberal Magazine, August 1939. Sinclair also pressed for the inclusion of Eden.

truth may include more than one, if not all of the factors above, Churchill was kept out despite an "ideal opportunity" to bring him back - the establishment of a Ministry of Supply on 14 July.

Ironically Chamberlain was not the only one taken aback by the campaign, as resentment was also evident in the circles of the Edenites, the instigators of the whole thing. Although originally backing Churchill they had hoped that Eden would be invited into the Government in the process. However it had soon become apparent, as Thomas informed Channon, that "Winston is stealing all Anthony's thunder" and that they were therefore "annoyed" with the way things had gone, almost to the exclusion of Eden. Channon passed this news on to the whips who "warmly welcomed it", confident that the plot was now a "wet squib".¹

When in August 1939 Geoffrey Mander wrote his assessment of Parliament that year, he came to the conclusion:

"Churchill's position as the session closes is enormously strong; after all, he has had no ministerial responsibility for any of the events of the last seven years; all his prophecies have come true."²

With the outbreak of war Chamberlain had little alternative but to include Churchill in his Government, and he had earlier recognised that "Churchill's chances improve as war becomes more probable, and vice versa".³ Eden's case was different. The former foreign secretary had dissipated a considerable amount of the public sympathy and support that he had enjoyed at the time of his resignation. Mander pinpointed

¹ Diaries, 4-5 July 1939, p.204.

² Political Review, September, 1939.

³ The Life of Neville Chamberlain, p.406.

the cause to the fact that he had not "hit hard" since the time he had left the Government, which he "refrained from criticising". "Only admirable generalities come out when he speaks".¹ Perhaps Vernon Bartlett summed the position up when he described Eden as having "missed the bus", something Eden and his entourage were now coming to recognise.² Having failed to make his presence felt, it was not surprising that when Chamberlain came to reconstruct the Government, Eden, who had previously held one of the major offices of state, was appointed to the Dominion Office.

Parliament was to disperse before the final blow fell, and it was the motion for the adjournment, in fact, which led to the last serious attack on Chamberlain ere war commenced. On 2 August the motion that the House should adjourn until 3 October was moved by the Prime Minister, in a speech which made it clear that he regarded it as little more than a formality. In view of the tense situation, the uncertainty about Russia, and the growing pressure on Poland, members from all sides of the House deeply resented the long period of absence from the scene. Greenwood, who was leading the Opposition owing to Attlee's illness, proposed that the House should meet again on 21 August, and was backed not only by Sinclair for the Liberals but by Churchill and other Conservatives.

Sensing the feeling of the House, and hoping that Chamberlain would not meet it by too flat a negative, Amery intervened just before the Prime Minister was due to rise and earnestly appealed to him to give an assurance that in the event of any change in the situation

¹ Political Quarterly, September 1939.

² Harvey Papers, 2 January, 1939.

Chamberlain would give serious consideration to representations as to an emergency meeting made by the Leaders of the Opposition. Chamberlain ignored the appeal and insisted, "contemptuously" according to Macmillan, that the move was based on distrust of the Government's good faith or of its judgement. Not giving way an inch, he dismissed the motion only as "another form of the usual vote of no confidence".¹

As a result, a discussion which normally took half an hour went on for five hours and a half, in an electric atmosphere. Chamberlain was attacked by members of his own party, and vehemently by Cartland, who said that the Prime Minister had missed a great opportunity by not showing his faith in "this great democratic institution". He went on "We are in the situation that within a month we may be going to fight and we may be going to die". At this certain members interrupted and Cartland angrily turned upon them, saying "It is all very well for honourable Gentlemen to say 'Oh'. There are thousands of young men at this moment training in camps, and giving up their holidays, and the least we can do here is to show that we have immense faith in this democratic institution. I cannot imagine why the Prime Minister could not have made a great gesture in the interests of national unity. It is much more important to get the whole country behind you than to make jeering, pettiflogging party speeches which divide the nation. I frankly say that I despair, when I listen to speeches like that to which I have listened this afternoon."²

Following Cartland's outburst the King's Norton Constituency Conservative Party decided to hold a meeting to discuss the future

¹ Winds of Change, p.600.

² House of Commons Debates, Col.2495.

representation of the division. The chairman wrote to Cartland to inform him that the situation was serious but the young member was quite prepared to stand as an independent. "I am not certain anyway", he told his sister, "that I can fight another election under Chamberlain's leadership".¹ Dalton had hopes of him crossing the floor, and it is true that he was totally disillusioned with the Conservative Party as it then stood. He informed Nicolson that he could not "stand the Tories any more. He loathes their riches and their self-indulgence. He loathes their mean petty party schemes. He cannot abide them."² In the event the constituency meeting never took place because of the outbreak of war, and Cartland was killed nine months later in the retreat to Dunkirk.

Cartland's tone in the adjournment debate was echoed by Churchill, who made a vivid contrast between Europe mobilised and Parliament going on a long holiday. It was odd, he said, "that the Government should say to members at such a time, "Be off. Run away and play - and take your gas masks with you". Parliament he declared, however much it might be disparaged at home, counted throughout the world "as the most formidable expression of the British national will and as an instrument of that will in resistance to aggression".³ Speech after speech followed along these lines, and except for Sir Herbert Williams and Victor Raikes who defended the Government, all were against Chamberlain's attitude.

Chamberlain had announced "I confidently expect my right honourable Friends to defeat it". And defeat it they did by votes

¹ Ronald Cartland, p.228.

² Diaries and Letters, entry for 15 November, 1938, p.380. See also The Fateful Years, p.163.

³ House of Commons Debates, 2 August, 1939, Cols.2441, 2438.

of 250 to 132 and 245 to 129. Thus the Prime Minister could still command the support of a well-behaved majority when the need arose, but he could inspire little confidence among his spirited colleagues in the House. From the very names absent from the division lists, it is clear that there were a number of abstentions on the Government side. Eden, apparently, was in favour of accepting the Government's advice, or as Nicolson put it, "toeing the line". "I would do so", Nicolson wrote, "were it not that Winston refuses, and I cannot let the old lion enter the lobby alone. But apart from this I do feel very strongly that the House ought not to adjourn for the whole of the two months. I regard it as a violation of constitutional principle and an act of disrespect to the House".¹ Eden obviously gave way to the strong feelings of his followers as his name is absent from both divisions. It is probable that 22 of those abstaining in October 1938 did so again, as did others more recently associated with the dissidents. Nicolson put the total at 40 although it could have been more. Austin Hopkinson, Independent National MP for Mossley, Lancashire was the only Government supporter to vote in favour of the Opposition amendment.²

The Government's majority had dropped quite considerably, as at the time of Munich it had exceeded 200, excluding the Tory dissidents.

¹ Diaries and Letters, entry for 2 August, 1939, p.407.

² Hopkinson, an MP since 1918, had been PPS to Inskip, Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence (switched to the Dominions Office in January, 1939). Hopkinson resigned the Government whip in order to defend Inskip from charges of responsibility for Britain's unpreparedness, and soon became associated with the Eden group. See Nicolson's Diaries and Letters, p.380.

What must be remembered, however, was that the Government had only issued a two-line whip to their supporters for the debate - a much less peremptory request for attendance than the three-line whip - and this might help to explain its comparatively low majorities of 118 and 116.¹ Certainly The Times political correspondent thought so: "in the circumstances the Government majorities were regarded as satisfactory".²

One of the reasons why feeling was running high was the renewed rumours of an immediate General Election which, according to Eden, "caused bitterness within and between the parties".³ "The indications seem to point", he wrote to Law and Cranborne, "to the Government appealing to the country in November, unless there should be some major upheaval meanwhile." Naturally the Tory dissentients were disturbed by such a prospect and were forced to consider their attitude should such an appeal be made. They could not, of course, stand as candidates supporting Chamberlain's record in foreign policy. Should they act as Independent Conservatives or should they try to create a new Independent Party? Law, in a letter to Macmillan, examined their dilemma:

"I'm sure of this - that if there is an election we shall either have to submit to the yoke of Birmingham or we must fight it. There will be no safety, there will be no sense in a middle position. When we get back to London we must concoct definite plans, those of us who don't want to conform. Otherwise the election will be

¹ The Government's majority on 8 May, 1940 was not much lower: 81.

² The Times, 2 August, 1939.

³ The Reckoning, p.57.

on us and we shall all be scrambling back on the band waggon without thought of dignity or honesty or anything else."¹

But for the outbreak of war it seems likely that several of the rebels would have been compelled to fight as Independent Conservatives, or at least on a definite independent basis similar to that which Churchill and Macmillan had adopted in 1935.

Inter-party contacts and the Popular Front

After Munich there was very naturally, both in and out of Parliament, many efforts made to increase the pressure on the Government by finding some different grouping of political forces. In the House the more optimistic foresaw the broadest of anti-Government fronts, ranging from Amery and Churchill on the Right to Politt and Maxton on the Left. Such a coalition was never brought to pass, because the major linkage - co-operation between the dissident Conservatives and the Labour Opposition - was never closed. Nevertheless a considerable amount of inter-party contact took place. Macmillan remained in touch with the Labour leaders and remembered attempting to arrange a meeting between Morrison and Dalton and Churchill, with a view to some definite action. "At first I was hopeful. But after preliminary discussion with Dalton, it was thought better to wait until things began to develop in the course of the winter".² Both Macmillan and Spears were strongly in

¹ Winds of Change, p.601.

² Ibid, p.585. Macmillan later recorded that "towards the end of the year some of the Labour leaders were beginning to look more favourably on the possibility of co-operating with the Liberals and the dissident Conservatives. The NEC of the Labour Party would not consider officially such a drastic move; but men like Greenwood, Dalton, Morrison, and A V Alexander, supported by Walter Citrine, Secretary of the TUC, were beginning to think seriously about the future". Ibid, p.587.

favour of a combined effort to change the Government and bring Churchill in as Prime Minister. Amery referred to this in his diary:

" . . . the Spears conspirators . . . I found some of these young men, particularly Harold Macmillan, very wild, clamouring for an immediate pogrom to get rid of Neville and make Winston Prime Minister before the House met. I poured cold water on that sort of talk."¹

Another of the rebels, Sandys, also tried to establish a measure of co-ordinated action between the various opposition elements. After seeking out Dalton, he suggested that co-operation could best be achieved by "propaganda based on a common platform" over such issues as defence or concessions - the sacrifice of colonies was mentioned - to Hitler. Sandys requested information about what action the Labour Party was going to take about air defence. "Were we going to demand the appointment of a special enquiry? He had some recent evidence which showed that things were even worse than he had supposed".² Further co-operation could be undertaken, he thought, at constituency level by the withdrawal of Labour opposition in the constituencies of Chamberlain's outspoken critics. Dalton, however, was non-committal: "I said that he had better not contemplate this possibility . . . I emphasised that I was not able to be very encouraging to particular projects for united action but encouraged him, if he felt inclined to come and have another talk with me later on. We both agreed that it would be undesirable to let people know we were meeting."

¹ Quoted in Winds of Change, p.385, but from unpublished Amery diary.

² Dalton Papers, diary entry 18 October, 1938.

Attlee, like Dalton a resolute opponent of earlier fronts, was also in contact with the Tory dissident, Leo Amery. The latter recorded how he unsuccessfully sounded Attlee to find out what possibility there was of the Opposition co-operating in a National Government or at least in support of some form of National Service. Labour's hostility to Chamberlain was the insuperable difficulty to any such an administration. Attlee insisted that "nothing would induce them to look at anything of the sort so long as Chamberlain was Prime Minister . . . They are convinced that Neville truckles to the dictators because he likes their principles".¹ Even the supreme crisis of war could not induce Labour to serve in a Coalition Government under Chamberlain. In any case, for all Amery's hopes, there was little likelihood of Labour co-operating over National Service, as was indicated by the Party's later opposition to the adoption of conscription.

Contacts also existed between the leadership of the Opposition Parties but these fell far, far short of W R Rock's claim that "co-operation between the two parties in opposition to Chamberlain . . . was easily effected".² In December Dalton lunched with the Liberal peer, Lord Rea, the purpose being to discuss the allotting of seats between the Labour and Liberal Parties in the event of an election. Rea realised that nothing could be guaranteed or even formally arranged as public talk of popular fronts and electoral pacts only did harm. They discussed various areas and constituencies, but it was repeatedly emphasised by both sides that they had no authority to commit or bind anyone and that it would be disastrous

¹ Diary entry for 21 October, 1938, recorded in My Political Life, pp.298-9.

² Appeasement On Trial, p.15.

if anything got into the press about talks, however informal. Dalton showed as much reserve as in his talks with Sandys: "I am doubtful whether much will come of this, but if I can head off Liberal candidates in even half a dozen constituencies where a Labour win in a straight fight is likely, it would be worthwhile".¹ By contrast Rea and the other Liberal leaders, at least publicly, proclaimed their readiness to "subordinate mere party considerations and to co-operate wholeheartedly with men and women of all Parties who realise the gravity of the time. It (the Liberal Party), therefore, appeals to all citizens to join with it in working for the establishment of peace, the preservation of freedom, and the defence of liberal civilisation".²

That autumn also witnessed the Oxford and Bridgwater by-elections, which undoubtedly encouraged parliamentary as well as "lay" advocates of a front between Labourites, Liberals and dissident Conservatives. At Oxford Patrick Gordon Walker, the prospective Labour candidate, was set aside by the local party which transferred its support to A D Lindsay who, though a socialist, ran as an Independent Popular Front candidate against the Conservative, Quintin Hogg. This became something in the nature of a referendum on Munich.³ Lindsay received the support of Liberals, and a letter of good wishes, signed by 39 Labour MPs, a quarter of the parliamentary party, was sent on the eve of the poll. Macmillan boldly spoke at a public meeting in support of the independent candidate and sent him a message of goodwill.⁴

¹ Diary entry, 9 December, 1938, Dalton Papers.

² Liberal statement dated 18 October, 1938, and entitled "An appeal to all citizens in the present emergency", found in the Cecil Papers, 51181.

³ See S Forbes-Rae's analysis of the by-election, Political Quarterly, 1939.

⁴ The Times recorded on 24 October that "Macmillan . . in a letter states that if he were a voter at Oxford he should unhesitatingly

As a result of these activities, it was generally stated in the press that the whip would be withdrawn from him and that at the next election in Stockton an official candidate would be run against him. No action, in fact, was taken, possibly because Hogg headed the poll. Nevertheless the result of the by-election was by no means satisfactory to the Government for a majority of 6,645 in the General Election had dropped to one of 3,434.

Towards the end of November, a by-election at Bridgwater struck an even more serious blow to the Government than at Oxford, Channon regarding it as the "worst blow the Government has had since 1935".¹ Vernon Bartlett was elected as an Independent on a broad anti-Government platform by a majority of over 2,300 - and this in a constituency which, at the General Election had returned a Conservative by a majority of 11,000. Foreign policy played an important role in the campaign, Bartlett later testifying that despite the rural character of the constituency "the questions after almost every meeting dealt as much with foreign policy as with domestic matters".² Bartlett, like Lindsay, a member of the Labour Party, had been persuaded to stand by Richard Acland, who was also instrumental in securing the withdrawal of the Liberal candidate, and Liberal Party backing.³ Here, too, a prospective

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vote and work for the return of Mr Lindsay to Parliament." Significantly, he was the only Conservative MP to support Lindsay.

¹ Diary entry for 18 November, 1938, p.176.

² Bartlett, And Now, Tomorrow, p.44.

³ Bartlett: journalist and broadcaster; London Director of the League of Nations, 1922-32; MP, 1938-55. As a member of the League Secretariat, and later the foreign correspondent of the News Chronicle, Bartlett took a close interest in foreign affairs. Early on he was horrified at the "overwhelming evidence of cruelty, corruption and corruption camps" in Germany, and was convinced that Hitler planned to "extend that behaviour to the rest of the

Labour candidate was set aside by the local party, and on the eve of the poll 38 Labour MPs and Parliamentary Candidates sent a message wishing Bartlett success. Liberal MPs were prominent in speaking for him, while Churchill wrote regretting that for political reasons he could not send a message of good wishes.¹ Like the other dissidents he was treading carefully in order to keep his seat in the House of Commons, although occasionally his spirit got the better of his intentions.

Naturally the independent victory at Bridgwater gave great comfort to the Popular Fronters, Bartlett admirably expressing their hopes:

" . . . if we can get a Popular Front victory now, especially after the way in which Lindsay reduced the Oxford majority, we ought to be able to break down the barrier between the two progressive parties."²

Bartlett was now convinced that the Popular Front would prove irresistible to Labour, and also the Conservative dissidents. With swings of 8% at Oxford, 10% at Bridgwater, and subsequently 7% at Kinross and West Perthshire and 11% at Westminster, these were far higher than at normal by-elections contested by the parties acting independently. In fact of the 30 contested by-elections during the period April 1938 to August 1939 there was an average swing against the National candidate of 4.8%, whereas it rose to 9% on average on the four occasions alluded to above.

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world." And Now, Tomorrow, p.25. In 1936 he was informed that he was no longer welcome in Germany, but he returned on the occasion of Chamberlain's three trips, in 1938, to report for the News Chronicle.

¹ And Now, Tomorrow, p.40.

² Letter from Bartlett to Cecil, 2 November, 1938. Cecil Papers, 51182.

Sinclair, the Liberal leader, was not so carried away by the electoral advantages, regarding the Labour people as "very difficult. Perhaps they are improving - their last manifesto and their attitude at Oxford and apparently at Bridgwater are all better than they have been in the past. Nevertheless they gave much less help at Oxford to the Socialist who was standing as an Independent Progressive than the Liberals did".¹ Norwithstanding Labour's attitude Sinclair regarded the dissident Conservatives and especially Eden as the "key to the situation". In an interview with Cecil, already referred to, Sinclair had expressed the view that if Eden "would come out and lead a movement against the Government's foreign policy no doubt it would be relatively easy to make a combination of all the parties under him".² It is likely that Sinclair exaggerated the ease with which a Popular Front alignment could be established once Eden's hat was in the ring, but such considerations are academic as the former foreign secretary had no intention of committing himself to such a combination.

In January 1939, when the Popular Front issue was still very much on the boil, Duncan Sandys called a meeting at Caxton Hall, Westminster with the object of forming a new political group, called the "Hundred Thousand". Unfortunately for those behind the new venture the news was leaked to the press and instead of a private meeting of a few interested parties, the attendance ran into hundreds. There was no attempt to record the names of those attending, but amongst those seen entering were: Labourite Fletcher, Liberal Roberts, Independent Rathbone, and Conservatives Adams, Macmillan, Spears and Atholl.³

¹ Sinclair to Cecil, 4 November, 1938, Cecil Papers, 51182.

² Record of an interview with Sinclair, 28 July, 1938, Cecil Papers, 51180.

What was described as a "basis for discussion", consisting of 10 paragraphs, each of which opened "we believe", was put before the meeting. Its main points were:

"We believe that the weakness of our foreign policy and the incompetence of our defence preparations have placed us in imminent danger; that in the event of war we should have to fight with inadequate arms and few allies; and that if we continue to rely on "meddling through" we shall be inviting not only war but defeat, and with it the destruction of the British Commonwealth and the loss of both our national independence and our personal freedom.

. . . We believe that peace cannot be preserved by surrender to force or the threat of force, but only by the creation of a solid front of peace-loving nations pledged to resist aggression.

. . . We believe that the efforts and resources of the nation must now be concentrated on the rebuilding of our armed strength . . . the emergency requires the formation of a truly National Government, which will command the confidence of a united people.

We believe that the widespread desire for national unity in support of freedom, which at present lacks the means to make itself politically effective requires organisation and leadership so that men and women of all parties and of no party may make their voice heard and their influence felt."¹

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Manchester Guardian, 5 January, 1939.

¹ Manchester Guardian, 5 January, 1939.

Asked who "we" were, one of the organisers of the meeting said that the statement had been drawn up by a number of people whose names could not be disclosed.

To achieve its purpose the idea was not, Sandys said in the opening address, to form a "new party in this hour of emergency". Party machinery was hindering united democratic action and "what we want is the co-operation of all parties". The method would be to enrol 100,000 persons as the spearhead of the new venture. "We believe", announced Sandys, "that even 100,000 independent resolute men and women, acting as leaders in their own spheres, could mobilise a sufficient weight of public opinion to achieve all the objects we desire".¹ Those enrolled could be expected to be fairly well distributed over the country, in which event there should be a handful of them in many constituencies and round them an effective local organisation could be formed. Through the local branches the Hundred Thousand could exert pressure on MPs, or on candidates in case of elections, to support a determined stand in defence of democracy against Fascist aggression.

Sandys had stressed that the meeting was not an attack on Chamberlain or his Government but its purpose was to create a greater national unity. This did not impress some of the speakers whose "criticism of Mr Chamberlain began to draw loud applause from sections of the audience".² One speaker declared that he could not join unless there was a condition that the movement stood for the elimination of Chamberlain, a statement that evoked prolonged cheering. Another urged Sandys to embrace the policy, "Chamberlain

¹ Manchester Guardian, 5 January, 1939.

² Daily Herald, 5 January, 1939.

must go", naturally an embarrassing demand to make of one of Chamberlain's followers. Sandys declined to comment but, under pressure, admitted that he hoped to see a reversal of Chamberlain's foreign policy. This did not satisfy the critics, impatient at his reluctance to come out openly against the Government, and a number left the hall.

Eventually the decision to go forward with plans for recruitment and build an organisation on a constituency basis was announced from the chair - to an audience already beginning to disperse and "clearly unwilling to give Sandys and his undisclosed backers a blank cheque".¹ Sandys was adopted as the temporary chairman, and the inaugural meeting of the Hundred Thousand was fixed for Wednesday, 15 March. Sandys resigned, on 22 January, from the Council and his place was taken by the Duchess of Atholl. In April, the organisation merged with a similar movement, the Active Democrats, whose leader was Lancelot Spicer, and so became the Hundred Thousand Active Democrats.² With the Nazi entry into Prague what support there was began to drop off, following the Government's adoption of something like the foreign policy they had been advocating.

Naturally this "strange meeting" as the Manchester Guardian termed it, attracted the anger of loyalist backbenchers. Sir Patrick Hannon, in a bitter letter to The Times, referred to the meeting as a "ludicrous incident", the product of a "kindergarten type of mind", those present being a "conglomerate of political malcontents and fault-finders".³ Hannon's letter produced a reply from R T Bower, the anti-appeaser who represented Cleveland, Yorkshire. While agreeing

¹ New Statesman, 7 January, 1939.

² Atholl, A Working Partnership, p.231.

³ The Times, 6 January, 1939.

that the leaders of the Hundred Thousand were "nominal supporters of the Government who have always found difficulty in the procrustean feats of fitting their opinions into the party's mould, Hannon, Bower felt, failed to give enough weight to the "widespread and genuine concern at the Government's foreign policy, and our unpreparedness in defence, which undoubtedly exists "among a strong body of Conservative backbenchers, by no means confined to those who refused, after Munich, to vote their agreement with the Government's foreign policy".¹ This opinion "is expressed principally by members who have wisely taken heed that, metaphorically speaking, the lobbies of Parliament are paved with the political tombstones of those who have in the past underestimated the strength of party machines; such members have come to the conclusion that they can do better work for the country in the lobbies and committee rooms of Westminster and in the constituencies than in the political wilderness. They are fortified in their conviction by the knowledge that there is no possible alternative Government in sight at present". Once again the division of approach amongst the dissidents was apparent.

It was the Hundred Thousand initiative - surprisingly, as it was almost what Harvey called it, "a complete flop" - in conjunction with the deteriorating international situation, particularly in Spain, that prompted the forces of the Left to make another effort to transform the British political scene.² Tribune, on January 6, announced its alarm at Sandys' attempt to "rally the youth of the country" and called for any combined opposition to the Government to be led from the Left. Such a movement falling into the "hands of the Imperialists under Churchill", who Tribune incorrectly felt was

¹ The Times, 10 January, 1939.

² Harvey, diary entry for 6 January, 1939.

the moving spirit behind his son-in-law Sandys, looked dangerously like a step towards fascism.¹ In order to avoid such a contingency the urgent need was for the Labour Party, hitherto lacking in the spirit and the urgency which were vitally necessary if the world was to be saved from calamity, to "show itself strong enough to give the lead to the anti-National Government forces".

To this end, on 9 January, Cripps wrote to the Secretary of the Labour Party requesting a special meeting of the National Executive to consider his accompanying memorandum. This set out in detail the argument for a Popular Front, including the fact that "Winston Churchill has made an attempt through Sandys and the 100,000 movement to capture the youth for reactionary imperialism and was much closer to success than many people may imagine", the programme in foreign and domestic affairs on which the front should be based and the manner in which Labour should open negotiations with other parties and groups. "I certainly should not desire to encourage the Party to any combination with other non-Socialist elements in normal times", wrote Cripps. "But the present times are not normal. Indeed they are absolutely unprecedented in their seriousness for democratic and working-class institutions of every kind". By an exhaustive analysis of the Party's electoral chances he proved the unlikelihood of Labour defeating the Government "single-handed", and therefore suggested the party should enter a wide Popular Front with "all other anti-

¹ Although it was assumed then and since that the move was made at Churchill's prompting (eg Bevan's Michael Foot, p.286), Churchill, in fact, had no connection at all with the Hundred Thousand. Private information. Lord Cecil was of the opinion that the "whole thing was falsely started by Sandys and above all by Randolph Churchill . . . people had been led to expect that it was a real anti-Chamberlain move based on a real democratic and sound foreign policy Actually at the meeting it came out that it was not effectively anti-Chamberlain and was based on rearmament and national service with some foreign policy in the background. Letter to R Lutyens, 13 April, 1939, Cecil Papers, 51183.

Government and democratic forces".

Four days later the Executive met to consider the proposals. Labour had already indicated in the document, Labour and the Popular Front, issued in 1938 against the call for a United Peace Alliance, that its opposition might cease should a considerable number of Members of Parliament supporting the Government rebel against the Prime Minister's authority. Although there had been hopes of a large-scale Tory revolt at Munich, that would change the whole political situation, this had not materialised, and the Tory dissidents had "drawn back into their shells".¹ In such circumstances, the Executive refused to accept Cripps' calculations and to admit that such a coalition as he proposed was practicable or tolerable for the Labour Party. After some discussion the Executive rejected the memorandum by 17 votes to 3, the latter being Cripps, Pritt and Wilkinson.

Cripps had provided against the contingency of defeat and had circulated a statement of his appeal to Labour MPs, Parliamentary Candidates and constituent organisations. Such action caused great resentment and the Executive met again on 18 January to consider this latest move. They decided that Cripps should both withdraw his memorandum by circular to the organisations or individuals to which it had been sent and reaffirm his loyalty to the Labour Party Constitution. Having refused the demands, at a further Executive meeting seven days later, Cripps was expelled by a vote of 17 to 1; Ellen Wilkinson alone dissented as Pritt was absent through gout.²

¹ Dalton, The Fateful Years, p.201.

² It is important to note that Cripps was not expelled "because he believes in the Popular Front. That is not the case. Sir Stafford had been excluded for grave breaches of reasonable Party discipline". Morrison, London News, March, 1939.

Two questionable manifestoes, called respectively Socialism or Surrender? and Unity, True or Sham?, directed against the Popular Front and against Cripps in particular were issued by the Party.¹ In both the Executive sought to show not only that Cripps had behaved disloyally, but also that his purpose had been to give up socialism in order to secure Liberal adherence to the Popular Front. He was accused, not without justice, of having radically changed his line. "Yesterday", said the Executive in Socialism or Surrender?, "he wanted a United Front with the Communists. Today he wants a Popular Front with the Liberals. Tomorrow . . . who knows?".

The expulsion settled nothing. Cripps remained convinced that the only hope of defeating the Chamberlain Government and replacing it with one which would give effective aid to Spain and substitute the appeasement policy by one of stern opposition to the aggressors, was by the co-operation of the anti-Chamberlain parties. After consultation he launched a petition of the British Peoples to the Labour, Liberal and Conservative Parties urging them "as British citizens, looking out on a world threatened as never before by war and Fascism", to "call upon the parties of progress to act together and at once for the sake of peace and civilisation". The petition, which could be signed by any elector, asked for a Government that would:

- "1. Defend Democracy, protect our democratic rights and liberties against attack at home and from abroad;
2. Plan for Plenty, multiply the wealth of the nation by employing the unemployed on useful work; increase Old Age Pensions; ensure a high standard of life; educational leisure for young and old;

¹ G D H Cole, A History of the Labour Party, pp.357-8.

3. Secure our Britain, organise a Peace Alliance with France and Russia, that will rally the support of the United States and every other peace-loving nation and end the shameful policy which has made us accomplices in the betrayal of the Spanish and Chinese people to Fascist aggression;
4. Protect the People's interest, control armaments and the vital industries, agriculture, transport, mining and finance;
5. Defend the people, provide effective protection against air attack and starvation in the event of war;
6. Build for peace and justice, end the exploitation of subject races and lay the foundations of a lasting peace through equality of opportunity for all nations."

It concluded by urging, "in the face of the perils that confront us", to combine every effort to "drive the National Government from office and win for us the Six Points of our Petition. To a Government of your united forces we pledge our wholehearted support".¹

The swift response - surprising in the light of some of the petition's demands - from politicians convinced Cripps' supporters, for a few exultant weeks, that the miracle could be accomplished. Barnes, Chairman of the Co-operative Party and Labour MP for East Ham, and Sinclair, leader of the Liberal Party, both supported the campaign as well as a number of other MPs including Lloyd George, Bartlett, R Acland and Roberts. Bevan closely associated himself

¹ E Estorick, Stafford Cripps, pp.166-7.

with Cripps. "If Sir Stafford Cripps", he said, "is expelled for wanting to unite the forces of freedom and democracy they can go on expelling others. They can expel me. His crime is my crime".¹

As well as Bevan, G R Strauss, and C C Poole, newly-elected MP for Lichfield, Staffordshire, also joined the campaign though Wilkinson and Pritt, who had voted for the memorandum, declined to do so.²

Seven Labour MPs - S O Davies, J Parker, M P Price, B Riley, Bevan, Strauss and Poole - wrote to protest against the Cripps' expulsion, making their own sympathies plain in the process: "We regard it in keeping with the failure of the Executive to mobilise effectively the opposition to the National Government which exists in the country among members of all parties and among those who belong to no party. There is a grave danger that this failure, if continued, will reduce the Labour Party to political impotence".³

In March all Labour Members prominently backing the Cripps Petition were informed that persistence in this course would involve their expulsion along with Cripps himself. Poole complied and withdrew, while Bevan and Strauss went ahead and, within seven days, were expelled.⁴ In effect the expulsions broke the back of the front movement. Sir Stafford had been the first to admit that any such agitation would fail unless the Labour Party participated; shortly after his own expulsion he commented that he was "as convinced

¹ Daily Express, 26 January, 1939.

² The 3 joined Cripps in a central committee for launching the petition, and an organisation was set up with a head office in Clifford's Inn and branch offices in Scotland and in several provincial centres.

³ Aneurin Bevan, p.289.

⁴ The decision to expel was only taken after a close vote. Apparently Morrison, Attlee, Clynes, George Ridley, Wilkinson, and Pritt had advocated that the Popular Front issue be deferred until the Southport Conference and that an approach be made to Cripps "to come to terms". This move was defeated by 2 votes. The Fateful Years, p.217.

as ever that that great organisation must be the core and centre of every anti-Fascist drive".¹ His hope that his allies within the Labour Party could work for unity from within as he would from without was of course dashed by the Executive's action. Although the Popular Front issue was raised again at Labour's Conference at Southport, it was by that time moribund, and on 11 June Cripps announced that the campaign would be wound up forthwith. Together with Bevan and Strauss, Cripps then applied for readmission to the Labour Party. Bevan and Strauss rejoined within a few months of the outbreak of war but Cripps, refusing to adhere to the terms laid down by the Executive remained free of a party tie until 1945.

Cripps, now an Independent, extended his contacts with the Tory dissidents and Liberals. Churchill noted how, at this time, "Sir Stafford Cripps . . . became deeply distressed about the national danger. He visited me and various Ministers to urge the formation of what he called an "All-In Government".² Cripps kept a record of his approach to Churchill. The Tory rebels, said the latter, had been ready to join the Government since Hitler went into Prague, but had not been admitted as it would have stopped all possibility of further appeasement. Churchill agreed with Cripps on the need for an all-in Government, although he despaired of anyway of getting rid or convincing Chamberlain. "It was a most interesting talk in which amongst other things he pointed out that but for Chamberlain's switch on foreign policy after Prague's occupation the Popular Front movement would have swept the country and I gathered he would have supported it".³ This last comment is remarkable in the light of the

¹ Cooke, The Life of Richard Stafford Cripps, p.236.

² The Gathering Storm, p.315. Apparently he had meetings with Baldwin, Oliver Stanley, Kingsley Wood and Lord Halifax.

³ Quoted in Cooke, p.242. In fact no Conservative MPs associated themselves with the campaign.

Popular Front's initiation by Cripps to avoid Churchill's capturing the youth for "reactionary imperialism" through the 100,000 movement.

Pat Strauss, wife of George Strauss, also ascribed the failure of the campaign to Hitler's seizure of Prague and the feeling among petitioners that there was less need for their efforts since the foreign policy of the Government was veering in the direction desired.¹ This may be so but the fact remains that the Executive's relentless opposition had largely predated these international developments and, as has been indicated, by depriving the Front of its "core", effectively undercut any prospect of success.

In retrospect the Petition campaign is significant as yet another expression of disgust with appeasement and a vigorous attempt to do something about it. But the tragedy of the movement, as Roy Jenkins has written, "was that, without achieving its own aim, it did much to weaken the effectiveness of the Labour Party. Energies which should have been devoted to strengthening the position of the Labour Party in the country were expended in internecine strife".² It cannot be denied that Cripps' campaign sapped party unity, and the background of dissension, which continued for several months, gave an impression of limpness to the Party's opposition to Government policies. Inevitably there were many within the party that had now simply had their fill of the front agitation and the divisive activities of Cripps, a mood summed up by George Brown, at the Stockport Conference: "The fact is that we have wasted nine blasted months arguing the toss about Cripps and the Popular Front".

With a general election in the offing what Brown and others feared was the effect of Labour's divided counsels on the party's

¹ Cripps - Advocate and Rebel, p.198.

² Mr Attlee - An Interim Biography, p.203.

electoral prospects. Obviously it is impossible to accurately assess the political consequences of Cripps, although it seems likely that the dissensions could not but have harmed Labour both in the by-elections that took place and in the event of an early general election. To see whether there was any evidence for this, an analysis was made of the by-elections held between April 1938 and August 1939. For contrast the period has been divided into four: April to September 1938, the pre-Munich era; October to December, the post-Munich period prior to the Cripps campaign; January to March 1939, the effective life-span of the Petition Campaign; April to August, when Labour, for the most part, closed its ranks. Excluded are the four popular front by-elections at Oxford, Bridgwater, Kinross and West Perthshire and Westminster. The figures in brackets are the percentages of the vote obtained in 1935.

April - September, 1938

West Fulham (April)

Conservative	48	(53)
Labour	52	(43)
Liberal	-	(3)

Increase in Labour vote 9%

Aylesbury (May)

Conservative	54	(57)
Labour	19	(11)
Liberal	27	(32)

Increase in Labour vote 8%

Stafford (June)

Conservative	58	(56)
Labour	42	(44)

Decline in Labour vote 2%

Lichfield (May)

National Labour	49	(54)
Labour	51	(46)

Increase in Labour vote 5%

West Derbyshire (June)

Conservative	49	Unopposed in 1931 and 1935
Labour	33	
Liberal	19	

Increase in Labour vote 22% on 1929 figures

Barnsley (June)

Labour	64	(59)
Liberal National	36	(41)

Increase in Labour vote 5%

East Willesden (July)

Conservative 57 (58)

Labour 43 (35)

Liberal - (7)

Increase in Labour vote 8%

Average percentage swing to Labour over the six by-elections (excluding West Derbyshire for obvious reasons) was 5.5%, and was doubtless partly due to the resignation of Eden, the Government's most popular figure.

October - December, 1938Dartford (November)

Conservative 48 (52)

Labour 52 (48)

Increase in Labour vote 4%

Walsall (November)

Labour 43 (39)

Liberal National 57 (58)

Independent - (3)

Increase in Labour vote 4%

Fylde (November)

Conservative 68 (71)

Labour 32 (29)

Increase in Labour vote 3%

The average increase in the Labour vote over the five by-elections was 4.4%, a decrease on the previous period of 1.1%.

January - March, 1939 The Petition CampaignEast Norfolk (January)

Labour 37 (31)

Liberal National 63 (69)

Increase in Labour vote 6%

Doncaster (November)

Labour 61 (58)

Liberal National 39 (42)

Increase in Labour vote 3%

West Lewisham (November)

Conservative 57 (65)

Labour 43 (35)

Increase in Labour vote 8%

Ripon (February)

, Conservative 69 (77)

Labour 31 (23)

Increase in Labour vote 8%

Holderness (February)

Conservative 39 (54)

Labour 21 (21)

Liberal 26 (25)

Independent

Conservative 14

No swing

Batley and Morley (March)

Conservative 45 (46)

Labour 55 (54)

Increase in Labour vote 1%

Kincardine and Western (March)

Conservative 53 (56)

Liberal 47 (44)

Increase in Liberal vote 3%

The average swing to Labour over four by-elections was 3.8%, a drop of 0.6%.

April - August, 1939South Ayrshire (April)

Conservative 42 (42)

Labour 58 (58)

No swing

Hallam, Sheffield (May)

Conservative 62 (67)

Labour 38 (33)

Increase in Labour vote 5%

North Southwark (May)

Labour 57 (49.5)

Liberal National 43 (50.5)

Increase in Labour vote 7%

Aston, Birmingham (May)

Conservative 66 (69)

Labour 34 (31)

Increase in Labour vote 3%

Kennington (May)

Conservative 40 (51)

Labour 60 (49)

Increase in Labour vote 11%

Caerphilly (July)

Conservative 32 (24)

Labour 68 (76)

Decline in Labour vote 8%

North Cornwall (July)

Conservative 48 (49)

Liberal 52 (51)

1% swing to Liberal

Hythe (July)

Conservative 54 (64)

Liberal 43 (36)

Independent 3

7% swing to Liberal

Monmouth, (July)

Conservative 60 (63)
Labour 40 (37)

Increase in Labour vote 3%

Colne Valley (July)

Conservative 25 (26)
Labour 49 (39)
Liberal 26 (31)
Independent - (4)

Increase in Labour vote 10%

Brecon and Radnor (August)

Conservative 47 (53)
Labour 53 (47)

Increase in Labour vote 6%

The average swing to Labour over the nine relevant by-elections was 4.1%.

It appears that the average swing to Labour was at its lowest during the months of January to March 1939, although it must be admitted that Labour's vote only rose marginally during the subsequent period. Consequently it is just possible to maintain that the activities of Cripps had a weakening effect on Labour's standing at the polls, and that at a time when the party was hoping to convince the electors that Labour alone offered the possibility of an alternative government at the next election.¹

As to a general election there is little evidence - April 1938 to August 1939 - of such a swing against Chamberlain's administration as would have brought about a Labour victory had one been held. It was partly the recognition of this fact, of course, that had persuaded Cripps to launch the Petition Campaign. Labour, having received 38% of the national vote in 1935, as opposed to the "National" 54% and Liberal 7%, required a substantially higher swing than 4.5% (the

¹ Cripps had launched the Petition movement on the very eve of a 'pre-election campaign', planned on a national scale by the Labour Party.

average of the four periods) to put them in office. Such a view is strengthened by information derived from the earliest opinion polls conducted during this period, which suggest that Chamberlain still had majority support.¹

Whereas some Labourites attributed the party's insufficient performance at the polls to internal strife others, as we saw in our first chapter, were more concerned with the poor quality of Labour's leader. Thus it is possible that yet another attempt to remove Attlee was instigated in February 1939. The evidence is scanty but Noel-Baker appears to have been canvassing views about Attlee, presumably as a prelude to an attempt at removal. Lord Robert Cecil, in a letter in which Attlee is referred to as "La Tete", recommended a change on the grounds that he "is not a leader, he excites no following, the party has little prestige under him". Nevertheless he warned that the change would be a blow to the reputation of the party, making it appear even more unstable and amateurish than it did already in the light of Cripps. Moreover it would only be worthwhile if the attempt was successful - "to try and fail would do nothing but harm". If it could be done there was "no time to lose". The election could not be more than six months off and that was about enough time for the new man to establish himself.² Whether anything more came of this it is impossible to gauge but it is unlikely - as with the Popular Front movement, and the pressure on the Tory dissenters in their

¹ British Institute of Public Opinion, p.20. (What Britain Thinks)

² Letter to Noel-Baker, 16 February, 1939, Cecil Papers, 51109.

constituencies - the move was probably undercut by the turn in the international situation.

Meanwhile Liberals had stood firm in their advocacy of a combined front against Chamberlain, though they wisely refrained from involving themselves too closely in the domestic squabbles of the Labour Party, fearing harm to the cause of co-operation. On 15 March, Sinclair addressed the Council of the Liberal Party Organisation, calling for the co-operation of people of all parties and none:

"Are you willing, without abandoning your ideals or asking us to abandon ours, to join with us . . . in driving the present mis-called National Government from office and in agreeing upon a programme of practical work in the next Parliament for strengthening the foundations of peace abroad and improving the condition of the people at home?"

Fearing the prospects of a Government victory at the forthcoming general election, he warned that "Nowhere do the Socialist candidates substantially increase their votes . . . The electors seem to be impressed only when the Opposition Parties can sink their differences in support of the beliefs which they hold in common". If co-operation were achieved the whole face of British politics could be changed and electors would at last have a possible alternative Government for the first time in years.¹

As a body, Sinclair and his fellow Liberal Members continued to advocate the Popular Front against Chamberlain's administration until the imminence of war tempered their policy. Then they began to urge a government of national unity, comprising the National forces but

¹ The speech was subsequently published in pamphlet form by the Liberal Party.

including Churchill, Eden and both Oppositions. Richard Acland, ever the moving spirit behind the Liberal Popular Front campaign, was none too happy about the shift from Popular Front to Government of national unity. Even after the occupation of Prague he favoured running "Independent Progressive Candidates" in by-elections, thereby indicating that independence of mind that was to be such a hallmark of his subsequent political career. In April he wrote to Lord Robert Cecil, who had also been involved in the Popular Front campaign, arguing against Cecil's view that the Conservative in the Abbey by-election should be given a walk over. "Is it really to be said that now that the Government has at last, at the last moment of the eleventh hour, adopted our policy that we, who have been right all the time are not to be represented, and that they, who have been wrong for seven years are to have the right to adopt anyone their little clique may think fit and claim that in the name of not embarrassing the Government he is to be given an unopposed return."

Acland, in fact, hoped that as the election developed the issue which might become uppermost in the minds of the electors would be "at least Eden and Churchill must join the Cabinet", and it seemed to him not impossible that on that issue "we might even win". Such a victory, he felt, would mean that Eden and Churchill would have to be included, which "would rid us of Simon, even if not of Chamberlain".¹ In the event Acland and his friends supported Gabriel Garitt, an active member of the Hundred Thousand Group, in the by-election, and Garitt substantially reduced the Conservative majority, fighting mainly on a programme of "A member for Abbey who has supported collective security for seven years, not another yes-

¹ Letter to Cecil, 1 April, 1939, Cecil Papers 51183.

man selected by those who have steadily opposed it".¹ Nevertheless, the Abbey by-election, unlike the earlier three, did not capture public imagination for the poll was 9,000 votes lower than 1935, and it was to be the last of the popular front candidatures.

The Descent into War

The Cripps campaign took place essentially during the respite purchased by Munich, when the situation in Central Europe was momentarily calm. Even so, in the winter of 1938-39, it gradually began to sink in that Hitler had not been effectively appeased, as Chamberlain had hoped. The brutal execution of the Munich Agreement, the anti-Jewish pogrom, and the press and speech campaign to discredit those in Britain who might resist his future demands, were all testimony to that. It seemed Hitler was as much a danger as ever. The actions of the Chamberlain Government itself strongly suggested this conclusion, despite the statements of individual ministers, which were probably due to an ill-judged effort aimed at relaxing European tensions.² Thus there were further moves to accelerate rearmament, and to improve the preparations against air raids, which had been so obviously lacking in the days of September.

Any lingering hopes of a "golden age" were dashed in March. When on the 15th the Germans marched into Prague, the Labour Party called for, and was granted, a debate. Chamberlain spoke first, making clear that while he bitterly regretted this development, he was not at all inclined to give up his hopes for a peaceful settlement in Europe. This state of detachment angered both the Opposition Parties and the National dissidents. To them the events of March had come as no surprise. Hitler-based appeasement, they claimed, had always been

¹ Acland to Cecil, 13 April. Ironically Sir Sydney Herbert, the previous Member for Abbey, had abstained at Munich.

² W N Medlicott, British Foreign Policy, p.197.

an illusion, whereas their own policies had been right. Now, in far less favourable circumstances, with Austria and Czechoslovakia lost, the Government must take what Sinclair called a "fresh, clear and objective view of the situation". The time for truth had come and the Government must adopt the view which both Parties had long been pressing upon them, including that of Britain gathering her friends to her and "convincing the world that she will resist aggression by all the means in her power".¹

Channon described the debate, in which 27 speeches were made, as a "great day for the Socialists and Edenites".² While the 14 members who attacked - if not savaged - Chamberlain's policy all sat on the other side of the House, only 4 back-benchers, along with Sir John Simon, unhappily defended the Prime Minister's recent conduct of foreign affairs. The other Conservatives intervening, including Bower, Adams, Law, Nicholson, Wolmer and Sandys, followed Eden's lead in coupling moderate criticism of Chamberlain's past policy with the recommendation that he form an all-party government. Bower, who had hitherto not spoken in the Commons against Chamberlain's policy, rose at this moment - symptomatic of a new found confidence of the anti-appeasers - to declare "This plan of appeasement has failed". Unrepresentative the sampling of parliamentary opinion may be; nevertheless the Prime Minister's critics were certainly more anxious to intervene in the debate than were his supporters.

While the Government held fast to its course, to most of those who spoke in the Commons on 15 March, appeasement was visibly in ruins. Not only was this apparent to those who had attacked Munich

¹ House of Commons Debates, 15 March, 1939, Cols.456-459.

² The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.186.

in the first place but to many loyal supporters of the Government, who now grew deeply disturbed and genuinely unhappy about the views and policies of their leader. A similar mood soon predominated outside the House. "Almost overnight", wrote Macmillan, "the whole country turned with something like relief from the long period of drugged sleep to a new awakening".¹ Chamberlain, at first, failed to gauge the changed temper of the nation and of the Conservative Party. Throughout the next two days the volume of criticism among Conservative Members and in the country at large, at his refusal to be deflected from appeasement continued to grow until it became clear that unless he committed Britain against further German aggression his personal position as Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative Party would be threatened.² Thus Nicolson wrote in his diary on 17 March:

"The feeling in the lobbies is that Chamberlain will either have to go or completely reverse his policy. Unless in his speech tonight (in Birmingham) he admits that he was wrong, they feel that resignation is the only alternative The Opposition refuse absolutely to serve under him. The idea is that Halifax should become Prime Minister and Eden leader of the House."³

Clearly this was the most dangerous political position that Chamberlain had been in since February 1938.

Small wonder, when addressing his constituents in Birmingham, a very different Chamberlain formulated the question as to Hitler's

¹ Winds of Change, p.591.

² This was especially reflected in the press on 16-17 March.

³ Diaries and Letters, p.393.

intentions, which his critics had been asking for months, even years: "Is this the end of an old adventure, or the beginning of a new?" If this was to be a step in an attempt to dominate the world by force, then, he concluded, "no greater mistake could be made than to suppose this nation had so lost its fibre that it will not take part to the utmost of its power in resisting such a challenge".¹ This indication of a stiffer attitude to Hitler - apparently forced on Chamberlain by Lord Halifax - was sufficient to save his position in the party for the time being.²

For the first time since becoming Prime Minister Chamberlain had been forced to modify his policy. Rock has suggested that in this sudden reversal of policy "the increasing pressure of the critics of appeasement played a significant role".³ This is probably so but perhaps in a more indirect way than Rock imagined. The pressure, or views, of the Opposition Parties and the National dissidents, which Chamberlain's Government had resolutely ignored, nevertheless had an effect. Through seeping into the minds of loyalist MPs, as well as the public consciousness, a ready alternative course was at hand should events appear to confound the Government's diagnosis. In effect, a climate of opinion had been created that, given 15 March, no politician, however secure hitherto, could afford to ignore. Consequently it was not the pressure that the Opposition elements exerted over Prague but the inexorable march of events, the import of which - through the exertions of the aforesaid - was apparent to all, that obliged Chamberlain to change his course in March 1939.

¹ The Times, 18 March, 1939.

² Birkenhead, Lord Halifax, p.432.

³ Appeasement on Trial, pp.IX, 329.

As Churchill said in May, in a speech to Cambridge undergraduates, in which he revelled in the change of policy: "This damnable outrage opened the eyes of the blind, made the deaf hear, and even in some places made the dumb speak . . . His Majesty's Government turned round over the weekend. They adopted - I trust wholeheartedly - the very policy which their opponents had long advocated".¹

Surprisingly, in the light of his comment above, Rock himself all-embracingly remarked that "by one act Hitler changed the whole situation".²

Within two weeks the diplomatic revolution came, the Government promising full support to Poland in the event of her independence being threatened. The Government's aim, however, remained the preservation of peace (although ready for the war likely to follow if this attempt failed) but this time by a demonstration of firmness. Naturally the House met to discuss the commitment and although there was general approval of the guarantee, in the view of both the Opposition Parties and several Government supporters it was not enough. What the Government had done was but a first step towards organising the forces of peace against aggression.

Labour, in fact, had already urged the "necessity for gathering together a body of peace-loving nations who could unite in the face of German aggression" in the course of a deputation from the National Council to the Prime Minister on 23 March. The deputation consisted of Grenfell and Shinwell of the Parliamentary Executive, Dalton and Dallas of the National Executive, and Dukes and Hallsworth of the Trades Union Congress. Dalton, who introduced the deputation, informed the Prime Minister that the movement they "represented had

¹ Liberal Magazine, June 1939.

² Appeasement on Trial, p.327.

always stood for collective security" and that they were therefore "glad to hear the Government inclining in this direction". He pressed the Government to avoid wasting time in debate and communications. Chamberlain, in reply wished to avoid the phrase "collective security" on the grounds that it was "misleading".¹

Channon, R A Butler's Parliamentary Private Secretary at the Foreign Office, was more honest with himself, recognising the new policy as "rather a return to our old faded friend, 'collective security'".²

Following Italy's occupation of Albania on 7 April, Good Friday, Chamberlain announced that Greece and Rumania would be "guaranteed". It was clearly the prevailing sentiment of the House that collective security must be pushed ahead with despatch. The method of selecting one country here and one there and offering them guarantees was far too slow and gave Britain insufficient security in return. There must be specific arrangements for co-operation and combined action among the larger nations as well as the smaller ones. Russia was essential to the success of the new policy, and the United States should be brought in if possible. It is interesting to note that half the speakers in this debate who most ardently called for collective security, using those exact words, were Conservatives.

As the international situation worsened, it became essential for Britain to show her determination to resist further aggression. To this end Chamberlain announced the establishment of a Ministry of Supply, a step which he had constantly opposed during the preceding two years, though it had frequently been proposed by the Opposition Parties as well as by certain dissident Conservatives.

¹ Cabinet Papers, Premier 1/322.

² Diary entry for 17 March, 1939, p.186.

On 26 April Chamberlain further announced the Government's intention to introduce a bill for limited and temporary military training for young men of 20 and 21 years of age. This again marked a reversal of policy. Up until March 1939, the Government had only envisaged the employment of an expeditionary force to defend France and the Empire. But now, with the failure of appeasement and the guarantee of Poland and Rumania, a much larger British force was an immediate necessity.

Both Opposition Parties had welcomed the new policy of guarantees but made no mention of what the cost, in terms of Britain's defence requirements, would be. Having approved the commitments, they could only deny the requirements necessary for the commitments by a supreme piece of self-contradiction. As The Times put it, the bill was the "inevitable consequence of the policy for which all sections of the Opposition have long been clamouring".¹ Thus by opposing military training the Opposition were guilty of a lack of responsibility, and had taken a course which only reduced the effectiveness of their earlier criticism of appeasement. It was, in Eden's words, "the worst mark against them in their conduct before the war".²

Both Opposition Parties had agreed to co-operate in Sir John Anderson's National Voluntary Service, announced in November 1938. This served two main purposes: to secure sufficient recruits for the essential services, including civil defence, and to compile a register of vital occupations stipulating which workers would remain in their own trades and which could be spared for more vital work. In contrast to the Liberals, Labour only reluctantly approved the proposals on the grounds that if a success were made of the voluntary

¹ The Times, 28 April, 1939.

² The Reckoning, p.52.

scheme, the need for compulsion would be avoided. Nevertheless, Bevan was aghast at Labour's co-operation:

"We are supposed to invite the organisations to which we belong and with which we have been brought up, to place our people at the disposal of the avowed enemies of the British workers . . . We ought . . not to bind them hand and foot and hand them over to our enemies."¹

In defiance of the party whips, Bevan and seven other Labour MPs, Barr, Cove, Davidson, T Henderson, Kirkwood, Macmillan and Strauss, voted against the scheme. Apart from the pacifist Barr, the opposition was drawn exclusively from Labour's Left. True to their past attitude they remained more troubled, at any rate over defence, with the "enemy" at home than with the enemy abroad.

Despite such differences over the voluntary scheme, in the matter of an involuntary one, Labour was united as on few matters in the entire decade. When the announcement came Labour vehemently opposed the Compulsory Training Bill, tabling a motion which read:

"That whilst prepared to take all necessary steps to provide for the safety of the nation and the fulfilment of its international obligations, this House regrets that His Majesty's Government, in breach of their pledges, should abandon their voluntary principle which had not failed to provide the man power needed for defence, and is of the opinion that the measure proposed is ill-conceived, and, so far from adding materially to the effective defence of the country, will prompt division and discourage the

¹ House of Commons Debates, 20 December, 1938, Cols.2769-70.

national effort, and is further evidence that the Government's conduct of affairs throughout this critical time does not merit the confidence of the country or this House."

Attlee assailed the Prime Minister with breaking his promise "solemnly given to the country", and with "sowing divisions in the ranks of this country that will gravely imperil the national effort".¹ The depth of Opposition feeling can be gauged by the intervention of George Hicks, a prominent rearmer and the author of pamphlets on Mein Kampf:

"Is the spirit of the volunteer now beneath the military jackboot? I cannot think of any other reason for introducing this, apart from the military mind . . . The old British tradition of freedom has been dealt a severe blow by this proposal for conscription."²

In later discussions on the Bill some Labourites became threatening: Kirkwood promised to do all he could to get "not only the engineers on the Clyde but the engineers throughout Britain to down tools against conscription"; Maclean advocated advising "mothers not to allow their boys to go, and I shall advise the boys not to go".³ Strong language indeed, but Labour was to make no subsequent attempt to oppose the operation of the Bill.

The Liberal Party, in the names of Sinclair, White and Harris, also put down a resolution condemning "the proposed departure from the principle of voluntary service at a time when the rate of recruitment is outpacing the supply of war equipment; nor could it

¹ House of Commons Debates, 27 April, 1939, Col.1354.

² Ibid, Col.1397.

³ Ibid, 4 May, Col.2190; May 8, Col.128.

at any time approve a partial system which would place the whole burden of compulsory service upon young men between the ages of 20 and 21". More restrained than Attlee had been, Sinclair warned that the Bill would divide the country and create "a deep, dangerous and unnecessary cleavage in public opinion, making more difficult the diligent search which we all ought to pursue for the greatest common measure of agreement and national unity in the serious situation in which our country finds itself today".¹

The first division on the Government's proposals took place at the close of the debate on 27 April. Although the Liberal Parliamentary Party had decided to oppose the Bill more Liberals, in fact, voted in favour than against. Eight, D O Evans, E Evans, David, Gwilym and Megan Lloyd George, Maclay, Owen, and de Rothschild, broke ranks while a further seven opposed conscription: Foot, Griffiths, Harris, Mander, Seely, Sinclair and White.² Small wonder then, that prior to the final division on the bill, the party reversed its position. At the Liberal Assembly, which met at Scarborough on 11 May, Sinclair moved an emergency resolution accepting the decision of the Commons, but emphasising that he had in no sense departed from the attitude taken on 27 April when he had spoken and voted against the measure.³ This was wise acknowledgement of the fact that public opinion, both in Britain and abroad, looked upon the Military Training Bill as an unquestionable proof of Britain's sincerity in resisting aggression.

¹ House of Commons Debates, 27 April, 1939, Cols.1361, 1370.

² Apparently there was "a hell of a row" in Caernarvonshire and Anglesey because David and Megan Lloyd George and G Owen voted in favour of conscription. Opposition to their stand appears to have originated from the Churches. Life With Lloyd George, p.320.

³ Liberal Magazine, June 1939.

Retrospectively, Labour leaders have questioned the wisdom of their decision. Attlee admitted in his memoirs: "Looking back, I think our attitude was a mistake".¹ Dalton, in defence of Labour's attitude, recorded the technical arguments raised by the party, but he characterized these as "not nonsense, but not, in present (1939) circumstances, very convincing".² Some within Labour's ranks refused, at the time, to support the party's attitude. When the final division occurred on 18 May and the Government triumphed 337 to 130, "about six of us", according to M Phillips Price, "refused to follow our colleagues into the Division Lobby and abstained".³ By comparing the division lists on 27 April and 18 May (final), it is possible to trace sixteen Labourites conspicuous by their absence on both occasions: Bellenger, A Edwards, Fletcher, Guest, Johnston, J J Jones, W T Kelly, Lee, Nathan, Price, Riley, Roberts, Stokes, Wedgwood, Weir, and D Williams. Of these L M Weir was seriously ill, soon to die in a Glasgow nursing home, while the records of another six reveal complete loyalty to the party, with no hint of a rebellion or indication why they should abstain over conscription.⁴ Consequently Price's figure of "about six" appears correct.

The Negotiations with Russia

After the extension of guarantees to Poland, Rumania and Greece, the question remained how Britain could lend effective assistance to

¹ As It Happened, p.146.

² The Fateful Years, p.250.

³ My Three Revolutions, p.275. Dalton put the group at about 20. The Fateful Years, p.254.

⁴ Jones, Kelly, Lee, Riley, Roberts, D Williams. It is interesting to note their respective ages: 62, 61, 68, 69, 59, 70. Perhaps the late sittings and numerous divisions of the conscription issue were just too much for some of these veterans.

these countries. Immediate support, if they were to have any, must come from the east, and that is why on 3 April, politicians of all parties, including Greenwood, Sinclair, Lloyd George, Churchill and Eden, stressed the urgency of enlarging the peace front to embrace Russia.¹ The demand for the inclusion of Russia in the peace bloc was intensified in the Commons debate of 13 April, when again Labourites, Liberals, independents and dissident Conservatives combined to make it clear that only Russian co-operation could translate into ships, aeroplanes and troops the guarantees that Britain was "sprinkling around Europe".²

In the forthcoming pages attention will be drawn to the criticism - continuing long after events depicted here - of the Government's handling of the subsequent negotiations with Russia. Although telling in part it tended to minimise the problems involved in reaching an agreement, problems which could not solely, as some critics thought, be attributed to what Thompson described as the Government's "thinly disguised fear and hatred of the Russian system".³ In fact both the British and Soviet Governments were mutually distrustful: each doubted the other's morality and efficiency of its social and economic order, and its loyalty to public commitments. Thus Chamberlain said that he himself had "very considerable distrust of Russia and had no confidence that we should obtain active and constant support from that country", while the Russians, for their part, correctly suspected that Chamberlain did not want to commit Britain to go to Russia's aid

¹ Chamberlain's reaction to the debate was to complain privately of the "almost hysterical passion of the Opposition, egged on by Ll(oyd) G(eorge), who have a pathetic belief that in Russia is the key to our salvation". Quoted in Lloyd George, Twelve Essays, 'Ivan Maisky and Anti-Appeasement' by S Aster, p.345.

² Sinclair, House of Commons Debates, 13 April, 1939, Col.23.

if Hitler attacked her, but exaggerated Britain's desire for Russian help if Hitler attacked Poland. Indeed the Government had little faith in Russian military strength - save for defensive purposes - and Britain's ministers, unlike the German leadership, had no conception of the underlying power of Russia. Halifax clearly represented their views when he wrote that "if we had to make a choice between Poland and Soviet Russia it seemed clear that Poland would give the greater value". Such a conviction of Russian weakness meant that the Government were not moved by the opposition argument that Hitler was unlikely to start a war against major powers on two fronts, because he was bound to lose, when in their view there was no major power on the second front. Then there was of course the disadvantage of seeking Soviet support after, and not before, Britain had pledged itself to the support of Poland and Rumania, both of which were as much afraid of the Soviet Union as of Germany. Finally there was the Soviet desire to exploit her favourable bargaining position to the full, and parallel temptation to secure such terms through an agreement with the Germans, in excess of what the west would provide.

In retrospect it is surprising that the talks continued for so long when they were so evidently doomed to failure. It may be, as Mark Arnold-Foster has argued that "a main reason - perhaps the only one - that Chamberlain did not abandon the talks altogether was his fear of the House of Commons".¹ The opposition elements, fortified by public opinion, would not let him stop them (if he had tried), but they could not persuade him to take the Russian negotiations seriously.

3 (from previous page)

The Anti-Appeasers, p.40.

¹ The Guardian, 1 January 1970. The quotations of Chamberlain and Halifax, taken from Cabinet Papers, are from the same source.

On 19 May the House, which had not debated foreign affairs for a month while the Government pursued negotiations with Russia, once more aired the question of Anglo-Russian relations. The debate, which was short and serious, was practically confined to the leaders of parties and to prominent ex-Ministers, who spoke forcefully and knowledgeably about the overriding necessity of constructing a strategically viable eastern front, and again urged the immediate conclusion of a military alliance with the USSR. "We have procrastinated seriously and dangerously", declared Lloyd George:

"I cannot imagine a government taking a risk which the present Government has taken . . . in failing to come to terms with Powers whose assistance to us will not only be useful but . . . essential, . . . Russia offered to come in months ago. For months we have been staring this powerful gift horse in the mouth."¹

Eden, too, argued that an arrangement with Russia would be "a definite gain to peace", and "the sooner, the more complete, the more far-reaching the agreement the better".² Wishing to further his ideas without more publicity, Eden sought out Lord Halifax and suggested that he should go on a private mission to Stalin to conclude the alliance. "I had been the only British minister to visit Stalin and it would not therefore seem so extraordinary if I went again". Apparently Halifax pondered the proposition and seemed to like it, saying that he would put it to the Prime Minister. Eden soon heard, without surprise, that Chamberlain would not agree.³

¹ House of Commons Debates, 19 May, 1939, Cols.1822-25.

² Ibid, Col.1866.

³ The Reckoning, p.55. Cripps made a similar offer. "I rang up Kingsley Wood", he recorded in his diary, "and offered my services to go at once to Russia to get the Russian agreement concluded, as I felt I could do this if I was given the authority". Halifax later thanked him for the offer but could not make use of his services. Estorick, Stafford Cripps, p.175.

The continued delay resulting from the ensuing exchange of views between the two Governments was reflected in the impatient volley of questions faced by ministers in the Commons. Chamberlain, in fact, was subjected to repeated questioning almost daily, frequently in none too genial terms. Dalton recorded that he took it upon himself to question the Prime Minister about the negotiations at least once, and sometimes twice a week. This he hoped would quicken the British replies to Russia, since Chamberlain would prefer to answer "that the ball was in the Russians' court and he was awaiting a reply from them".¹ "Does the Prime Minister not realise", he asked on 12 June, "that these very long delays . . . are causing disquiet in the country and . . . doubt as to whether His Majesty's Government really mean business in this matter at all? Are they not spinning out time until they can wriggle back again to the Munich policy?"² Other comments were just as caustic. "In what year does the Prime Minister expect Mr Strang's visit to be concluded?" asked William Leach on 21 June.³

After months of intense questioning Chamberlain was finally able to make a definite statement with regard to the Russian negotiations on 31 July, announcing that military talks would begin in Moscow "as soon as possible". Nevertheless, the two major contributors to the subsequent debate, Dalton and Sinclair, attacked what are called four and a half months of "floundering diplomacy" and "grave procrastination" by the British Government. Reiterating their parties' demand for a "grand alliance against aggression", they suggested that

¹ The Fateful Years, p.246.

² House of Commons Debates, 12 June, 1939, Col.881-2.

³ Ibid, 21 June, Col.2204. Leach was the Labour Member for Bradford Central.

a man of the highest political standing should make personal contact with the Russian Foreign Minister. Dalton could not resist commenting: "The Prime Minister used to believe in diplomacy by personal contact. . . . Has he lost faith now in the desirability of opposite numbers meeting?"¹ From Sinclair's comments it is apparent that he too had doubts about the genuineness of Chamberlain's desire for a pact with the Russians.

As there was no motion on the floor during the debate, the entire international situation was under general discussion, but speakers from all sides of the floor tended to stress distinct points. That the Russian negotiations should be pressed forward as quickly as possible was one, although equally as important was the theme that Britain must stand firmly behind Poland in the event of German provocation. It appears that the Opposition members were distinctly worried about the possibility of another Munich over Danzig, and so were the Conservative dissidents.² With this in mind Crossley proposed that Britain's motto should be "Not an inch further, and no discussion with the German Government except on our own terms". He added the warning that if Britain gave way one inch further there could be no doubt at all that no peace-loving country "will ever trust this country again. I hope that the Government will stand absolutely resolute, whatever the threats, throughout this long automatic

¹ House of Commons Debates, 31 July, Col.2012.

² The fear of Britain, in Labour parlance, "ratting" again, this time over Poland, were matters raised by Dalton, Morrison and Citrine in a deputation from the National Council of Labour to the Prime Minister and Lord Halifax on 28 June. The Labourites stressed the danger in delaying an agreement with Russia, and wanted Britain to declare unequivocally that a move on Danzig would be resisted. Dalton was anxious "that we should be able to make it clear that there would be no question of our running away in the face of aggression against Poland". Cabinet Papers Premier 1/325.

holiday".¹

The thought continued to haunt them: would Chamberlain once again pose as the great appeaser? According to Nicolson, the Eden Group had the "feeling" that there was to be a deal over Danzig comparable with Munich. "In that event we (the Edenites) shall be stigmatised as the war-monsters and driven out of politics. If only Anthony Eden would now come out in a rage against this subversive attempt, we should be safe. But Anthony does not wish to defy the Tory Party and is in fact missing every boat with exquisite elegance. We drift and pass the rudder into other hands".²

Churchill, too, so Spears recorded, feared that the Government would run out over Poland.³ His fears, and those of the other dissidents, were not groundless as there were a few "foolish virgins" on the Government side who even in September were averse to a war with Germany over Danzig.⁴ One of the rebels, Bower, recalled hearing two Tories on the bench behind him saying: "I suppose we shall be able to get out of this beastly guarantee business?". "Oh, of course", came the reply, "Thank God we have Neville".⁵ Getting out, however, was not the intention of ministers. The Government, it is true, was anxious for a peaceful solution and continually made clear to Germany its willingness for a "comprehensive settlement". But by this was

¹ House of Commons Debates, 31 July, 1939, Col.2061.

² Diaries and Letters, entry for 18 July, p.406.

³ Prelude to Dunkirk, p.3.

⁴ Winterton, Orders of the Day, p.248.

⁵ Recorded in Nicolson, Diaries and Letters, entry for 2 May, p.401.

meant that Germany must abandon further expansion and must disarm, in return for any concessions granted, rather than at Munich when a settlement was made in isolation from other factors.

On 2 August took place the heated debate on the question of the summer adjournment. Both Opposition Parties and Tory dissidents frankly distrusted the Government and feared that if the House adjourned until 3 October, as Chamberlain proposed, it might return once again to appeasement. Labour, therefore, moved the adjournment should not take place until 21 August. Greenwood unashamedly explained why: "A considerable number of Members of this House, not confined to my colleagues on these benches, do not trust the Government". Continued parliamentary vigilance was required otherwise what guarantee "have we that when our backs are turned the Government will not throw in their hands on this question of a triple alliance?".¹

Other members were also anxious about the Russian negotiations. They are so important, Sinclair asserted, that "I do not think we ought to rise before they are completed". Tinker and Sexton, two Labour MPs not noted for an interest in foreign affairs, joined in expressing concern with the way the Government, as Sexton put it, "has dawdled and diddled" along the road to a peace bloc with Russia. Though their fears were shared and voiced by dissident Conservatives, Greenwood's motion to defer the adjournment was heavily defeated.

In fact the House, following the breakdown of the negotiations with Russia after the Nazi-Soviet Pact, reconvened on 24 August, only three days after the Opposition's proposed date. It was at once evident that feeling towards the international situation was one of

¹ House of Commons Debates, 2 August, 1939, Col.2454.

firm resolve, so much so that Spears recorded that Members seemed to be on the watch to detect, and resent, any sign of weakness in the Prime Minister's statement. Chamberlain, however, traced the German-Polish dispute up to the Nazi-Soviet Pact and reaffirmed that Britain's obligations remained unaltered.

Greenwood then expressed disappointment that the peace front had not been strengthened by the addition of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, he seconded the Prime Minister's resolve, not wishing to "rake over the embers of the days that are behind us".¹ Rather he proposed to make clear that the position of the Opposition was full square behind the Government's policy to Poland over the guarantee. Sinclair argued that if Britain yielded over Danzig, she would be faced with further demands, and she would have to face those demands weakened and discredited by her betrayal of the Poles. Britain had no alternative but to honour in full the obligations undertaken in defence of the independence of Poland.

While most speakers agreed that this was no time for recriminations two members dissented from Labour's acceptance of Government policy.² Lansbury voiced a last appeal for a world conference to find a way out of Europe's mad plunge to war.

"Peace can only come when the nations of the world are prepared to do justice by one another. I believe that our people are prepared to make great sacrifices for peace, not more war for peace, but sacrifices of prestige and possession, I believe that they are willing to do that.

¹ House of Commons Debates, 24 August, Col.11.

² In fact the virtual unanimity of the Commons is best expressed in the passing of a motion to turn to a consideration of a bill to confer emergency powers upon the Government.

But what they want is somewhere in the country a body of men who will give the lead."¹

Bevan, while recommending new talks with the Soviet Union, charged the Government with throwing away its proffered assistance. Addressing the Conservative benches he said that if they were in earnest about resisting aggression, they should get rid of the Prime Minister. "He is the man upon whom Hitler relies; he is the man responsible for this situation". Nor was Bevan impressed by Labour's leaders: "No Opposition could be kinder. It has prophesied this month for four or five years. It has fought against it at every stage of the journey, and, at the end of it, abstains from even saying to the Prime Minister "I told you so".² Doubtless Labour's leaders might well have indulged in recriminations, as Bevan urged, but instead, with war in prospect, they chose to emphasize not division, but unity.

At dawn on 1 September, 1939, the German Army opened its assault on Poland. The House of Commons met at 6 p.m. Chamberlain told the House that Britain would oppose force by force and read the document which Henderson had handed to the German Government, explaining: "If a reply to this last warning is unfavourable, and I do not suggest that it is likely to be otherwise, His Majesty's Government's Ambassador is instructed to ask for his passports".³ Although he went on to declare that Britain must enter the struggle with firm determination to see it through to the end, his words concerning "this last warning"

¹ House of Commons Debates, 24 August, Cols.58-9.

² Ibid, Col.29.

³ Ibid, 1 September, Col.131.

left the House puzzled. By the terms of the agreement with Poland, Britain by now should have come to her aid.

September 2nd was a day of tension in the Commons. Members had been restive all day before in the absence of positive action by the Government, and the uneasiness grew as the hours passed. Spears recorded that in his long experience he had never seen the House so stirred, so profoundly moved, as it was that afternoon. It was dawning upon even the most uncritical supporters of the Government that Britain's honour appeared to be in danger.

At 7.45 p.m. Chamberlain spoke. All members expected the announcement that war had been declared but as "we listened, amazement turned to stupefaction, stupefaction into exasperation".¹ Instead the Prime Minister announced an Italian initiative that hostilities should cease and that there should be an immediate conference among Britain, France, Germany and Italy. The Government's position was that Britain could not take part in a conference while Poland was being subjected to invasion, and if the German forces were not withdrawn from Polish territory Britain would be bound to take action. But if Germany agreed to withdraw her forces, then Britain would be willing to regard the situation as being the same as before the German forces crossed the Polish frontier.

When Chamberlain finished the House had been shocked into silence. It was inconceivable that anyone should believe that Hitler meant to turn back. Was there to be another Munich, thought members.² At length Greenwood rose to reply but was interrupted by a shout of "speak for England", from either Amery or Boothby,³ inferring that

¹ Prelude to Dunkirk, p.20.

² Nicolson, Diaries and Letters, p.419.

³ Opinion is divided over who was responsible for this historic intervention. Nicolson attributed it to Boothby, who agrees, but

the Prime Minister had failed to do so. Greenwood rose to the occasion and avoided anything that smacked of partisanship:

"An act of aggression took place 38 hours ago.

The moment that act of aggression took place one of the most important treaties of modern times automatically came into operation . . . I wonder how long we are prepared to vacillate at a time when Britain and all that Britain stands for, and human civilisation are in peril."¹

Every minute's delay imperilled the foundations of Britain's national honour; there must be no more devices for dragging out what had already been dragged out too long. Whereas Chamberlain had been listened to in embarrassed silence, Greenwood's words evoked widespread cheers, even from the Conservatives. Sinclair sided with the acting Labour leader, "This meeting will not have been in vain if it demonstrates to the world that the British Parliament will not tolerate delay in the fulfilment of our honourable obligations to Poland".²

Chamberlain, realising the fury of the House, felt it advisable to speak again. Apologetically, he hoped his statement had not betrayed the slightest weakening on the part of the Government. There were difficulties, he said, in co-ordinating action between the French and British Governments - a veiled reference to the insistence of the French General Staff that there must be a forty-eight hour period after the presentation of the ultimatum so that the French mobilization could proceed without the risk of German air

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others, such as Spears, put it down to Amery, who also claimed the 'authorship'.

¹ House of Commons Debates, 2 September, Col.282.

² Ibid, Cols.283-4.

attack. Nevertheless, he felt certain that he would be able to make an announcement on the next day which, save for a miracle, would be a declaration of war. What Chamberlain did not say in his reply, however, unlike his earlier intervention, was that he was hoping for a miracle from the Italian initiative - one that might arrest Hitler's invasion of Poland and thereby prevent Europe plunging into a general war.

Chamberlain's statement did not satisfy his critics who expected an instant declaration of war, and were disconcerted by the reference to talks going on. Thus Eden was urged to speak by those sitting around him, but eventually Sir John Wardlaw-Milne, MP for Kidderminster, rose from his seat to make known his indignation. Wardlaw-Milne was well-equipped for such a role. A loyal supporter of the Government, he had been elected Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the supporters of the National Government in succession to the troublesome Emrys-Evans. Channon had recorded how:

"Fearing a 'Glamorous movement' I packed the Foreign Affairs Committee with sound Chamberlain chaps and we elected Sir John Wardlaw-Milne, a semi-diehard as chairman . . . The new chairman will be fair and tolerate no nonsense from the Glamour group who are being very tiresome."¹

Wardlaw-Milne argued that Britain's pledge to Poland was Britain's not France's. If Germany had any intention of complying with the British note, delivered 24 hours ago, she would have stopped the devastation of Poland by now. He felt compelled to say this much "because the whole country is nervous about this continual delay in

¹ Diary entry for 5 May, 1939, p.197.

carrying out our pledges".¹ Following Wardlaw-Milne's speech, which according to Cooper, "carried great weight", the House adjourned amid mingled feelings of hostility and dismay.²

Later that evening a small group of dissident Conservatives, including Cooper, Eden, Boothby, Bracken and Sandys met at Churchill's flat. Presumably Eden at this stage no longer feared association with Churchill. All those present, Cooper records, were in a state of "bewildered rage". Boothby was convinced that Chamberlain had lost the Conservative Party "forever" and that it was in Churchill's power to "break him" and take his place. The group talked long into the night over the old question: was it better to split the party and the country at this critical moment in an attempt at toppling Chamberlain or to bolster him up in the interests of national unity? Eventually they received news of what was to occur next day, and the heated discussion cooled.³

According to Channon, the "Cabinet and the Appeasers were discouraged by the reception the insane House of Commons gave to this glimmer of peace", the Italian initiative.⁴ The Prime Minister's statement had infuriated the House and it became clear that unless the Government acted forthwith it would not be able to maintain itself when Parliament met again. Apparently, after the adjournment, Chamberlain remained in the Chamber with Margesson the Chief Whip. "The latter was purple in the face, and the former was as white as a sheet. It must be clear to them that if it had come to a vote at

¹ House of Commons Debates, 2 September, Col.286.

² Old Men Forget, p.259.

³ Ibid, pp.259-60.

⁴ The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.212.

the time, he would have been defeated".¹ After a full meeting of the Cabinet, it was eventually agreed that the ultimatum to Germany would expire at 11 o'clock the next morning. The House met again the following day, a Sunday, when Chamberlain announced that the final note had been sent to Berlin and, as it had not been complied with, "this country is at war with Germany".² It does appear, therefore, that in the last days of the peace the House of Commons made the Government's mind up for it, at least as regards the timing of war.

¹ Nicolson, Diaries and Letters, p.421.

² House of Commons Debates, 3 September, 1939, Col.292.

C H A P T E R V I I I

THE WAR AND THE DOWNFALL OF CHAMBERLAIN

With the declaration of war, Chamberlain had at once reorganised his government. Churchill was at last brought in, and given the same post as he had held in 1914, First Lord of the Admiralty, together with a seat in the War Cabinet. This meant that Lloyd George's idea of a War Cabinet of Ministers with no departmental responsibility to harass them, had been abandoned. Several of the Tory rebels were critical of this arrangement and were inclined to believe, possibly erroneously, that Winston had been given a department so that "he would be too busy to make a nuisance of himself".¹ "The original idea", wrote Nicolson, "was that Winston should be a member of the War Cabinet without portfolio. Margesson insisted that he must be nobbled by having a department which would occupy all his time".² Boothby, also suspicious at the combination of posts, considered that "Winston is hamstrung. As a member of the Government, who shall be nameless, put it to me last week 'We fixed him when we sent him to the Admiralty'".³

Eden was also brought in, as Dominions Secretary, without a seat in the War Cabinet but which he was able to attend. Anxious to clarify the exact position, Eden asked the Prime Minister whether this meant he could make any contribution to the discussions.

¹ Spears, Prelude to Dunkirk, p.27.

² Diary entry, 20 September, 1939, Diaries and Letters, p.35.

³ Letter to Lloyd George, 18 September, 1939, Lloyd George Papers.

Chamberlain said that strictly speaking these should be limited to matters concerning the Dominions, but this restriction would not be rigidly enforced. "I could feel no enthusiasm", Eden commented, "for the general arrangement of the Government, nor for my own somewhat anomalous position in the Cabinet. If it had not been for the emergency of war, nothing would have induced me to return. The next few months, until Mr Churchill formed his administration, were for me uneasy because, though I was a spectator of most War Cabinet proceedings, I had no real part in them."¹ Harvey's pre-war diary for 1939, however, revealed a different Eden, anxious at all costs to return to office, and this throws doubt on his reluctance to serve in the Government, despite the awkward nature of his position.

With the exception of Gwilym Lloyd George and Sir Arthur Salter, who were appointed to minor posts, all the changes made during the remaining months of Chamberlain's administration were painfully orthodox. The 'old gang' were occasionally shuffled from one post to another but the War Cabinet remained substantially the same: Chamberlain, Simon, Halifax, Hoare, Churchill, Hore-Belisha, Kingsley Wood, Chatfield and Lord Hankey, who had retired in 1938 after 22 years' service as secretary to the Cabinet.² Churchill complained of its age: six of them had an average age of over 64, "only one year short of the Old Age Pension".³

¹ The Reckoning, p.63. Thompson records that Eden was taken into the Cabinet. The Anti-Appeasers, p.221. This is incorrect.

² In January 1940, Hore-Belisha was succeeded by Oliver Stanley; in April 1940, Chatfield left the Cabinet when the Ministry for the Co-ordination of Defence was abolished, and at the same time Hoare and Kingsley Wood changed places. Nicolson recorded the remark: 'I do not understand why they bothered to change Ministries; surely it would have been simpler to exchange names. Diary entry 5 April, 1940, Diaries and Letters, 1939-45, p.66.

³ The Twilight War, p.1.

Promotion elsewhere in the administration was confined to loyal supporters of Chamberlain so that the best use was not made of the talent available in the Conservative ranks. Almost immediately the press began to ask why leading Conservatives like Amery and Cooper were not given positions, and the answer lay in the Prime Minister's resentment towards his critics. Eden recorded how at a War Cabinet meeting on 4 October Chamberlain "showed a flash of his old vindictiveness" when Amery's name was suggested for a post. "Neville pushed it away with an irritated snort". When it was further suggested that Cooper should be considered "Neville at once said vehemently that he thought neither of them would be at all suitable".¹ Apparently the rancour was not dimmed even after Chamberlain's resignation as Prime Minister: as Lord President he had to swear in Lord Cranborne as a minister and he would not speak a friendly word. Furthermore able young men such as Boothby, Law, Macmillan and others of the Conservative opponents of Munich were likewise excluded.

The creation of a Ministry of Shipping was, after great pressure, agreed to by Chamberlain, but even then he chose as its head the ageing Sir John Gilmour who died within a few months. Yet these exclusions should not lead us into a blanket generalisation like Thompson's "the ablest Conservatives were sitting on the back-benches when war came", for there were able Conservatives on the front-bench although doubtless there were some whose ability was open to question, as with many on the back-bench.²

The Government then remained a party affair, "effectively unchanged and integrally Conservative".³ On 1 September, Chamberlain

¹ The Reckoning, p.73.

² The Anti-Appeasers, p.14.

³ The Life of Neville Chamberlain, p.420.

had invited Labour to join his Government, but their Parliamentary Executive was unanimous in refusing the offer. Dalton explained to R A Butler, Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, that they declined to join the Cabinet because Chamberlain and Simon, whom they had often expressed lack of confidence in, were number one and two. "Continuing, I point out that if, for instance, members of the Labour Party were given, say, one seat in the Inner Cabinet, plus the Postmaster General and the Secretaryship of State for Latrines, we should not only be uninfluential within, but we should lose most of our power to exercise influence from without, since we should continually be referred to 'Your Mr So-and-So, who is now 'Secretary of State'".¹ Dalton was also of the opinion that Labour's leadership would lose credit amongst the parliamentary party, which would be filled with suspicion at their official participation.

This is not to say that Labour was half-hearted at the prospect of war. Although declining to join the Government, they had pledged full support to the national war effort, while reserving the right to criticise, both publicly and privately, in the national interest. "We shall", Dalton noted in his diary, "act as patriotic gadflies on Ministers. We shall still be free to criticise if we think fit in the House, and the so-called 'political truce' whereby no contested elections take place for the time being, is subject to termination at any time in our discretion."² Consequently Labour

¹ Dalton Papers, Diaries, 6 September, 1939.

² Ibid. The electoral truce was an arrangement, made at an early stage in the war, whereby the major parties agreed not to put up candidates against each other in Parliamentary by-elections. As signed by the three chief whips, it read: "We jointly agree, as representing the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Parties, as follows:- (a) Not to nominate Candidates for Parliamentary vacancies that now exist, or may occur, against the Candidate nominated by the party holding the seat at the time of the

made no attempt to interfere with the general process of wartime Government, to obstruct Government business, or to embarrass the Government by inconvenient debate. It recognised its public duty to assist and not to hinder. The party however, opposed when contentious questions of peace-time order, like the Old Age and Widows' Pension Bill, were before the House. It also proposed motions and debated resolutions on internal aspects of the conduct of the war. Nevertheless, it had tacitly agreed not to oppose, and the Government on its side had tacitly agreed not to introduce matters of a really contentious nature. In effect there was a truce in the normal party conflict, and not a mere agreement not to contest by-elections.

It was agreed that a number of members of Labour's Parliamentary Executive should keep in touch with leading Ministers. Cabinet records, in fact, reveal that 'Individual leaders of the Labour Party in both Houses of Parliament had approached various Ministers of the Crown. In each case the Minister concerned had been informed that the Labour leader in question had been nominated by the Labour Party to keep in touch with him for the purpose of obtaining information regarding the work of his Department'.¹ In these liaison arrangements Greenwood kept in touch with the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, Alexander with the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lees-Smith with the Secretary of State for War, Pathick-Lawrence with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Dalton with the Secretary of State for Air and

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vacancy occurring. (b) The agreement shall hold good during the war, or until determined on notice given by any one of the three Parties signatories hereto." Labour Party Conference Report, 1940, p.19.

¹ Cabinet Papers 65 6(39)3 Parliamentary Oppositions, Request for information.

the Minister of Economic Warfare. The purpose of such contact was twofold: first, to convey any opinions held or relevant information received, by the leaders of the Labour Party; secondly, to receive information which, though it could not in the national interest be published, yet should be revealed in confidence to the leaders of the Opposition.

The Liberal Party, too, was offered ministerial office in Chamberlain's administration, but, like Labour, it declined to participate.¹ It does not appear that the Liberals were quite so averse to joining the Government for, according to Churchill, the Prime Minister had "hopes that they would accept office".² In the event Sinclair was offered a post outside the War Cabinet, but turned it down on the grounds that "if we are to accept responsibility for the actions of the Government we must of course be represented in its innermost councils where the big decisions are taken".³

Although the party welcomed the inclusion of Churchill, Eden and Hankey, "Liberals", said Sinclair, "cannot be expected to be very enthusiastic about the present composition of the Government. It is indeed a very experienced Government - the faces of the War Cabinet are nearly all familiar to us - perhaps, many Liberals will think, too familiar. We should have liked to see the direction of our policy during the war in the hands of a War Cabinet the great majority of whose members would have been free from the constant

¹ Apart from Gwilym Lloyd George who accepted office as Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Trade.

² The Twilight War, p.1.

³ Speech by Sinclair to the Council of the Liberal Party, 4 September, 1939. Liberal Magazine, September 1939.

burden of departmental responsibilities - so greatly increased as they are by war-time conditions and legislation - free to think and plan ahead and act vigourously." The leader of the party went on to define their functions, now that war was declared, as "criticism and vigilance", but "we shall be willing to put the best construction on their actions and we shall allow ourselves no criticism which is not inspired by the single aim of achieving the earliest possible victory and peace".¹

The Liberal Party also made a request to receive confidential information regarding the conduct of the war. It was not identical to Labour's, as the Cabinet records reveal. "Sinclair had indicated his desire to be furnished regularly and at short intervals with confidential reports for the information of himself and his colleagues." Naturally the Government felt that it could not "share responsibility for the conduct of the war" with the leaders of what were the Parliamentary Opposition Parties, and therefore it was agreed that no information should be given to them "as a matter of right", although no objection was maintained to Ministers establishing "informal contacts with the leaders of the Parliamentary Opposition".²

The role which the Liberal and Labour Parties had set themselves, that of discriminating support, was not an easy one. Both parties distrusted the Government and wanted changes in its personnel, yet on the other hand, there was basic agreement on the Government's war policy, for which they had pledged full support. Consequently the parties were placed in a position that could not be held for very

¹ Liberal Magazine, September 1939.

² Cabinet Papers 65 6(39)3.

long: either, dependent on the successful prosecution of the war one became a real supporter, if not collaborator; or, if disaster followed disaster, one became really critical, amounting to a peacetime opponent. In effect it was the combination of the Opposition choosing the latter course and making a frontal attack on the Government, and the realisation by a large section of Tory back-benchers of what they felt to be the inadequacy of existing Government personnel, that precipitated the political crisis resulting in the resignation of Chamberlain.

The opposition tactics of critical support of the Government had an important effect on the Tory benches. As there was fundamental agreement over war with Germany there were no great debates and divisions. Any disagreements arose out of aspects of policy such as rationing, agricultural production, and economic organisation. With the Government's continued existence going unchallenged and the whips thereby largely redundant, the National supporters were released from their obligations to the Government. Ivor Jennings noted the result: "There is now as much criticism from the Government benches as from the Opposition side. It rarely shows itself in votes, but it does show itself in speeches".¹ A good example of this was the first Secret Session, on 14 December, which both Emrys-Evans and Nicolson felt was "a great blow to the Party machine". "They must have realised", Nicolson wrote, "the underlying force of the opposition on our side. The effect of the Secret session was not to divulge secrets which could not have been divulged in public. It was to show the Whips what their supporters really felt. The

¹ 'Parliament in Wartime', Political Quarterly, 1940.

tremendous reception given to Archie Sinclair's speech must in itself have shown the Whips how precarious is their hold on their own ¹ Party. This marks a stage in the end of this administration . . . We have got them."²

A further consequence of the lessening of party divisions was the formation of the All Party Parliamentary Action Group. Before the onset of war Members had been reluctant to appear on the same platform, or associate themselves publicly with a political opponent, either through fear of antagonising their supporters or damaging their chances of preferment. Now that they were all in the same boat together, and were intent on waging a successful war, MPs from all sides of the House banded together in an action group. Six members were prominent in its establishment: Rathbone and Salter, both Independent; Boothby and Nicolson, Conservative and National Labour; White and Grenfell, Liberal and Labour respectively.³ In a tentative circular signed by the six and dated 4 September, the group was described as informal and constituted without regard to party, and chiefly of private Members "who have in recent years been working for similar objects and have found action through purely party machinery inadequate".⁴ Its object was stated as "private discussion and action on problems arising out of the war". Reasons for the group's formation were also set out:

¹ A J Sylvester, Lloyd George's secretary wrote to his employer in March, 1940, that Margesson, once referred to as the "political Maginot line" of the Government, had less influence than ever before. Letter dated 20 March, Lloyd George Papers.

² Diary entry, 14 December, 1939, Diaries and Letters, p.50.

³ Boothby later claimed that he and Davies formed the group. I Fight To Live, p.194. This is incorrect as the 4 September circular reveals. Davies came to the fore later.

⁴ The group was formed in 1939, not in 1940 as Thompson records, The Anti-Appeasers, p.222.

"1. Numerous problems will arise on which Members will desire to obtain information from or make suggestions to Ministers or Government departments. The ordinary methods of debate and Parliamentary questions will be unavailable on questions where publicity is undesirable. Joint action rather than individual approach will secure greater attention and save the time of Ministers.

2. Members may desire opportunities for private discussion among themselves on the general course of Government policy, or on particular practical problems, with or without the assistance of invited outside speakers."¹

Meetings, it was suggested, could be held in a Standing Committee Room, or, when Parliament was not sitting, in some convenient place, like Chatham House. They would be held at fixed periods, either weekly or as may be decided.

At first the circular was issued to selected MPs chosen by the six, but as more and more joined the group, any member could suggest that an invitation be sent to a non-member, which, however, could only be done through the secretary. The great advantage of such a method was that the group consisted of personal contacts, thus ensuring that undesirable members and adverse publicity could be minimised.

The preliminary meeting was held on 6 September, when Salter presided over the eighteen that attended.² Sir Roger Keyes was there to answer questions on naval matters. The follow-up meeting was held a week later on 13 September, when the organisation of the group was thoroughly thrashed out. Boothby proposed, and it was resolved, that three sections or sub-committees should be formed: Foreign Policy

¹ Lloyd George Papers, 4 September, 1939.

² Salter, after his ministerial appointment ceased to play an active role in the group.

and Strategy, Home Defence, and Economic Planning. The three sub-committees would collect information, making special enquiries where none was available, and then report their results and suggestions to the whole group. Mander, Mavis Tate and Boothby agreed to be the convenors of the sub-committees, but it was entirely up to the membership which committees, if any, they joined.¹ The three convenors of the sub-committees, together with Rathbone, convenor of the main group, and the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the group, when appointed, were to act as an Agenda Committee to make and receive proposals for future work and meetings. Rathbone, who was acting secretary, was empowered to write to Lloyd George to see whether the services of the Research Department of the Council of Action could be utilised for the work of the group.

On 15 September Rathbone addressed a letter to Lloyd George requesting his permission for the group to make use of the services of his Research Department. "It would be a great advantage to have some means of making specialised enquiries on subjects where information from other sources is inadequate and not otherwise being accumulated."² Lloyd George replied to the effect that although he liked the idea of the movement, he was a little doubtful over some of the names involved. Wanting to know more about the group's aims before committing the Council of Action, Lloyd George suggested a meeting to discuss the question.³ It is likely that Nicolson recorded the occasion of the meeting in his diary, but without stating the purpose. His entry for 20 September was "Go round with Bob Boothby,

¹ Tate was the Tory MP for West Willesden, 1931-35; Frome, Somerset, 1935-45. Her interest in defence matters was not a recent acquisition for at the 1935 General Election she, in contrast to the majority of her colleagues, had advocated large-scale rearmament. C Sykes, Nancy, The Life of Lady Astor, p.362.

² Lloyd George Papers.

³ Letter, dated 16 September, Lloyd George Papers.

Eleanor Rathbone and Wilfrid Roberts to see Lloyd George."¹ In the event Lloyd George consented to the Council of Action being utilised for the work of the group.

As September progressed the Group's membership became more numerous and its organisation much improved. Its objects were now formally delineated:

"That this Group seeks to promote the most vigorous and efficient prosecution of the war, with the object of establishing conditions conducive to the freedom and economic welfare of all European peoples; and believes that every other consideration should be subordinated to this end.

In particular, the Group seeks to promote the utmost vigour and efficiency in administrative and industrial organisation, so that the full resources of the country may be made available for the above purpose.

The Group pledges itself to work for the sole purpose of securing that, alike in the military, political and economic fields, the war shall be waged in the manner best calculated to achieve a lasting peace."²

Boothby and Horabin were appointed to act as joint secretaries, the latter arranging for his secretary to listen to the radio and take notes on foreign broadcasts, which could be made into reports.³ These were to be furnished to the appropriate sub-committee according to their content, or alternatively, if of general interest on the war situation, to the whole group. At the same time Clement Davies, the Liberal National Member for Montgomery, became Chairman, providing

¹ Diaries and Letters, p.35.

² Printed circular dated 28 September, 1939. Rathbone Papers.

³ Horabin was the Liberal Member for North Cornwall, Sir Francis

"vigorous leadership".¹ Within three months Davies, as a result of his activities in the group, wrote to the Prime Minister stating his intention of withdrawing his support from the Government. His letter was as follows:

"Having heard and carefully considered the explanations given from time to time by the members of the Government, I find that the opinion, forced upon me by so many instances of failure on the part of the Government to take the measures necessary for the vigorous prosecution of the war, that the Government has not the resolution, policy, or energy demanded by the country and the situation itself to meet the crisis, has been only too fully confirmed. I feel, therefore, that I must withdraw my support from the Government."²

In November 1939 the question of the general circularisation of the House arose. Whereas invitations had hitherto been limited to personal contacts, it was now felt that numbers should be enlarged by inviting any one who wished to join to do so. Of the six original signatories, Grenfell and Nicolson were against the move, while Salter and White were not keen if only four of the six original names were to appear on the circular. The difficulty was overcome by the Chairman, Davies, issuing the circular in his name. Although membership records are scanty, the circular does appear to

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Acland having died in the summer of 1939. Horabin represented the constituency from 1939-50, but for the last three years he sat as a Labour member.

¹ The Unforgiving Years, p.339.

² The Times, 16 December, 1939.

have attracted a handful of new faces, so that membership now exceeded sixty.

The Agenda Committee drew up a programme in which leading authorities addressed the group on every aspect of the war. They discussed finance with J M Keynes, broadcasting in wartime with Sir Stephen Tellents, air warfare with Lord Trenchard, economic planning with Sir William Beveridge, munitions supply with Lord Aberconway, the Soviet-Finnish conflict with George Gripenberg, Finland's Ambassador, and the general situation with David Lloyd George. The latter apparently spoke to the group on 27 September, and was of the opinion that the Royal Air Force should have bombed German arms factories within 12 hours of the declaration of war. That this was not done indicated weakness, and if such was the case Britain should never have begun to fight. The situation warranted a secret session at which the Government should give the facts, and unless the chances were 50-50 peace should be made.¹

Another meeting, fully documented in Amery's memoirs, was that with Field Marshall Milne, when the military situation was discussed. In an impressive address Milne argued that it was certain destruction to be caught on the move, and that the only thing was to be pitiless, write Belgium off and break the German offensive on a well-prepared front. He implored the members that when the time came and the Dutch and the Belgians cried for help, not to support that cry, but to remember that the only real help Britain could give was final victory. To rush forward beyond that line, not only endangered victory, but probably meant the over-running of Northern France and complete disaster. In the event Britain gave way to the French in favour of the advance into Belgium, and were caught on the move

¹ Nicolson, diary entry 20 September, 1939, Diaries and Letters, p.35.

with the consequent results that Milne had predicted.¹

Expert advice was not enough. Through the sub-committees information was gleaned from many sources, and where none existed, an enquiry was instituted. In this way precise knowledge of the war situation - in so far as this was consistent with security - was made available for the group to digest, and then was discussed at the weekly meetings. The end result was, in the words of Rathbone's biographer, "a real insight into the war situation" otherwise only available to Ministers, equipping the group to fulfil its object of pressing for the most vigorous prosecution of the war.² This, as was implied in the September circular, was done in several ways: individual members intervening in debates, criticising Government action or inaction and suggesting possible lines of activity; deputations and written communications, from the group or individual members, to the Government and Government departments.

The formation of the group and its activities were not approved by the Government Whips' Office. At the beginning of October 1939 Margesson made some caustic comments to Boothby on the subject of the group and the critical attitude of some of its members in the House. With the group's object to press for an effective conduct of the war, it was inevitable that members should from time to time come into conflict with the administration. But to assume that the Government supporters involved were merely intent on "loyal grousing" is to do them less than justice. A number there were who, in what they felt were the interests of an efficient war effort, were

¹ The Unforgiving Years, p.336.

² Stocks, Eleanor Rathbone, p.269.

determined to do all in their power to upset Chamberlain. Boothby, for one, indicated as much in a letter to Lloyd George:

"Four men have landed us in this deplorable situation - Chamberlain, Simon, Halifax and Hoare . . . How can we fight the most desperate war of our history against two of the most brilliant tacticians (Hitler and Mussolini) the world has ever seen, under a Government which . . . does not enjoy the confidence of a large section of the House of Commons and of the country?

But I am convinced that, if the poison that now infects the body politic is to be removed; and if the nation is to go forward with full strength, resolution, and confidence; then the authors of the present misfortunes (Chamberlain above all) will have to go and a genuine National Government will have to be formed."¹

Cartland, too, was extremely pessimistic. In a letter to Rathbone he made his views quite clear: "we shall never attain victory with the present organisation of the Government".² To Nicolson he was even more forthright, saying that those responsible for the situation should be suitably dealt with: Chamberlain and Margesson hung on lamp-posts; Burgin and Hore-Belisha shot.³ As these views were already held by Opposition Members, and increasingly shared by the Government supporters among the group's activists, it is not surprising

¹ Letter dated 10 September, 1939, Lloyd George Papers.

² Letter dated 24 September, 1939, Rathbone Papers.

³ Diary entry 20 September, 1939, Diaries and Letters, p.36.

to find that by May 1940 the group had become a focal point of disaffection, contributing to the fall of Chamberlain.

Although membership records of the group are scanty, particularly after November 1939, it is possible to piece together the membership as it stood after the general circularisation of the House. It consisted of 24 Conservatives, 5 Liberal Nationals, 3 National Labourites, 8 Liberals, 20 Labourites and 4 Independents, making a total of 64. These were: Adams, Amery, Assheton-Pownall, Baldwin-Webb, Boothby, Cartland, T Cazalet, V Cazalet, Lady Davidson, Doland, Fyfe, Fremantle, Gunston, Hammersley, Hannah, Hogg, Sir J Kerr, Law, Lyons, Macmillan, Moore-Brabazon, Sandys, Tate, I Ward (Conservative); Beechman, Davies, Magnay, Morrison, Stewart (Liberal National); Denman, Nicolson, King-Hall (National Labour); Acland, E Evans, Foot, M Lloyd George, Horabin, Mander, Roberts, White (Liberal); D Adams, J A Damson, Beaumont, Bellenger, Cocks, A Edwards, Fletcher, Grenfell, W G Hall, Haden-Guest, Isaacs, Jowitt, Milner, Nathan, Stokes, Thurtle, Tinker, Wedgwood, Wilmot (Labour); Bartlett, Lipson, Rathbone, Salter (Independent). An analysis revealed little save that members tended to be younger, better educated, and more biased towards the professions than their respective parties. However there was a low percentage, 20%, as compared with 40.9%, drawn from business circles amongst Conservative members, and a small proportion, 15%, compared with the 59.1%, who were trade unionists sitting on the Labour benches.

During the autumn of 1939 efforts were made by the Group's leadership to assimilate the Conservative followers of Eden, who was now, of course, in Chamberlain's Government. In fact 9, Adams, Amery, Boothby, Cartland, Gunston, Law, Macmillan, Nicolson, and Sandys, of those that had been associated with the little group of

Conservatives formed round Eden, were already identified with the group. Other Edenites had been scattered: Thomas had become Parliamentary Private Secretary to Eden at the Dominions Office; Crossley had been killed in a plane crash off Denmark, a few days prior to the outbreak of war; Joel, Patrick and Turton were all on active service. Of those remaining at Westminster, including Bower, Emrys-Evans, Lancaster, Nicholson, Tree and Spears, Rathbone was hopeful that they might be persuaded to join. The response was poor. Doubtless the reason for this reluctance was that the Eden Group, or what was left of it, still continued to function. With Amery, who, of course, was a member of the Action Group and was developing a wider range of allies than he had ever had before, in the chair, they met to discuss the situation over dinner every Wednesday, in a little room at the Carlton Restaurant.¹

Like the Action Group, the Edenites, with their history of disaffection from the Chamberlain Government, were not to be reconciled to the administration by the inclusion of their leader. As early as September Channon noticed signs of the 'glamour boys' beginning to intrigue again, indicative of the growing disquiet that the Edenites felt for what they considered an uncertain and half-hearted conduct of the war.² That month, two members, Spears and Amery, had taken a particularly active line against the Government's complete abandonment of the Poles. Although it was the German attack upon them that was the occasion of the war, neither Britain nor France made any attempt to give them air support or to undertake an offensive in the West to divert German forces from Poland. Instead,

¹ The Unforgiving Years, p.339.

² The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.222.

all the Allies did was to indulge in what became known as the 'Confetti War', dropping pamphlets over Germany. Spears, very angry at what he regarded as a betrayal, was only persuaded, by the personal intervention of the Secretary of State for Air, not to take up on the floor of the House, in co-operation with Labour, the question of lack of support to the Poles.¹ Similarly Amery went to see Kingsley Wood with the suggestion that Britain should try to set fire to the Black Forest with incendiary bombs, since this area was an important reserve of timber and packed full of stores. The Air Minister dismissed the idea, stating that bombing should be confined to military objectives and neither forests nor stores could be so described. "To my question whether we were not going to lift a finger to help the Poles he had no answer. My diary says that "I went away very angry".²

It is necessary to add that conditions did not appear to favour the initiative in boldness that the Edenites pressed for. The leading members of the Government doubted whether the Anglo-French forces could win a decisive victory even in a long war and, in any case, there was the advantage in postponing the heavy fighting in France while British rearmament was rushed along. They felt their best hope lay in the collapse of the German home front, accelerated by propaganda and allied blockade. Thus in the absence of serious fighting during the winter of 1939-40, propaganda and blockade (directed by the Ministry of Economic Warfare) became the Allies

¹ Prelude To Dunkirk, pp.30-31. Labour, too, were incensed at the failure of the Government, and in particular the Air Force, to do anything except drop leaflets while the Poles were so hard pressed in the East. Like Amery, Dalton suggested to Kingsley Wood setting the Black Forest alight, which the Minister turned down as being contrary to the Hague Convention. Other Labour leaders also pressed Cabinet Ministers for action to support the Eastern Front, either by putting planes into Poland or by air action in the West to draw away German forces from the East. The Fateful Years, pp.276-77.

² The Unforgiving Years, pp.329-30; the diary entry is for 5 September.

chief weapon. It was not until the military disasters of April to June 1940 that the purpose and spirit of the conduct of the war were transformed. Issues were suddenly and sharply defined and the dictates of prudence no longer seemed relevant. Britain's total resources were to be mobilised and used - by a new and bolder leadership - to resist the German menace.

The Eden Group remained essentially what it had been before the war - a forum for discussion and exchange of views. Various sources were available to the members, including information derived from the All Party Action Group, contacts within Government Departments, and ministers addressing their weekly meeting.¹ Some of the group were engaged in various aspects of the war, which they duly reported on to their associates. One such occasion was January 17, 1940, when Bower, then working in the Air Ministry department dealing with Coastal Command, informed the group that British bombers had been over the Wilhelmshaven and seen below them submarines and a huge battleship in the course of construction, but had been prohibited from dropping a single bomb. The group were all shocked by what they considered "a very serious situation".²

From an early date the Edenites - indicative of the way their leader's stock had fallen - became convinced that the British war effort would only stiffen if Chamberlain were removed and Churchill succeeded him as Prime Minister. This was discussed "in all its bearings" at a group dinner in the Carlton on 3 October, when Amery

¹ As on 25 October when an extremely confident Hore-Belisha addressed them, saying that he was preparing for a three-years war but he did not think it would last that long. Nicolson saw no grounds for such optimism. Diaries and Letters, p.40.

² Nicolson, diary entry 17 September, 1939, Diaries and Letters, p.58.

and Cooper contended that "we have no time to lose".¹ The latter had in fact told Churchill, two weeks after the outbreak of war, that he had "no wish to get into the present Government or to serve under Chamberlain again, but that I looked forward to the time when he would become Prime Minister".² Certainly Chamberlain, unlike Churchill, had no gift for inspiring the nation to the great efforts required to wage a successful war. The Prime Minister, in fact, recognised his deficiency, writing in October that he hated and loathed the war. "I was never meant to be a war minister, and the thought of all those homes wrecked in the 'Royal Oak' makes me want to hand over my responsibilities to someone else."³ As such was his attitude, it is not surprising that we find Nicolson comparing the Prime Minister's weekly statement on the progress of the war with the secretary of a firm of undertakers reading the minutes of the last meeting.⁴

Alternatively the group switched from its hopes of a new leader to what could be done with the old to effect the efficient prosecution of the war. Their discussion turned on how the group in the War Cabinet thought to be "working for appeasement" could be countered. "Should we start a House of Commons campaign and distribute questions among our group in such a way as will indicate to the House that there is a concerted movement?" Cranborne, however, suggested that a very small committee should be created of very respectable Conservatives,

¹ Nicolson, diary entry 3 October, 1939, Diaries and Letters, p.38.

² Old Men Forget, p.264.

³ The Life of Neville Chamberlain, p.420.

⁴ Diary entry 17 January, 1940, Diaries and Letters, p.58.

upon which the Eden Group should be represented by Amery, which would exercise pressure on the Cabinet.¹ They all agreed that such pressure would only be possible if it could be indicated that in the event of reluctance on the part of the Government, the Edenites would go to the point, not only of supporting the Opposition in debate, "but of voting against the Government if necessary". This would mark a complete departure from what had been their tactic hitherto, but Nicolson was confident that the group was in a very strong position and could exercise "what may prove to be a determinant influence".² His optimism was not misplaced for he and his associates, like the Action Group, were to play their part in bringing about the change of Government.

It is interesting to note that the Labour opposition was working on similar lines to the Tory dissidents. As early as 19 September, the Parliamentary Executive held discussions, which continued into the next day, on how to bring about a change of government. Dalton recorded that there was a rising growl, led by Morrison, against Chamberlain and his associates and of the need to kick them out if the war was to be more than, as Shinwell put it, "a silly escapade".³ This impatience on Morrison's part has been paralleled in the work of R Miliband, who wrote:

"A remarkable feature of the Labour leaders'

attitude, once war had been declared, was their unwillingness to apply all possible pressure for a radical reorganisation of the Government.

¹ Such a committee was created in April 1940 by Cranborne's father, the Marquis of Salisbury.

² Nicolson, diary entry 17 January, 1940, Diaries and Letters, p.58.

³ The Fateful Years, p.282.

. . . A party more boldly led, and less inhibited in its political strategy, might well have exacted, as the price of its indispensable co-operation and support, major changes in the political direction of the war."¹

Miliband's haste altogether misses the strategy on which Labour was working, and continued to work, for a majority of the executive were agreed on the need to tread warily. They favoured caution, or "timing it well", as the Government could be changed only if there was a serious defection among its supporters. "We must steer", Dalton observed, "between undue delay while present ministers mishandle the war, and plunging into strong criticism without any effective support from ministerialists".² Implicit in the latter course was the danger that party divisions would be reinforced, the whips would remain active and criticisms by National Members become muted, inter-party associations terminated, and the possibility of a breakdown of the morale of the ministerial mass substantially reduced. Add to this the fear that if Labour was to be fractious from the first, this would not only appear unpatriotic and be seen as hampering the war effort, but would nullify the effectiveness of the real show-down when once it came. Consequently Labour's tactics, as adopted at this meeting, were to allow sufficient time for the Government to mismanage the war, or further misfortune arise, and then to confront ministers, returning to peace-time opposition, in the hope that enough Conservatives - more open to criticisms of the Government's conduct of affairs, through

¹ Parliamentary Socialism, p.268.

² Dalton Papers, Diaries 20 September, 1939.

contacts with Opposition elements and the lack of party conflict - would have the courage to override party loyalty and discipline and press for a change of administration.

While Members on both sides of the House worked for a truly National Government to wage war effectively against Nazi Germany, there were those, again in all parties, that devoted their energy to bring about an armistice and the restoration of peace at the earliest possible moment. The most significant of this group, David Lloyd George, made a speech in the House of Commons on 3 October, supporting a peace conference between Britain, Germany, Russia, Italy, France and the United States. While rejecting the suggestion that Britain should agree to a surrender, he urged that there were many points to be settled, and that in face of a proved readiness to fight if a reasonable settlement could not be reached, terms might be arranged for a permanent peace settlement. His speech was violently attacked. Duff Cooper immediately sprang to his feet, and white with anger, "deplored and regretted it" as a "suggestion of surrender".¹ Two of Lloyd George's fellow Welshmen, Grenfell and Morris-Jones, roundly denounced what was a "great disservice to this country. Wales would be ashamed of the words he uttered".²

Three days later Hitler made his peace appeal to the Western Powers. He advocated the holding of a European conference on the problems arising from the collapse of Poland, including Germany's colonial claims and the limitation of armaments. Chamberlain, on 12 October, publicly turned the appeal down, which made Lloyd George even more determined to follow up his theme. On 21 October, 1939,

¹ Cooper recorded the incident in some detail. Old Men Forget, p.267.

² House of Commons Debates, 3 October, 1939, Col.589.

he told 8,000 people at Caernarvon that "we could be as firm at a conference as on the battlefield . . . if there were an opportunity of achieving our aims by peaceful means now it is better than running tremendous risks and incurring terrible sacrifices to achieve at the end terms which might not be better than those we have a chance of securing now".¹

Lloyd George's defeatism - shared incidentally by Liddell Hart - may have been completely out of harmony with both his party and the nation but it rested on what was a careful reading of the dangers of the situation in which Britain found herself. He had, after all, been prominent in the endeavours to expose the futility of the guarantee to Poland without first obtaining the aid of Russia. As he had feared, the Poles fought largely unaided, even though he had urged a quick blow in the West to relieve the pressure on them. By the third week of the war Lloyd George was becoming convinced of allied inability to win: nothing had been done or projected which bore, at any rate to him, the mark of resolute warlike purpose. It seemed that Chamberlain's administration was too incompetent to conduct a war, and therefore it might be better if Britain got out of the mess on the best terms it could. He was, in Nicolson's words, "frankly terrified and does not see how we can possibly win the war".² Elsewhere Lloyd George wrote:

"If they reject the chance of making peace it will not be long before Britain will realise that they have committed the most calamitous mistake perpetrated by British statesmanship since the days of Lord North.

¹ Quoted in D McCormick, The Mask of Merlin, p.283.

² Diary entry, 20 September, Diaries and Letters, p.35.

Although many people will hardly believe it, I am only thinking of this grand old country of ours."¹

Lloyd George's hopes of a peace conference were shared by members of the Parliamentary Labour Party. On 10 November, twenty Labour Members calling themselves the Peace Aims Group, who had been meeting regularly to promote peace negotiations, issued a manifesto containing comprehensive proposals for a settlement with Hitler, whose recent speech, they felt, held out the prospects of peace. Although the Ministry of Information directed the Press to suppress certain paragraphs in the manifesto, various Labour and Pacifist journals published it in full. Their statement was as follows:

"It is vital that the present opportunity for negotiations should not be lost. It is an opportunity which may not occur again for a long time. We should press for a further and much more considered reply to Hitler's speech and a clear declaration that this country is ready to join in a genuine European conference.

1. We aim at securing a negotiated peace at as early a date as possible. We believe such a peace better in itself and more likely to endure. We think the longer it is delayed the more difficult it will be to achieve.

2. The necessary foundations for such a peace must include:

(a) A new European system, in which every country, including our own, would be prepared to sacrifice some measure of national sovereignty in the interests of general security internationally guaranteed. In

¹ Letter to Lord Mottistone, 9 October, 1939, Lloyd George Papers.

forming such a European system no existing frontier can be excluded from review, the aim being to secure for every people full national and economic freedom.

(b) Discussion and organisation of a standstill in armaments under agreed supervision as a preliminary to universal disarmament; this must proceed simultaneously with the discussion of territorial, financial, economic and other questions; disarmament should be discussed by civilians.

(c) Economic internationalism with regard to raw materials and food; free use of all the great waterways; free access to all major sea and airports for all nations, and the removal of trade barriers.

(d) The widest possible extension of self-government in the dependent areas of the world, and for the remaining colonial areas some form of international control and organisation, Germany coming in on the same terms and subject to the same limitations as other colonial powers.

We urge the Government to offer here and now to enter into conference at any time with the enemy, allied and neutral powers who are prepared to co-operate with us in such a conference to see how far these things - without which the danger of war will be always and imminently with us - may be achieved. We exclude no country and no government. As soon as such a conference is agreed upon and the date of its meeting fixed, we are prepared to agree to an immediate armistice."¹ .

¹ The full manifesto found in the Lansbury Papers.

The memorandum stood in the names of Barr, Buchanan, Cove, Greves, Hardie, Kirkwood, Lansbury, Leonard, Maclean, M K Macmillan, Mathers, McGhee, Messer, Davies, Salter, Silverman, Sloan,¹ Sorensen, Stokes and Wilson.

An analysis revealed little of significance as regards age, education and occupation, save that the group had a middle class flavour, making it somewhat unrepresentative of the party as a whole. What is most interesting, however, is the fact that ten of their number represented Scottish and Welsh constituencies, and that of the others a further two were a Scot and a Welshman sitting for English divisions. When it is considered that out of the 154 Labour Members elected in 1935, only 38 represented Scottish and Welsh boroughs and counties, the high number of 10, or 12 if we include McGhee and Davies, from the Celtic fringe is the more surprising. The figures become even more remarkable when Davies and Cove, the two Welshmen, are excluded, leaving 10 Scots out of the 20 returned for the Scottish boroughs and counties in 1935. Although one cannot base too much on this, it certainly appears that a majority of the pacifists and anti-war members of the parliamentary party either represented or sprang from the outerlying areas of Britain, areas where the Independent Labour Party had held sway and where its ideas still retained the sympathy of many people.

Looking at the members individually, 9 pacifists are conspicuous: Barr, Davies, Hardie, Lansbury, McGhee, Messer, Salter, Sorensen and Wilson. Naturally they were disillusioned with the policy of the Labour Party, which was to support the war effort. In fact the disillusionment of Salter and Wilson ran so deep that they supported,

¹ Sloan, Member for South Ayrshire, 1939-45; Secretary National Union of Scottish Mineworkers; in company with Buchanan, Salter and Wilson, he had, on 3 September voted against the Government's Bill extending conscription to those between 18 and 41.

in October, an anti-war candidate in a by-election against the official Labour Party candidate. Salter sent a letter to Forward, the Scottish Socialist Paper, passionately pleading the case of Andrew Stewart, the Independent Stop-the-War Candidate for the Peace Pledge Union:

"Religious belief and political instinct alike urge me, whatever the consequence to myself from the party point of view, to support the Peace candidature at Clackmannon For the love of Christ, for the sake of humanity, for the salvation of the threatened new generation, I implore the electors in the division to vote for Andy Stewart."¹

Wilson, also, associated himself with the letter of support, but to no avail as their candidate lost his deposit. No disciplinary measure was taken against the two, but if their action had been repeated it is probable that a formal rift would have occurred. In the event the Independent Labour Party put up stop-the-war candidates in subsequent by-elections, so the possibility did not arise.

Of the other signatories to the November manifesto, Silverman had been an extreme and uncompromising pacifist in the First World War.² Such beliefs had since been tempered, as a result of his Jewish origin and strong sympathies with the victims of Hitler's pogroms, by a realisation of the need to make a stand against the Nazis. This had not prevented him, according to a biographer, going through "great agonies in trying to reconcile his minimal support for the war, and his old anti-war views".³ Yet the support Silverman

¹ Bermondsey Story, p.222.

² Silverman: MP Nelson and Colne, 1935-68.

³ Emrys Hughes, Sidney Silverman, Rebel in Parliament, p.72.

gave to the November call for a negotiated peace was contingent upon the settlement reached resting on a firm basis. At no time was he prepared to "contemplate a world under Hitler's heel".¹

Stokes, the Chairman of the Peace Aims Group, had his own peculiar reason for joining in the plea for a negotiated peace. In a memorandum sent to Lloyd George after the latter's peace speech in the House, Stokes questioned Britain's involvement in the Polish-German conflict. "Poland, until the rise of Hitler, was the most aggressive nation in Europe". Not content with the territory assigned to her by the allies, she had conquered Russian territory, seized the capital of Lithuania and had even shared in Germany's dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. "We have, in fact, backed a little aggressor against a big one". By fighting Poland's war against Germany, Britain would reduce western civilisation to ruins, the only possible victor being the Hammer and Sickle. "Every day the war is continued the more certain it is that Russia will achieve in much shorter time than anyone contemplated a Bolshevik bloc from the Pacific to the North Sea". The answer, Stokes argued, was for Britain to call off the war at once and wait for Russia, whose position was enormously strengthened by the acquisition of tracts of Polish territory, and Germany "to come to loggerheads with each other". In the event of such a showdown, Britain should, as in the previous war, side with Russia, thus ensuring that "Germany will again have to fight on two fronts, and that is the war she will do her damndest to avoid". In view of this possible scenario, Stokes argued that the German peace

¹ Emrys Hughes, Sidney Silverman, Rebel in Parliament, p.72

initiative should immediately be taken up, European civilisation saved, and the way opened towards world peace.¹

Three of the twenty are known to have had connections with the Independent Labour Party: Kirkwood, Mathers and Buchanan.² The latter, in fact, had only rejoined the Labour Party in May 1939, having been an Independent Labour Party Member since 1931.³ All three were influenced by the Marxist viewpoint, always strong in the Independent Labour Party, that war was the inevitable product of capitalism, the warring nations fighting to retain or seize control of the world's markets and colonies. Nevertheless all three were prepared to fight, but only for a socialist society, where the working class had effective control. Kirkwood had taken a similar stand in the Great War, and in 1916 had been deported for organising protests among the Clyde workers against an increase in house rents.⁴

The views of the remaining six are difficult to distinguish. Doubtless some were influenced by either pacifist or marxist sentiments; others, like Silverman, were facing agonising internal turmoil between their horror of war and their detestation of Hitler and Nazism. Reluctant to support a struggle which would expend millions of lives, they hoped against hope that peace might somehow be restored and that nations, in co-operation, might lay the

¹ Memorandum to Lloyd George, dated 4 October, 1939, found in the Lloyd George Papers.

² Kirkwood had been a member of the National Council of the ILP, while Mathers was the ex-chairman of the Edinburgh branch.

³ Buchanan: MP Gorbals, Glasgow, 1922-48.

⁴ Kirkwood: influential trade unionist and leader of the engineers in Scotland; MP Clydebank, 1922-51.

foundations of a lasting settlement. Such beliefs and aspirations that the twenty shared, although deeply rooted in the tradition of the Labour Movement, had, by the outbreak of war, no significance on party policy, which as set out in Labour, the War, and the Peace, was to "contribute their utmost effort to the overthrow of the Hitler system in Germany".¹ Gone was the special calculation that Labour leaders had once made, as in the tactics over the arms estimates, regarding the anti-war wing of their own movement.

At the beginning of January 1940 the public were bewildered by the sudden dismissal of Hore-Belisha, the Secretary of State for War since 1937. Hore-Belisha had done much to meet the grave shortage in recruiting by making life in the army more attractive, and although his democratisation aroused antagonism few had doubted its necessity. Chamberlain considered that he had done more for the army than anyone since Haldane.² Convinced that the Germans would try to break through between the Maginot Line and the sea he had, on a visit to the front in December, been much alarmed by what he felt to be the inadequacy and lack of depth of the Allied defence line. His forceful insistence on more vigorous measures to strengthen the line had given offence to the soldiers on the spot, General Ironside telling him that "the officers were most upset" at his criticisms about the lack of defences.³ Chamberlain, after assuring Hore-Belisha of his support and of his complete confidence, seems to have decided, early in January, that the personal position had become too difficult.⁴ At an interview on the 4th Hore-Belisha was

¹ Official declaration of party policy, published in February 1940 by the Labour Executive.

² The Life of Neville Chamberlain, p.434.

³ Minney, The Private Papers of Hore-Belisha, p.263.

deprived of the Secretaryship of War but was offered the Board of Trade, which he turned down flat. He made it plain that he would never serve under Chamberlain again, because "he no longer trusted him . . . There was some bitterness".¹ He resigned the following day and thereupon became an inveterate opponent of the Government. Symptomatic of this was his resignation in March from the Chairmanship of the Liberal National Party, following a speech condemning the Government for hesitation in giving aid to Finland, in order to "enjoy the greater freedom of the rank and file".²

Little happened during the next three months to reassure those Government supporters who were increasingly disquieted by what they felt was the uncertain and half-hearted conduct of the war. That the disquiet was spreading can be gauged from Lord Salisbury's convening, on 4 April, a score or more of leading back benchers in both Houses to form a Watching Committee. The formation of such a grouping had been simmering for some months ever since Salisbury, in February, had corresponded with his younger brother, Lord Robert Cecil, on the desirability of a secret session, which the latter favoured. Salisbury confessed himself more in favour of "some sort of organisation - a Parliamentary Committee of sorts which should watch over the administration of the war and harass Ministers when they ought to be harassed".³

4 (from previous page)

Channon recorded in his diary, p.227, on 3 January, that the "anti-Belisha plot has grown, and is now alarming. The Prime Minister is in a dilemma - either Belisha goes or most of the General Staff."

¹ Ibid, p.229.

² Liberal Monthly, April, 1940. Belisha was the MP for Devonport, 1923-45; Minister of Transport, 1934-7; Secretary of War, 1937-40.

³ Cecil Papers 50186, letter from Lord Salisbury to Cecil, 17 February, 1940.

The following month he addressed another letter to his brother, reminding Cecil of their previous correspondence, and how he thought much could be achieved by an "influential Committee - weighty, experienced and confidential - who could meet frequently, correspond with Ministers, and perhaps interview them". Since then he had been busying himself "collecting some such people" and was able to report that the following Lords had consented to be involved: Lloyd, Horne, Hailsham, Trenchard, Moyne, Fitzalan, Swinton, Trent, Hastings and Balfour of Burleigh. Apparently "Top" Wolmer was also engaged in "getting about an equal number of Commons". "We have tried", confessed Salisbury, "to avoid extreme 'Yes' men, but to have a few men not extreme in the other direction".¹ When constituted on 4 April, Cecil and Londonderry were also members, as were the following House of Commons men: Amery, Macmillan, Nicolson, Law, Spears, Emrys-Evans, the secretary, Wolmer, and newcomers like Sir Joseph Nall, Geoffrey Ellis and Patrick Spens. The Committee met regularly at Salisbury's house, at 21 Arlington Street, throughout much of the war, although Amery put the group's demise at Chamberlain's fall.

The object of the Watching Committee was not merely - although primarily - to make representations directly to the Government, but also to exchange views, to make members better acquainted with the war situation so that when they approached Ministers they could do so with authority. Although outside sources of information appear to have been available to them, members tended to give the Committee the benefits of their own particular interests, generally by way of circulated memoranda, to be digested and discussed at the regular

¹ Cecil Papers 50186, letter from Salisbury to Cecil, 20 March, 1940.

weekly meetings or meetings of the military sub-committee. Thus Amery drafted a paper entitled The Case for a War Cabinet in which he gave a brief account of the origins, function and purpose of a War Cabinet and concluded that the "present War Cabinet is such only in name". All its members, except Hankey and Kingsley Wood, were burdened with heavy departmental duties and could not possibly find the time to keep really abreast of the problems and also do justice to their departments. On the other hand, other departments, no less important from the point of view of carrying on the war, were unrepresented and so at a disadvantage compared with the service departments. Such an arrangement, felt Amery, was a "lop-sided compromise between the ordinary peace Cabinet and a true War Cabinet. The best that can be said for it is that . . . it represents a half-hearted and not clearly thought out move more or less in the right direction". He found it astonishing that this was as far as they managed to get with all the experience of the last war to draw upon. Furthermore, a major war had now been going on for seven months and the "appropriate instrument for conducting it is still lacking".

Amery also criticised Chamberlain's appointment, made on 3 April, of Churchill as Chairman of the Military Co-Ordination Committee, set up the previous October and consisting of the Service Ministers. "Mr Churchill's committee of service ministers suffers from the . . . defect . . . (that) . . . its conclusions are not only liable to be challenged before the Cabinet by other departments affected, but the service ministers concerned, as Cabinet equals of their chairman, can re-open any question on which they disagree with him."¹ It was a sound criticism for Churchill later recalled that he had "an exceptional measure of responsibility, but no power of effective direction. Among the other Service Ministers who were also members of the War Cabinet

¹ Cecil Papers, 50172, undated paper on "The Case for a War Cabinet".

I was 'first among equals'".¹

Matters raised in the memorandum, particularly the aspect of the Military Co-ordination Committee, appear to have been discussed at a meeting of the Watching Committee on 11 April, following a sitting of the House at which Churchill had given a report on the war at sea. It was apparent that he was very tired and could not possibly "both run the Admiralty and co-ordinate defence, which latter task must involve an endless effort to persuade the three services to a common policy since he had no authority beyond his own Department".² Salisbury conveyed these views to the Prime Minister and to Churchill himself, who claimed that he was feeling in perfect health, and that "he would die if the Admiralty were taken away from him, and that the press had much exaggerated his role as Co-ordinator of Defence, which was little more than Chairman of a Committee of the fighting services. He had no right to initiate suggestions or make decisions".³ Churchill, then, by implication, objected to the current arrangement, not on the grounds of the effort involved, but, as Amery had diagnosed, because of the position of responsibility without power in which he had been placed. Accordingly on 15 April, Churchill, conscious that only the authority of the Prime Minister could reign over the committee, requested Chamberlain to take the chair, and he presided over every one of their subsequent meetings during the campaign in Norway.⁴

¹ The Twilight War, p.167.

² Prelude to Dunkirk, p.109.

³ Nicolson, diary entry 23 April, 1940, Diaries and Letters, p.73.

⁴ The Twilight War, p.169.

Following the circulation of another memorandum, by Lord Trenchard on Air Policy, in which he expressed the view that he was "more than ever convinced of the necessity of hitting at Germany by air in Germany", there grew up what amounted to a "general feeling of annoyance" at Britain's failure to bomb objectives in Germany.¹ This was raised - along with other matters - at an interview the Watching Committee had with Lord Halifax on the 29 April.² They had three main themes. "(1) Lack of initiative, which Halifax counters by saying that we are necessarily on the defensive. (2) Why do we not bomb German towns? Halifax, who seems tired and distressed, does not really reply to our arguments. He merely says that the Government must abide by the advice of the service departments. (3) Our lack of effort as illustrated by the Budget, and our lack of courage against such neutrals as Italy and Portugal who are not being really neutral".³ It was not a successful interview and Halifax's replies led even the ever-courteous Salisbury to say bluntly "we are not satisfied".⁴ Halifax noted in his diary:

"Watching Group in thoroughly critical mood, and nothing I said had the least effect upon them."⁵

¹ Cecil Papers, 50186, memorandum by Lord Trenchard on Air Policy; Prelude to Dunkirk, p.109.

² This followed an encounter between Salisbury and Halifax on 24 April, during which the latter agreed to receive "a new ginger group of notables in both Houses . . . formed to give expression to what is great dissatisfaction with the Government". From Halifax's diary, quoted in L Thompson, 1940: Year of Legend, Year of History, p.71.

³ Nicolson, diary entry 29 April, 1940, Diaries and Letters, p.73.

⁴ The Unforgiving Years, p.356.

⁵ Quoted in 1940: Year of Legend, Year of History, p.71.

A regular meeting of the Committee took place the following day. Nicolson recorded finding "a glum crowd, The general impression is that we may lose the war. The tanks position is appalling and we hear facts about that".¹ Information had reached them from sources, including S S Hammersley, Conservative MP for East Willesden, of a lamentable story of indecision and muddle over tanks.² Nearly eight months after the outbreak of war the design for a heavy tank had still to be settled while the British Expeditionary Force had nothing but a Tank Brigade with seventeen light and one hundred infantry tanks. Only 23 of the latter carried even the two-pounder gun: the rest machine guns only. Hammersley, in fact, who voted with the Opposition on 8 May, had already written to the Prime Minister expressing his anxieties about tank design and production, and pressed for the complete overhaul of existing organisation, including the "replacement of those officers proved by events to be incapable of tackling the problem". The whole safety, he argued, of the British Expeditionary Force was at stake.³ Salisbury, too, on behalf of the Committee, had made representations on this score but made "no impression on Chamberlain's complacency".⁴

E H Keeling, the Member for Twickenham, like Hammersley, a loyal Conservative engaged in war work, was also becoming disillusioned

¹ Diary entry, 30 April, Diaries and Letters, p.74.

² Hammersley: served in the Great War in the Tank Corps; MP Stockport, 1924-35; East Willesden, 1938-45; worked for the Ministry of Supply on tanks, 1940-43.

³ Cabinet Papers, Premier 1/422.

⁴ The Unforgiving Years, p.356.

with the administration. Dalton's diary reveals how on a periodic visit to the Air Ministry he was drawn aside by Keeling and told the relative strengths of the British and German air forces. "This he says is a catastrophic situation. . . He says that Kingsley Wood is not on top of his job and never has been. . . He says that he has long wondered whether it was consistent with his duty to speak to me about these matters, and has finally decided that it is".¹ Like Hammersley he sided with the outright rebels on 8 May.

Although the Watching Committee included several Edenites, the Eden group had continued to meet separately at the Carlton. On 3 April Eden had been their guest, informing them of the state of affairs in the Dominions, particularly Australia, where there was a strong isolationist group.² News had arrived, during their dinner, of the Government reshuffle in which Hoare and Kingsley Wood exchanged places while Churchill was made Chairman of the Military Co-ordination Committee. Macmillan remarked, "Tweedledum, having been informed by his doctor that his health cannot stand the strain of his present office, is succeeded by Tweedledee, who has also been informed by his doctor that his present duties impose too great a strain upon his health". Nicolson felt that the changes were so bad that they

¹ Diary entry 7 March, 1940, Dalton Papers.

² Perhaps Harvey had persuaded Eden to address the group. His diary for March 30th reads: "Thomas rather worried about A.E. . . . his neglect of the House of Commons and his group, and also of Bobbety. I am afraid he is going through a trying time, and great patience and complacency are not in his nature. He hated not being more actively on the job, and rightly so, with the sight of all those old dotards before him."

would render inevitable a complete reconstruction within a certain period, and the general opinion was that "the Chamberlain Government will not now last for more than three months".¹

In Parliament the Edenites were again restive - as were all the opposition elements - over the Government's handling of the Soviet-Finnish conflict. It was the Soviet attack on Finland on 30 November, far more than the Soviet-German pact of August, which marked Stalin's real breach with British opinion; there was no disposition this time to explain away the aggression as a self-defensive gesture against Germany. Soviet Communism was angrily denounced as the predatory twin of Nazism. But this was no justification for the reckless moves in the Finnish crisis which made war with the Soviet Union possible for a while. It is necessary to add that aid to Finland was visualized as part of a complicated scheme whereby the opening of communications through northern Norway and Sweden would enable the Anglo-French forces to control and cut off Swedish iron-ore supplies to Germany. The plan was also strongly supported by Churchill. Similarly the opposition elements - Edenites, Labourites, Liberals and Independents - were calling emotionally for help to Finland. Thus the folly of a strategy which promised to add the Soviet armies to those of the Allies' existing enemy does not seem to have bothered either the Government or the opposition. Fortunately for Britain the plan failed through the inability of the Foreign Office to persuade Norway and Sweden to permit the passage of Allied troops, which was formally requested at the beginning of March 1940; shortly afterwards Finland made peace.

On the 19th March, in the debate over the Finnish collapse, Chamberlain put the whole blame on the Scandanavian powers in that

¹ Diary entry, 3 April, 1940, Diaries and Letters, pp.63-64.

they refused to allow British troops to pass through their territory to the aid of Finland. And he claimed that the Government had "answered" all Finland's requests for munitions and had done all that was humanly possible in the circumstances. Law then made an effective intervention to the effect that the Prime Minister's arguments were all very fine but that time and again Ministers had stood at the box to explain the reasons for failure: people who had made so many mistakes should not remain in power. Macmillan also spoke, "conscious of an extreme hostility from the Front Bench and, what was unusual in my previous deviations from the party line, from some of the Whips. There had even been considerable pressure to prevent me from speaking".¹ He made a fine attacking speech, pointing out what he felt was the discrepancy between what Britain sent to Finland and what she actually received. Although Chamberlain replied vigorously "a sense of confusion and mismanagement over the whole Finnish affair remained strongly in Members' minds. When the same melancholy story was repeated a few weeks later in the Norwegian campaign, the Finnish incident was not forgotten".²

By now the Eden group had reached the breaking point, their minds made up that "the muddle cannot go on any longer".³ "My only

¹ Macmillan, The Blast of War, p.54. Macmillan had recently returned from an expedition to Finland and was speaking with first hand knowledge.

² Ibid, p.59. The Labour Party had also experienced internal difficulties over Finland. D N Pritt, a member of Labour's executive, published a book entitled Must the War Spread? in which he defended the Soviet Union's action. The Executive held a special meeting on 23 March and decided to exclude him "from membership of the Labour Party on the grounds that he had shown himself to be in violent opposition to the policy of the Party on the question of the Russian invasion of Finland". Pritt, From Right to Left, p.225.

³ The Unforgiving Years, p.358.

conclusion", Amery recorded in his diary, "is that we cannot do worse than with the present lot, and that if we only change often enough we shall end by finding someone who can lead us to victory".¹ At all costs and at the earliest possible moment the Chamberlain Government had to be forced out, and a complete change take place in both the personnel and the structure of the Cabinet. The problem which faced the group was how to create the conviction in the House, and above all in the Conservative Party, that this must be done. News of their intentions somehow leaked out and it seems that Margesson was sufficiently alarmed by this "glamorous" development that Chamberlain was informed: "The Prime Minister was shaken and indignant. So now we are in for a first class political struggle between the Chamberlain men and the "glamour group"."²

The All Party Parliamentary Action Group was similarly alarmed at what they felt was the Government's half-hearted conduct of the war. The very day Chamberlain declared that Hitler had "missed the bus" on the assumption that "the very completeness of Hitler's earlier preparations had left him little margin to call upon", Amery addressed the group. In contrast to what the Prime Minister had said, Amery pointed out that, so far from catching up in preparations, the gap in fighting strength between Britain and the Germans had steadily widened. This astounding display of wishful thinking "staggered and terrified" the members of the group who knew something about the real state of affairs.³

By April, therefore, a situation had been reached whereby, on all sides of the House, there was a growing dissatisfaction with the

¹ The Unforgiving Years, p.357, diary entry for 29 April.

² Channon, diary entry 26 April, 1940, p.243.

³ The Unforgiving Years, p.355. Amery recorded that in the period October/March the German Army increased by 38 divisions while that of Britain by 4.

way Britain's war effort was being run, and a conviction that things would only improve if there were substantial changes resulting in more drive from the top. Lloyd George's secretary, A J Sylvester, indicated as much in a memorandum on the feeling of the House:

" . . . you get many and varied opinions, but taken as a whole there is a feeling in the Opposition which extends also to a large number of Government supporters that this Government will never be able to lead us to victory and, as one Labour leader remarked, if it did it would not be very flattering to Hitler."¹

On April 7th German troops invaded Denmark and Norway.

Immediately at the end of questions on the 9th, the Chief Whip moved the adjournment in order that the Prime Minister might make a statement. In it he informed the House that the British Government had decided to extend their "full aid" to Norway, and that powerful units of the Navy were at sea, but that it would not be in the public interest to give details about any operations in which they were engaged. The leaders of the Opposition Parties did not press for details, nor did they debate the questions of policy involved. In fact from that date until the beginning of May, Parliament gave the Government complete freedom of action. MPs refrained from embarrassing debates, and they did not even ask for explanations.

Several months earlier, Dalton had been asked by Kingsley Wood that "if the situation became desperate, Labour might reconsider" their decision not to join the Government.² Dalton had replied that their

¹ Memorandum dated 20 March, 1940, Lloyd George Papers.

² The Fateful Years, p.273.

decision had been taken in the existing situation but that it might be reconsidered if important circumstances changed. On the evening of 9 April, Labour's Parliamentary Executive exchanged views on the question of entering the Government. None of those present proposed that Labour should enter a Government under Chamberlain.¹ On the other hand most thought "we should keep an open mind, as events develop, and that if Chamberlain disappeared, as a result either of rapid physical decay or of a bad turn in the war, we should again seriously look at the question".² Several members felt strongly that Labour should be a very substantial part of the Government in the last phase of the war, with a view to influencing the settlement and preventing a Khakhi-coupon election.

In the event it was to be a bad turn in the war, resulting in Chamberlain's disappearance, that led Labour to reconsider. On 2 May Attlee asked an arranged question so that the Prime Minister might give an account of the situation in Norway. It was then announced that the British troops landed at Andalsnes on the 18 and 19 April had been withdrawn, and that the idea of taking Trondheim from the south had been abandoned. In view of the operation in progress - the withdrawal of troops from Namsos - he asked the House to defer comment until the following week.

On the same day the Action Group met and decided on direct parliamentary action. It was resolved to attempt to make the two-days' Whitsun adjournment debate on 7 May the occasion for a trial of

¹ Dalton commented "not even A V Alexander". The meeting may have been called in response to an offer by the Prime Minister "of 3 seats in the Cabinet . . . Attlee would not come in, but Alexander, Greenwood and Morrison were seriously considering it". Harvey, diary entry 25 March, 1940.

² Diary entry 9 April, 1940, Dalton Papers.

strength.¹ Accordingly Davies tried to persuade the leader of the Labour Party to raise, in the debate, the direct issue of confidence. This intervention has been seen as decisive. Thus Henry Pelling writes that Davies "played a vital role by deciding . . . that this was the moment for a demonstration of feeling by the House, and by urging Attlee to demand a vote. Attlee agreed to the suggestion . . ."² Yet from what is known of Attlee he was unlikely to commit himself in such a way without reference to the party, and although both he and the Labour executive may well have been influenced by the request, it is claiming too much to say that the intervention of Davies was decisive. This is in line with Pelling's source, Amery, who subsequently recorded that "Attlee hesitated".³

Attlee remembered being approached by Davies, whom he mistakenly - but understandably in view of the latter's contact with members of the Watching Committee - regarded as an intermediary from a group of prominent Tories headed by Lord Salisbury. The latter was "deeply disturbed by the way the Government was going and was anxious to find if there was sufficient possibility of agreement between Conservatives, Liberals and Labour to have some chance of bringing a change".⁴ A series of confidential meetings were held - implying that contacts existed some time before 7 May - which were largely devoted on Attlee's part to trying to find out what hope there was of the Tory rebels being ready to vote against the Government if the issue arose; a course which the critics had always previously refused to take when it came to the point. Nothing concrete seems to have come out of these

¹ The Unforgiving Years, p.358.

² Pelling, Winston Churchill, p.434.

³ The Unforgiving Years, p.358.

⁴ A Prime Minister Remembers, p.28.

discussions, for both Attlee and his Executive did not decide to challenge the Government until after the first day's debate. This was to prove a wise decision for it made it much easier for the Conservatives to be influenced by the opening day's debate.

In the period immediately preceeding the adjournment debate various critical and condemnatory speeches were made in the country, a sure sign that the Government was in for a stormy passage. Sinclair, in a speech at Edinburgh on 1 May, evinced amazement at the "false prophets telling us that 'Hitler missed the bus', that we had turned the corner, and that we are now ten times more confident than six months ago. That reminds me of the prophecy that Munich meant peace in our time". Although Britain could muddle through to victory in the long run, the country would pay for the feebleness of the political direction by the prolongation of the war.¹ Similarly Richard Law, speaking at the Annual General Meeting of the South West Hull Conservative Association, said it was becoming increasingly obvious that there was something wrong with the "political direction" of the war. The matter could only be put right by the formation of a genuine National Government.²

Davies, leader of the Action Group, made a most vigorous attack on the Government. Speaking at Oxford, on 3 May, he said that the country could not be properly organised until the Government departed. He mentioned the "lethargy, the complacency, and the feeling that we would muddle through . . . I feel the Government has no real grip of the situation and that we are not being organised in the country on a real war basis". Unless "a few of us" could influence a great

¹ Manchester Guardian, 2 May, 1940.

² Ibid, 4 May.

majority of the House that week there would be another vote of confidence in the Government. "We are meandering through the war", said Davies, "making excuses or boasting. What right had the Prime Minister to say the other day, 'I am ten times more confident . . . Hitler has missed the bus'? As a friend said to me, 'Hitler too often takes a taxi'."¹

On 5 May, at Cambridge, Dalton stepped into the fray. The fiasco in Norway, he said, had lowered British prestige abroad and shaken confidence at home, necessitating drastic changes in persons and policy at the top. "Mr Chamberlain and Sir John Simon are our two greatest liabilities both at home and abroad. They would best serve their country by resigning. Then an encouraging notice-board could be put up in Downing Street: 'War against Hitler; under New Management'."² The following day Morrison, at a Labour Party regional conference in Southampton, echoed his colleague's sentiments. Having warned, "We shall want to know a lot about the Norwegian events in the House of Commons next week", he added:

"Three men in my view are primarily responsible because of their conduct of pre-war foreign policy - for landing us into a war which the collective organisation of peace could have avoided. The three men are Chamberlain, Simon and Hoare. I have a suspicion that these three men are also primarily responsible for the relative weakness of our war effort. I urge them to consider whether their best service to their country would not be by way of resignation."³

¹ Manchester Guardian, 4 May, 1940.

² The Times, 6 May, 1940.

³ Ibid, 7 May.

Salisbury's Watching Committee was also active prior to the debate, and was beginning to meet more frequently. "One difficulty about the Watching Committee", wrote Lord Salisbury to Lord Cecil, "is that it only meets once a week unless there is a special meeting: yet in these days of crises it may well be necessary to keep in touch with the most energetic of our number in between".¹ Thus he arranged with Amery, Emrys-Evans, Macmillan, Spears and Lords Wolmer, Cecil, Hastings, Horne, Lloyd, Swinton and Trenchard, when he would be available for extra meetings during the week.

The fruit of their more regular meetings during the first week of May appears to have been a memorandum, which Salisbury submitted to the Prime Minister on their behalf. This proposed a complete reorganisation of the Government, admitting new blood but based on a small War Cabinet, whose members would be free to give all their attention, without the burden of departmental work, to the general conduct of the war. Chamberlain, according to the Manchester Guardian's political correspondent, considered the memorandum and offered a preliminary reply which was unfavourable. "But this is not the end of the matter. Lord Salisbury and his fellow members are so convinced of the necessity of some radical change in the organisation of the Government that they are prepared, I understand, to say that Mr Chamberlain should resign if he cannot make the changes."²

Although the existence of some such Watching Committee memorandum seems to be confirmed by similar reports in The Times, The Daily Telegraph and the Evening Standard, Laurence Thompson has ascribed the document to Salisbury alone. Drawing on the Evening Standard report,

¹ Cecil Papers, 50186, Salisbury to Lord Cecil 1 May, 1940.

² Manchester Guardian, 7 May, 1940.

in which reference is made to the possibility of Chamberlain refusing to make the changes suggested in the memorandum:

"If Mr Chamberlain refuses to make the changes, they say that there should be a new Prime Minister. And the man they select is Lord Halifax",

he argued that such a threat could not have been made on behalf of the Watching Committee, whose attitude to Lord Halifax was ambivalent.¹ This was so. Throughout this stage of the crisis the Watching Committee remained divided on the premiership question and, as we shall see, only really got down to personalities on 9 May, when it was clear that Chamberlain's day was drawing to a close.

If then, as seems correct, the Evening Standard report was faulty, it is surprising that Thompson should have seen fit to use it in support of a theory that Salisbury, in presenting the memorandum to the Prime Minister "set the Halifax lobby in powerful motion".² This is unlikely. Not only was such a descent to personality uncharacteristic of Salisbury but the supposed threat that Halifax would be his alternative in the event of the Prime Minister being obstinate, would have carried little weight with Chamberlain. It is also worthwhile remembering that the Evening Standard report was unconfirmed by the articles in the other three newspapers and it would appear, therefore, that a simpler explanation, that the memorandum was presented on behalf of the Watching Committee and contained no reference to Halifax, will suffice.

Thompson's reference to Salisbury setting the Halifax lobby in motion reveals a major theme in his history of 1940. This is that

¹ Evening Standard, 6 May, 1940.

² 1940: Year of Legend, Year of History, p.72.

a conspiracy was afoot to dislodge Chamberlain and install Halifax as Prime Minister of a new coalition containing Sinclair, Lloyd George, Morrison, Amery, Eden and other dissident Conservatives. In support of this theory he quoted the Evening Standard article and Cripp's anonymous letter, published in the Daily Mail on 7 May, calling for such a coalition. He also implied that a meeting Halifax had with Morrison on 6 May to discuss the possibility of Labour joining a coalition was part of this conspiracy, even though no details of what was said are known. Certainly Cripps was working for such a coalition but to assume on such slender grounds that Halifax, Morrison, Amery, Eden and Sinclair were as deeply embroiled as he, is to stretch the bounds of credibility too far. Cripps's Daily Mail letter was an example of the kind of political aberration to which we have seen he was prone, and his activities, as always, were on the fringe, unlikely to influence the mainstream of British politics. Therefore to conclude that the "only major effect of the Norway vote was to install the official Labour leaders, Attlee and Greenwood, in the War Cabinet, instead of Morrison and Eden" is to give importance to Cripps's activities far in excess of what they merited.¹ Rather than installing the coalition described above any attempt along those lines might have precipitated an even greater political crisis than what in fact occurred, as well as discrediting those politicians involved. And even that is based on the questionable assumption that Halifax and company were implicated and, from past form, Eden for one was unlikely to commit himself to such a risky scheme.

¹ 1940: Year of Legend, Year of History, p.93.

Where the restlessness was most acute among the Conservatives, where it amounted to a passionate conviction that the direction of the war must be placed in different hands, was among those who ever since Eden's resignation had constituted a critical wing of the Government forces. They, however, had hitherto proved powerless to influence the mainstream of the Conservative Party. But on this occasion everything, they realised, was in a state of flux. Now there was manifest questioning of the Government's organisation and the competence of some of its personnel even in the ranks of hitherto loyal Tories, and it seemed possible that, should the issue come to a vote, some might find courage enough to break with the Government. Yet even if the rebels did not sway votes, they hoped that at the very least they might be able to influence opinion in favour of a reconstruction. It was not surprising that Margesson summed up the situation by saying that the country was on the "eve of the greatest political crisis since August 1931".¹

The debate opened on the 7 May. Though by this time criticisms were numerous neither the Liberal nor Labour Parties had decided to vote against the Government. So far they had carried out the policy adopted at the beginning of the war. Though they had on occasions divided on minor aspects of Government legislation and moved motions on special matters arising from the consequences of the war, they had refrained from direct attack on the conduct of the war. Even at this stage they were not prepared to put down a condemnatory

¹ Channon, diary entry 3 May, 1940, p.244. Interestingly enough when Reith talked with the Chief Whip on 30 April and said that the Government would fall in a week or two, or at any rate have to be radically reconstructed, Margesson had replied that this was nonsense and that there was no chance of either. Into The Wind, p.379.

resolution. The result was that the debate that helped destroy the Government was on a motion of adjournment.

The debate commenced with a statement by Chamberlain which explained all the difficulties; it showed how these were insuperable; and it sought to show how the Government had lost through no fault of its own. It even attempted to prove that Norway was not a major disaster:

"I hope we shall not exaggerate the extent or the importance of the check which we have received. The withdrawal from Southern Norway is not comparable to the withdrawal from Gallipoli. There were no large forces involved. The fact was, it was not much more than one division, and our losses, therefore, were not really great in number, nor was there any considerable or valuable amount of stores left behind."¹

The speech does not read persuasively, and it is clear from reports in the press and from statements in the House that the Prime Minister was less effective than usual in convincing the members. Nor did he receive much support from the 400 MPs sitting behind him. Sir Henry Page Croft, Lewis Jones and Sir Archibald Southby were but light-weights compared with those attacking the front bench from both sides - Attlee, Sinclair, Wedgwood, Keyes, Bellenger, Amery, Milner, Winterton and Greenwood.

Attlee, who followed Chamberlain, was coldly destructive in the way he had made the events of the present grow out of the events of the past:

"It is not Norway alone. Norway comes as the culmination of many other discontents. People are saying that

¹ House of Commons Debates, 7 May, 1940, Col.1075.

those mainly responsible for the conduct of affairs are men who have had an almost uninterrupted career of failure. Norway follows Czechoslovakia and Poland. Everywhere the story is 'too late'. The Prime Minister talked about missing buses. What about the buses he and his associates have missed since 1931?"

Addressing the Government back benchers, he said that they had been content to see "failure after failure shifted along those benches, either lower down or further up . . . They have allowed their loyalty to the Chief Whip to overcome their loyalty to the real needs of the country". Yet now they must take their full responsibility, conscious of the fact that there was a widespread feeling in the country, not that Britain would lose the war, that she would win it, but that to win the war, different people must be at the helm than those hitherto.¹

Sinclair's speech was more restrained than Attlee's, and this was intentional. "What we have got to do", he wrote to Lord Cecil the day of the debate, "is to nurse the friendly members of your Party along. Violent attacks always disconcert them; but if we sing in a low key they are much more likely to sing out".² Events were to prove the wisdom of Sinclair's caution, for as many back bench Conservatives condemned the administration as supported it. The Liberal leader directed much of his speech to the question of "why we ever got ourselves into a position in which we had to accept defeat in Norway" and felt that the outcome would have been different

¹ House of Commons Debates, 7 May, 1940, Cols.1093-4.

² Cecil Papers, 51185, Sinclair to Cecil, 8 May, 1940.

if "our force . . (had) been prepared, organised and equipped beforehand". Drawing out the swiftness of Hitler's action, he concluded that "we must show equal swiftness and vigour in action if we are to win this war. . . we must have done with half-measures. Let us insist upon and rally to a policy for the more vigorous conduct of the war".¹

Perhaps the most effective intervention, until Amery's, was that of Keyes, who came to the House in the full dress uniform of an Admiral of the Fleet. He made a devastating attack on the naval conduct of the Narvik episode and the Naval General Staff but carefully avoided blaming his old friend Churchill. Keyes was followed by Jones, who confessed himself alarmed at the bitterness that had suddenly developed in the political life of the country. On all sides of the House members had pledged themselves to the defeat of Hitler "and I am surprised to find that the concern of many Members of this House appears to be that the Prime Minister should go". "We heard last week", he continued, "all kinds of rumours about hole-and-corner meetings that were being held in the corridors of this building. It was really nauseating. There were rumours of cabals floating through the air". He called for an end to what he called "playing for your party", and expressed the hope that the Opposition Parties would take up the Prime Minister's appeal for co-operation, rather than strengthening the "Fifth Column movement in this country".²

Fred, now Captain Bellenger, rose to dismiss the Prime Minister's proposal that "certain members of the Opposition should take office

¹ House of Commons Debates, 7 May, Cols.1095, 1101, and 1106.

² Ibid, Cols.1130-33.

under him", saying that that would be impossible. Nevertheless, he suggested that the time was not far distant - it may even have arrived - "when the Opposition should accept its responsibility before the nation" and not continue its critical acquiescence in Government policy, or the lack of it. "If we believe", he said, "that the times are so critical, we should say so openly that the Government should make place for one of a different character and a different nature".¹

It then fell to Amery to intervene and make one of the most famous speeches ever heard in the House, a speech which Macmillan felt "effectively destroyed the Chamberlain Government".² Admitting that the Prime Minister had given a "reasoned, argumentative case for our failure", Amery contended that it was always possible to do that after every failure. "Making a case and winning a war are not the same thing. Wars are won, not by explanations after the event but by foresight, by clear decision and by swift action". Amery's remedy, as he had set out in his paper to the Watching Committee, was a "supreme war directorate of a handful of men free from administrative routine, free to frame policy among themselves, and with the task of supervising, inspiring, and impelling a group of departments clearly allocated to each one of them". Such a War Cabinet should be based on a new National Government representing "all the elements of real political power in this country, whether in this House or not". The existing Government - a coalition based on no clear political principles - lacked the "vision, daring, swiftness and consistency of decision" necessary for victory. "We cannot go on being led as we are", he said, there must be change, and he concluded by quoting

¹ House of Commons Debates, 7 May, Cols.1133-40.

² The Blast of War, p.70.

the fierce words that Oliver Cromwell addressed to the Rump of the Long Parliament: "You have sat here too long for any good you have been doing. Depart, I say, and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go."¹

Southby followed to tell an emptying House that Parliament had, in the end, survived Cromwell. Using the same phrase several times over he attacked the critics on the grounds that their speeches "will certainly give great satisfaction in Berlin".² But his defence of the Government, and Stanley's, the Secretary of State for War, who wound up the day's debate, was more than outweighed by the remarks of Milner, Winterton and Greenwood. The latter, in a sure indication of the line that the Opposition were going to take the next day, reminded the House of the words he had used on the morning that war broke out:

"Should there be confused councils, inefficiency and wavering, then other men must be called to take their place."

That is what the Opposition were asking, although Greenwood felt that the responsibility for any change lay, not with the Labour Party, but with "the majority whose responsibilities are, far and away, greater than ours".³

After this weak display by the Government, it was not surprising that the Labour Party decided to challenge a division. Not to have done so would have been to deny the principles upon which the party had been

¹ House of Commons Debates, 7 May, Cols.1140-50.

² Ibid, Cols.1151-60.

³ Ibid, Col.1178.

working since the outbreak of war. The Labour leaders had made plain that, although they had no great confidence in the War Cabinet Chamberlain had appointed, they supported the declaration of war and they were prepared to continue support so long as the conduct of the war was efficient. Privately they hoped, indeed expected, that this condition would not be satisfied, and would eventually be recognised as such by Government supporters, and that then a concerted move against Chamberlain might be made. Now with Norway, seemingly the latest evidence of an inefficient prosecution of the war, Labour - and the Liberal Party - decided on outright opposition in the hope that sufficient Conservatives would follow their lead to necessitate a change. Sinclair, in fact, set out these hopes in a letter to Lord Cecil, written before the debate recommenced:

" . . . a strong movement did develop among them (the Conservatives) yesterday, and it is Attlee's opinion as well as my own - which we expressed to Amery and Dick Law in an informal conversation in the corridor - that if they could undertake to produce twenty votes in the Lobby we should divide the House. Many of them were saying that there were thirty or forty, and even fifty, who would vote against the Government tomorrow. However that may be - and past experience has made us a little sceptical - it seems to me that it would be well worth while to divide if we could have twenty Conservative supporters. There would be many abstentions, and so large a minority of so diversified a composition which would be not a party triumph but quite an impressive Parliamentary verdict."¹

¹ Letter from Sinclair dated 8 May, 1940, Cecil Papers, 51185.

Even so the decision to challenge the Government was no foregone conclusion. Taylor has argued that the party only "plucked up courage during the night" and that their hand was forced - a little-known fact - by the women MPs. These had an all-party room of their own and, in discussion there, resolved to force a vote if no one else did so".¹ In fact it was not until late the following morning that a decision was reached. At ten-thirty on the morning of the 8th Labour's Parliamentary Executive met and discussed whether or not to force a vote that day. A majority, including Morrison, Less-Smith and Attlee were for voting. A minority - Williams, Benn, Pethick-Lawrence and Dalton - were against.² Dalton thought that a vote at this stage would be a tactical blunder consolidating the Government majority, and that Chamberlain and Margesson would like Labour to have one. There was something in this argument as the event showed. At the party meeting later that morning the Executive recommendation was accepted, though with some doubts and dissentients.

Where Taylor got his information from, that the women forced the vote on an unwilling Labour Party he does not make known.³ Certainly the present writer found no evidence to support it, and it is possible that the executive reached an independent decision. This, however, does not preclude the view that the women - like Davies' intervention on behalf of the Action Group - influenced the executive's

¹ English History, 1914-45, p.472.

² The Fateful Years, p.305. Morrison's story (Autobiography, p.173) that he convinced the initially reluctant committee to challenge a division is probably exaggerated, a conclusion his biographers share. Herbert Morrison, p.272.

³ Lawrence Thompson recorded that there was an understanding between 3 women MPs, the Conservative Lady Astor and Mrs Morris Tate, and the Socialist Ellen Wilkinson, that if nobody else forced a vote, they would do so. He did not reveal his source, and commented that a division sponsored from such a quarter would not have been taken entirely seriously. 1940: Year of Destiny, Year of History, p.77.

decision, and may have strengthened their hand at the subsequent meeting of the parliamentary party.¹

When news of Labour's decision got abroad, Price remembered Conservative backbenchers coming to him and "begging that we would not press this motion because they would get rid of Mr Chamberlain themselves. I told them that we had a duty to perform. We too played out part in making Mr Churchill the war-time Prime Minister".²

Salisbury's Watching Committee also met during the morning of the 8th. Views were expressed that no ordinary Government reshuffle would restore shaken confidence both at home and abroad; that Labour would not enter any Government which contained Chamberlain, Simon and Hoare; and that it was really no alternative to create a strong War Cabinet under Chamberlain, since the efficacy of the Government depended on the character of the Prime Minister, who had not proved sufficient. Then word came that the Opposition had decided to demand a vote. Lord Salisbury "begged" those Members present not to vote against the Government but rather abstain, as a vote would create a bad impression in the country and leave such bitterness behind. It appears that Salisbury's advice prevailed until it was discovered that so many "unexpected people such as the Service Members and Lady Astor" were determined to vote against the Government.³ Deciding they had no alternative, they hoped to get as many as thirty people to join them in the Opposition lobby.⁴

¹ There were 12 women in the House and of these 8, including 4 Labour, voted against the Government on 8 May.

² My Three Revolutions, p.276.

³ Nicolson, diary entry 8 May, 1940, Diaries and Letters, pp.78-9.

⁴ According to Channon "the whispering in the lobbies was unbearable. Ham. Kerr offered to bet that 100 Government supporters would vote against the regime; I scoffed. Mrs Tate offered to bet me £5 that over 50 would do so, but refused to take up the challenge, when I agreed." Diary entry 8 May, p.246.

During the debate that day the Action Group met in a committee room to discuss the situation. Amery had been appointed ad hoc chairman of the Group for the emergency, a step that reflects the close relations that now existed between the pressure groups. After a discussion they came to the conclusion, almost unanimously to vote against the Government.¹ What with the Action Group, Salisbury's Watching Committee, the traditional Edenite rebels, and a further group led by Herbert Williams, Tory Member for South Croydon, all having announced their intention of voting against the Government, it is not surprising the whips became active.² They had discovered that the discontent in the Conservative ranks was far more widespread than they had imagined, and were frantically busy trying to stem it. According to Amery, Lord Dunglass, the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary, succeeded in persuading those led by Williams to hold their hand by a promise that Chamberlain would meet them the next day to tell them of his plans for a drastic reconstruction of the Government. A similar approach was made to Emrys-Evans and Gunston to see whether the Edenites and the Members of the Watching Committee could be bought off. Dunglass informed them that "if we will agree to vote for the Government, the Prime Minister will see us tomorrow and that we will find him ready to meet our demands. When asked what that means, he indicates (although without consulting the Prime Minister) that in order to save himself Chamberlain is prepared to sacrifice Hoare and Simon. We say things have gone too far."³ Later that evening the rebels held an emergency meeting, at

¹ I Fight to Live, p.218.

² Williams' group numbered between 30 and 40 members. The Unforgiving Years, p.366.

³ Nicolson, diary entry 8 May, p.79.

which Emrys-Evans and Gunston's frank negative to Dunglass was endorsed. "We unanimously agreed to vote - and to vote against the motion".¹

Apart from the overthrow of the Government, the chief concern of the rebels was Churchill. They were determined to bring down the Government, and as every hour passed, they seemed more likely to achieve their purpose. But how could Churchill be disentangled from the ruins? Herbert Morrison's speech was chiefly notable for his announcement that the Opposition intended to divide the House. Chamberlain at once rose, in what was to be an unfortunate intervention:

"I say to my friends, and I have friends in this House . . . I accept the challenge. I welcome it indeed. At least we shall see who is with us and who is against us, and I call on my friends to support us in the lobby tonight."²

This was a mistake. It enabled speaker after speaker to say that the Prime Minister was treating a national crisis on narrow party lines or even as a personal issue. Nevertheless Morrison, in spite of a hard-hitting speech, was not unfriendly to Churchill. "It appears to me", he said, "that when the Government are in trouble . . . they tend to bring the First Lord into the shopwindow. . . . That is not altogether fair. It tends to place on the First Lord responsibilities which he cannot possibly carry, and which it is doubtful whether, in fact, the Government will allow him to carry."³ In this Morrison

¹ The Blast of War, p.74.

² House of Commons Debates, 8 May, 1940, Cols.1265-66.

³ Ibid, Col.1263.

reflected what Dalton had put so succinctly: "He is . . . our one white hope in that black flock".¹

It soon appeared, in fact, that both Opposition parties and Conservative critics were anxious to throw Churchill a life-line. "He will be defending", said Cooper, "with his eloquence those who long refused to listen to his counsel, who treated his warnings with contempt. He will, no doubt, be as successful as he has always been, and those who so often trembled before his sword will only be too glad to shrink behind his buckler".² But it was Lloyd George, in what was to be his last memorable and, according to Churchill, "absolutely devastating" speech, who made the strongest effort to protect Churchill from the collapse of the Government.³ When he suggested that the First Lord of the Admiralty was not to blame for all the recent disasters, Churchill at once rose to accept full responsibility. But Lloyd George effectively countered:

"The Right Honourable Gentleman must not allow himself to be converted into an air-raid shelter to keep the splinters from hitting his colleagues."⁴

Churchill later wrote that considering the "prominent part I played in these events . . . it was a marvel I survived". That he did so was, in his opinion, because of his pre-war record, which was recent enough to separate him from his Cabinet colleagues.⁵ Chamberlain took the

¹ Diary entry, 11 April, 1940, Dalton Papers.

² House of Commons Debates, 8 May, Col.1307-08.

³ Diary entry in the Dalton Papers for 8 May, 1940.

⁴ House of Commons Debates, 8 May, Cols.1282-83.

⁵ The Twilight War, p.231.

brunt of criticism over Norway, although it was largely Churchill's rash enthusiasm which had led the Government so far astray. "It was the irony, or fatality of history", wrote Liddell Hart, "that Churchill should have gained his opportunity of supreme power as the result of a fiasco to which he had been the main contributor."¹

The debate continued to run very badly for the Government. Cripps described the administration as a "Mad Hatter's tea-party" and went on to attack Chamberlain, ending with, "I never thought that I should be present in the House of Commons when in a moment so grave a Prime Minister would appeal on personal grounds and personal friendship to the loyalty of the House of Commons".² Similarly Bower, like Keyes, in uniform, emphasised that loyalty was not to a man or a party but to those things which two thousand years of Christian civilisation had built up. "That is what we are fighting for, and to reduce the thing to the level of a petty personal loyalty is impossible".³ By contrast "only a few third-raters" defended the Government.⁴ "Thank God, we are led by a Prime Minister who is not easily rattled, and who possesses the gift of patience, which so many of us lack", said Sir George Courthorpe, while Henry Brooke, newly elected Member for West Lewisham, saw Chamberlain as a man with a "burning heart", a "cool head" and a "fiery hatred of the Enemy".⁵

¹ Quoted in Gardner, Churchill In His Time, p.310.

² House of Commons Debates, 8 May, Col.1298.

³ Ibid, Col.1328.

⁴ The Fateful Years, p.306.

⁵ House of Commons Debates, 8 May, Cols.1321, 1332.

After Alexander had wound up for the Opposition, Churchill rose to close the debate. His speech was confined almost wholly to the facts of the Norwegian campaign, and was much interrupted by the Opposition. The keynote of his speech was an appeal for unity:

"Let pre-war feuds die; let personal quarrels be forgotten, and let us keep our hatreds for the common enemy. Let party interests be ignored, let all our energies be harnessed, let the whole ability and forces of the nation be hurled into the struggle, and let all the strong horses be pulling on the collar."¹

The speech for all its skill did not make a lasting impression. What really mattered was that it strengthened, by its aggressive tone, Churchill's position with the defenders of the Government without weakening it in the eyes of those against, some of whom saw in him an obvious successor to Chamberlain.

In all during the two-day debate a total of twenty-eight speeches had been made: 11 - 9 Conservative and 2 Liberal National, in support of the Government; 17 - 10 Labour, 5 Tory and 2 Liberal, against. Apart from the four ministers that spoke only 7 backbenchers intervened on behalf of the Government, and nor was there a single parliamentary figure of note in that 7. Small wonder Nicolson commented that "the weakness of the Margesson system is displayed by the fact that none of the yes-men are of any value whatsoever, whereas all the more able Conservatives have been driven into the ranks of the rebels".² Indeed a reading of the account of the debate in

¹ House of Commons Debates, 8 May, Cols.1361-62.

² Diary entry 8 May, Diaries and Letters, p.77.

Hansard indicates how feeble was the support for the Government, except numerically.

During the division which followed a considerable number of Conservatives remained estentatiously in their seats, determined not to vote. Doubtless there were more but they preferred not to advertise the fact. Dalton recalled walking into the lobby and seeing it full of "young Conservatives in uniform, - khaki, Navy blue and Air Force blue all intermingled".¹ Although Amery had hopes of an actual majority against the Government, the figures, as announced by Margesson, were: 281 to 200. In spite of the Norwegian catastrophe and the damaging speeches that had been made, in spite of a sizeable section of the Conservative Party voting against or abstaining, Chamberlain still retained a substantial majority of eighty-one. Nevertheless, the number of Government voters had slumped dramatically as a breakdown of the figures revealed: the Government vote consisted of 252 Conservatives, 21 Liberal Nationals, 4 National Labour, 2 Independent Liberals and 2 Independents; that of the Opposition, 138 Labour, 16 Liberals,² 33 Conservatives, 4 Liberal Nationals, 2 National Labour, 2 Independent National, 4 Independents and 1 Communist. Although the Government had not been defeated there was no doubt that the debate and the division were a "violent manifestation of want of confidence in Mr Chamberlain and his administration".³

The forty-one Government supporters voting with the Opposition were: Conservatives - Amery, Anstruthar-Gray, Viscountess Astor,

¹ The Fateful Years, p.306.

² Davies has been reckoned as an Independent Liberal.

³ The Twilight War, p.233.

Boothby, Bower, Burton, Cooper, de Chair, Duggan, Emrys-Evans, Glyn, Gunston, Hammersley, Hogg, Keeling, Kerr, Keyes, Law, Macmillan, Macnamara, Molson, Nicholson, Patrick, Profumo, Russell, Spears, Tate, C S Taylor, Tree, Winterton, Wise, Wolmer and J A C Wright; Liberal Nationals - Butcher, Hore-Belisha, Medlicott and Stewart; National Labour - King-Hall and Nicolson; Independent National - Hopkinson and Lipson.

Included in the rebels were a considerable number of familiar faces. A handful, including Amery, Boothby, Keyes, Winterton and Wolmer, had been noticeably active throughout the Parliament in pressing the administration to put Britain's defences in order.¹ Likewise, Bower, Emrys-Evans, Macmillan, Molson, Nicolson, Amery and Boothby of the above, had been acutely conscious of the danger emanating from Nazi Germany and had not been slack in presenting their views. There were sixteen who might loosely be termed "Edenites" - Boothby, Bower, Cooper, Duggan, Gunston, Kerr, Keyes, Patrick, Tree, Amery, Emrys-Evans, Law, Macmillan, Spears, Wolmer and Nicolson, the latter six also belonging to the Watching Committee set up by Salisbury. Neville Chamberlain wrote of them, "The Amerys, Duff Coopers and their lot are consciously, or unconsciously swayed by a sense of frustration because they can only look on".² This was only part of the story. With such a history of dissidence they were hardly likely to pass over an opportunity of challenging the Government head on.

¹ Of the others Glyn, Hammersley, Keeling, Tate, Wright and Stewart had, during the so-called breathing space provided by Munich, been associated with the critical motions directed against the Government's measures.

² The Life of Neville Chamberlain, p.440.

Also prominent were twelve known members of the All Party Parliamentary Action Group, although here there was a considerable amount of overlapping: Amery, Boothby, Gunston, Hammersley, Hogg, Law, Macmillan, Tate, Stewart, King-Hall, Nicolson, and Lipson. Others had personal grievances: Hore-Belisha, dropped from the War Office in January, 1940; Winterton, dropped from the Government in a reshuffle; Hopkinson, angered by Chamberlain's treatment of Inskip, whose Parliamentary Private Secretary he had been.

Lady Astor's presence amongst the rebels is not easily explained, but Channon felt that her rebellion was due to her being seriously rattled about the "Clivedon Set" allegations, made against her before the war, which she wanted to live down.¹ There may be some truth in this, but both her biographers put it down to Lady Astor, long a "faithful supporter" and devoted admirer of Chamberlain, now beginning to doubt him in his new role of war leader. In a debate in April 1940 she had said that "People are beginning to feel that Mr Chamberlain is not the wisest selector of men. Duds must be got rid of, even if they are one's dearest friends. And if there is a sweep, it should be a clean sweep and not musical chairs."² Within a month, in "voting against Chamberlain, she put duty before friendship. She liked Chamberlain but believed him unfit for his job".³

It is interesting to note that the Prime Minister, in his analysis of the debate, wrote "the serving members were acutely conscious of

¹ Diary entry 8 May, 1940, p.246.

² House of Commons Debates, 11 April, 1940, Col.839.

³ Collins, Nancy Astor, p.196. See also Sykes, Nancy, p.417.

various deficiencies".¹ Of the 41 rebels, 22 in fact can be described as serving: Anstruther-Gray, De Chair, Keeling, Macnamara, Molson, Nicholson, Profumo, Russell, Taylor, Wise, Wright, Medlicott and ten already mentioned, Bower, Duggan, Gunston, Hammersley, Hogg, Hopkinson, Kerr, Patrick, Spears and Stewart. Dalton testified to the strength of feeling in such circles:

"One of the Tories who voted with us in uniform last night said to me, 'I came straight back from Namsos to vote against the Government. I voted on behalf of my men. We were bombed by German aircraft and had nothing with which to reply, not even a machine gun. When I went back to the Mess last night everyone, from the Major-General downwards, said "Well done!"'.²

Macmillan was of the opinion that the loyalty of the serving members to the King "overcame their loyalty to the Old Man and Margesson. When they saw the mess in Norway, some at first hand, they made up their minds".³

An analysis⁴ of the 41 supporters of the National Government that had rebelled revealed that their average ages, compared with their parties' figures, were as follows:

¹ The Life of Neville Chamberlain, p.440.

² Dalton Papers, Diaries, entry for 9 May, 1940. The member was A R Wise, who, according to Channon, later went to see Chamberlain to "apologise for voting against him; others did likewise". Diary entry, 10 May, p.249.

³ Ibid, Report of a conversation between Dalton and Macmillan. Diary entry 16 May.

⁴ Only those figures obtained for the Conservatives are meaningful and not too much weight should be placed on those of their electoral allies.

	Conservative	Liberal National	National Labour
Rebels	39 yrs 5 mths	34 yrs 8 mths	40 yrs 6 mths
Party	49 yrs 4 mths	54 yrs 1 mth	54 yrs 9 mths

If one excludes Hammersley, Hogg, Molson, and Profumo, all entering the House as a result of recent by-elections, the Conservative average age rises slightly to 40 years 9 months, still an appreciable difference. The numbers attending public school and university also, for the main part, bettered the party averages:

	Conservative	Liberal National	National Labour
Public School			
Rebels	83.9%	50.0%	50.0%
Party	56.2%	36.4%	50.0%
University			
Rebels	71.0%	50.0%	50.0%
Party	60.9%	54.5%	75.0%

Occupations confirmed an armed forces and official service slant, with few representatives from the business community:

	Conservative	Liberal National	National Labour
Land			
Rebels	3.2%	-	-
Party	9.7%	-	-
Professions			
Rebels	25.8%	75.0%	-
Party	32.3%	45.5%	-
Armed Forces and Official Services			
Rebels	48.4%	-	100.0%
Party	19.4%	-	12.5%
Business			
Rebels	16.1%	25.0%	-
Party	40.9%	30.3%	-

Similar to other occasions of dissent in the 1935 Parliament, the majority of the Conservatives voting against the Government represented constituencies where the majorities were less than ten thousand. If one includes Molson and Profumo, both returned unopposed as a result of the electoral truce, the number of divisions where majorities did not exceed ten thousand rises to 23 out of 33 members.¹ There were also six political allies of the Conservatives amongst the rebels, five of whom had majorities of less than 10,000, and whose hopes of re-election depended heavily upon agreement with the Government of the day. Although it might be claimed that in a grave emergency the six and the Conservatives were merely putting country before personal political loyalties, it says something for the strength of their feelings that they were prepared to take their intransigence so far when many of them did not occupy the more secure seats.

Whereas the potential Conservative vote was 375, on this occasion only 285 voted, either for or against. If one excludes five vacancies, three officials and the Chief Whip, the missing Tory voters numbers 81. This figure obviously includes not only those that deliberately abstained, but the Service Members and others, who for various reasons could not attend the House. Fifteen at any rate had been paired so that the total number of abstentions could not have exceeded 66, and what with members called away on duty or those sick, it is likely that the figure was about 50. As with those voting against, the Conservatives that abstained were drawn in large measure from the Service members. Of the 81 missing voters at least 43² were then

¹ Neither Molson nor Profumo's predecessors received majorities of 10,000 or more in the General Election of 1935.

² Adams, Agnew, W Astor, Beit, Cartland, Castlereagh, Cazalet, Cook, Cox, Despencer-Robertson, Dower, Duckworth, Dugdale, Emmott, Evans, Fyfe, Galbraith, Gluckstein, Grant-Ferris, Heilgers, Hunloke, G Hutchinson, James, Joel, Kellett, Lancaster, Lyons, MacDonald,

serving in the various branches of the Armed Forces, while a further 20 could be classed as ex-servicemen. Clearly the service vote, or the lack of it, was crucial in the fall in Chamberlain's majority, as was recognised by the Manchester Guardian:

"It will have been noticed what a high percentage of serving officers voted with the Tory minority. One of them had actually served in Norway, and though hitherto a diehard, he voted with passionate indignation against the Government. The Government has had few friends of late among the Tories holding commissions in the Army."¹

Seven of the 81 were habitual rebels: Adams, Cartland, Cranborne, Joel, Ropner, Sandys and Turton; and there were six members of the Action Group including Victor Cazalet, Fyfe and Lyons, as well as three of the above. Other interesting features of the 81 were: an average age of 42 years, appreciably lower than the party at large; a preponderance of public school men;² as indicated above, an armed forces and official service slant, as with the 33 that voted against the Government;³ a figure of almost two-thirds with majorities less than ten thousand.⁴

2 (continued from previous page)

Marsden, Maxwell, Perkins, Petherick, Pilkington, Porritt, Ropner, Sandys, Scrymgeour-Wedderburn, Thornton-Kemsley, Turton, Willoughby de Eresby, Wilson, Wood, York. Information derived from The Times 11 December, 1939, and 8 January, 1940, and individual records from Dod, Who's Who, Who Was Who.

¹ Manchester Guardian, 9 May, 1940. Two of the Government's "friends", Lt. Cdr. Agnew and C N Thornton-Kemsley, both absent from the division for reasons of service, wrote to The Times expressing support for Chamberlain. Their letters, however, were not published until 13 May, three days after Churchill became Prime Minister.

² 67.9% public school; 55.6% university.

³ Services, 37%; professions, 25.9%; commerce, 23.5%; land, 7.4%.

⁴ 53 less than 10,000, 28 with more or unopposed.

Turning to the Conservative's major electoral ally, the Liberal Nationals, six did not take part in the division, although two of these were paired. An analysis of the ten Liberal Nationals missing or voting against the Government revealed little except the low average age: 42 years 7 months, compared with the party's 54 years 1 month at the General Election. Dissent therefore, in both the Conservative and Liberal National camps, seems to have been related to age. Of the seven National Labourites, only Markham was absent from the division, while two, King-Hall and Nicolson, voted against. As with the Independent Nationals, of whom two, Hopkinson and Lipson, voted with the Opposition, the small numbers involved deny effective examination.

The views of the abstentionists and other hitherto loyal back-benchers were voiced by Morris-Jones, Liberal National Member for Denbigh in a letter to The Times:

"The number of those, like myself, deliberately abstaining was substantial. 'Abstaining' may not appear a heroic course, but it certainly does not denote confidence, and the line of demarcation between it and open revolt is thin and transient. It is not for the writer to express the views of those voting for the administration, except that he may be permitted to comment on the fact that many of them expressed to him the view that never has the conflict of mind as to where their duty to the country lay been more disturbing and disquieting. Any Government which fails to appreciate this will be living in a fool's paradise."¹

The message was clear: the Government as at present organised did not inspire confidence, appearing incapable of obtaining from the country

¹ The Times, 14 May, 1940.

the necessary war effort. But what was to be done? As with those voting with the Opposition, there was no unanimity of opinion among the abstentionists on the need to upset Chamberlain and his leading colleagues. Where, however, they were all agreed was on the desirability of a truly National Government.

A total of 16 Independent Liberal Members voted against the Government on the motion of adjournment. As the parliamentary party now totalled 20, as a result of Clement Davies's defection, only four need to be accounted for. Gwilym Lloyd George had accepted office and as such voted for the continuance of a Government of which he was an integral part. The only other Liberal to enter the Government lobby was Maclay, who had a history of siding with the administration on major issues. The two absent MPs were Owen and Rothschild. It is possible that the former was involved in some kind of war service, which prevented his attendance. In any case neither Owen nor Rothschild had broken ranks on an important issue in the 1935 Parliament, and neither belonged to the Right of the party, as did Maclay. It is unlikely, therefore, that had the two been present, they would have abstained.

Of the potential Labour vote of 166, a total of 138 had entered the division lobby, while two acted as whips.¹ Lansbury's death had been announced by the speaker on 8 May, and the only other vacancy was due to Kelly, the Member for Rochdale, announcing his retirement a few days before. Consequently 24 Labourites were absent from the House, when the vote was taken, although 17 of these, according to The Times were paired.² The missing seven could have been called

¹ This figure excludes Cripps and Pritt; both voted but must be reckoned as Independents. Strauss and Bevan had already been readmitted to the Parliamentary Party.

² The Times, 9 May, 1940.

away on duty or absent through ill-health, although there is a possibility that there was a pacifist abstention. Four of the missing members were McGhee, Messer, McLaren and Salter, and it seems too much of a coincidence that half of Labour's known pacifists were simultaneously absent from what boiled down to a division on the effectiveness of Britain's war effort.

Macmillan has written of the two days:

"It certainly was a decisive debate, for it altered the history of Britain and the Empire and perhaps of the world . . . The issue would, of course, turn on the votes of the Conservative Members. How many would vote against the Government? How many would abstain?"

Later he concluded that if a system of proxy voting had existed at that time, the issue "must have been different" and Britain "might have lost the war".¹ Other commentators writing on the period have also concluded that Chamberlain was "ousted by his own party"; his resignation "forced by a Conservative revolt".² He resigned the office of Prime Minister because in a "vote of confidence some 93 of his followers failed to support him; presumably they no longer considered him a suitable war leader. In other words, a large minority of Chamberlain's party withdrew their consent to his continued leadership. He was not immediately removed or forced to resign from the leadership of the party because his successor as Prime Minister apparently felt at first that his own position as leader of a three-party war coalition would be strengthened if he did not become the leader of one of the parties in the coalition".³

¹ The Blast of War, p.67.

² Blake, The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill, p.247; Thompson, The Anti-Appeasers, p.3.

³ R T McKenzie, British Political Parties, p.67.

But did the issue "turn on the votes of the Conservatives"? True, the Government had suffered a tremendous hammering at the hands of its supporters, both in the debate and the division which followed, yet it had retained an ample peacetime majority of 81. Neither were all the "93" who failed to support Chamberlain anxious to bring him down, Channon recording that several of the dissidents, including Wise, went to see the Prime Minister and "apologised for voting against him".¹ It is conceivable, therefore, that with the failure of an attempt to reconstruct his Government to include the opposition elements, which was after all what many of the critics wanted, "Neville could still make minor changes and remain".² Chamberlain then, unlike the above impression of the proceedings, was not "removed" or "forced" to do anything simply as a result of National Members abstaining or voting against him. That he could have survived the adverse vote was noted by Dalton on 12 May, when the Government reconstruction was underway:

" . . the case for keeping Chamberlain in the War Cabinet was unanswerable. After all, if he turned against the new Government, he probably could still command enough Tory votes to overthrow it. Much better keep him, so that he could be put up to reply to Tory attacks on the Government, if these become serious."³

It is also implied in a letter that Churchill wrote to Chamberlain upon his return from the Palace on 10 May. "With your help and counsel", wrote the new Prime Minister to the old, "and with the

¹ Diary entry for the 9 May, p.247.

² Ibid, diary entry for 10 May, 1940, p.249.

³ The Fateful Years, p.315.

support of the great Party of which you are the leader, I trust that I shall succeed . . . To a very large extent I am in your hands - and I feel no fear of that . . . My fate depends largely on you."¹

Why then did Chamberlain resign? It was not that 93 of his followers failed to support him but that the situation created by their challenge, coupled with that of the Opposition, left the Prime Minister with no real alternative but to tender his resignation. No Government in modern times can prosecute a war efficiently unless it has the public and parliamentary support necessary; but such support must be virtually unanimous. To suggest that one could wage war with the assistance of one's friends when the whole Opposition and many of the prominent members of one's own party outside the Government were in opposition was foolhardy, if not dangerous, as Chamberlain well knew. Following the debate he felt "he could not go on. There ought to be a National Government. One party alone could not carry the burden. Someone must form a Government in which all the parties would serve, or we could not get through".²

The impossibility of carrying the war further with a one-party Government was recognised by W P Spens, the chairman of the 1922 Committee and a loyal follower of Chamberlain, when he welcomed the formation of Churchill's government:

"As one who voted in favour of the late Prime Minister on Wednesday last and one who since the outbreak of war has resolutely supported the last Government in its efforts, I want to be one of the first to welcome the new Government.

¹ Quoted in Iain Macleod's Neville Chamberlain, p.292.

² The Twilight War, p.233.

The line I have taken since the outbreak of war has been this: I believe it is absolutely essential for the Executive in power . . . if the war is to be won, to have the maximum support of the people of this country. I believe that what happened last Wednesday night merely brought to a conclusion an episode which some of us had foreseen from the very beginning of the war. Where you have big parties, with great strength in the country, opposing the Executive in the conduct of a war, it is impossible for the Executive to get from the country the full war effort which is necessary if the war is to be won . . . Opinions have been very freely expressed during the last six or seven months in this country, and, not once or twice, but on many occasions, the Executive has been very seriously embarrassed by the expression of opinion in this country on the conduct of the war. That phase in the conduct of the war has come to an end, and I think Heaven that it has."¹

In effect the damaging debate with its shattering of the political truce necessitated the urgent formation of a coalition of all the main bodies of pre-war opinion, in order to restore confidence, lest Hitler "take advantage of our divided councils", and to secure the maximum war effort from the British people.² The time had come for a National Government in the broadest sense. Throughout the next two days some of Chamberlain's leading backbenchers as well as some of those who failed to support him on 8 May, insisted that he

¹ House of Commons Debates, 13 May, 1940, Col.1506. See also the similar views expressed by two other loyal Chamberlainites, Sir Irving Albery and Sir Philip Colfox; Cols.1515 and 1518.

² The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.247.

reorganise his government on truly national lines to avoid fighting the war on a party basis. Yet this was the very thing he was not able to do. As Prime Minister since 1937 he had already dissipated any remaining goodwill that the Opposition and a sizeable section of the Tory Party felt for him. Chamberlain fell victim, therefore, to the vital necessity that he form the widest possible administration, to his own recognition, and that of his supporters, of the need for this, and to his opponents flat refusal to serve under him.

Although it might be argued that Chamberlain "lost the confidence of his followers and resigned the leadership", a close examination of his downfall has not borne this out.¹ The circumstances were highly unusual with Chamberlain never actually defeated in an open vote, retaining a substantial majority of 81, but resigning to avoid fighting the war on purely party lines. What took place, then, occurred at a time of grave emergency, with Chamberlain putting country before personal political interest. Not too much emphasis, therefore, should be placed on the fall of Neville Chamberlain as evidence of the limitation to the ascendancy that the Conservative leader enjoys over his followers.

On the day after the historic vote in the House of Commons the various pressure groups met to consider their next move. At 9.30 am the Watching Committee met at Salisbury's house in Arlington Street, where those present exchanged their impressions on the debate. Amery made it quite clear that the Prime Minister could not survive longer than a week or two and on this there was general agreement, whichever way they voted the night before. They agreed on the following formula:

- "1. That a Coalition Government is essential.
2. That Labour will not enter such a Coalition if Chamberlain, Simon and Hoare remain; and that therefore
3. They must go."

¹ British Political Parties, pp.68-69.

There was some discussion whether, in order to mitigate this blow, Chamberlain should be asked to become Chancellor of the Exchequer. As to his successor as Prime Minister, the feeling was that either Halifax or Churchill should form a War Cabinet on national lines. Macmillan spoke out in favour of the latter. At length, Salisbury agreed to convey their opinion immediately to Lord Halifax.¹

Meanwhile Davies presided over a meeting of the Action Group, which, according to Macmillan, many new adherents attended.² They decided by an overwhelming majority that they would not support the existing Government, and would only support a National Government comprising all parties. They agreed on a three point policy, which was released to the press and communicated to Chamberlain:

- "1. There must be a National Government of all parties;
2. The Prime Minister, whoever he might be, should choose his colleagues on the grounds of merit.
3. The Group will give support only to the Prime Minister able to form a National Government."³

As the Manchester Guardian noted, "Members of the group freely expressed the opinion after the meeting that Mr Chamberlain could never form such an all-party administration".⁴

When the House met Davies put down a motion regretting the Whitsun recess, and moved that Parliament should reassemble on the 14th, instead of the 21st, in order to be on hand while discussions on reconstruction were going on, or in case of a sudden German attack on Holland, Belgium and elsewhere. Boothby seconded the amendment,

¹ Nicolson, diary entry 9 May, 1940, p.80.

² The Blast of War, p.75.

³ I Fight to Live, p.220.

⁴ Manchester Guardian, 10 May, 1940.

attempting to drive another nail in the Government's coffin:

"The events of yesterday proved that the Government, as at present constituted, do not possess the confidence of the House and of the country in sufficient measure . . . national unity can never be achieved by our present political leadership."¹

The motion was supported by Ede, Labour Member for South Shields, and Morris-Jones, who reminded the House that among those abstaining in the previous night's division were a number who hitherto had "constantly supported the Government" and this constituted "one of the most grave reflections on the Government".² A fellow abstainer, P C Loftus, and two members that voted with the Opposition, Glyn and Mander, argued against the motion on the grounds that the Recess should best be employed to reconstitute the Government. After Margesson had assured the House it would be recalled "should occasion arise", Davies withdrew the motion.

Early in the afternoon, Amery took the chair at a meeting composed largely of the National Members who had voted against the Government. Boothby, the secretary of this new group, apparently told Dalton that more than 60 attended.³ Amery informed them that the Whips were active, and that Chamberlain had given vast promises of conciliation to those Tories who were not contented but who had voted with the Government. According to Dalton, Chamberlain had been personally telephoning from 8 am that morning, trying to conciliate the opponents of yesterday. He seemed determined himself to soldier

¹ House of Commons Debates, 9 May, 1940, Col.1458.

² Ibid, Col.1444.

³ The Fateful Years, p.308. Boothby also wrote to Lloyd George and congratulated him on his speech, noting the "fox is dragging his brush". Letter dated 10 May, 1940, Lloyd George Papers.

on, offering to sacrifice Simon and Hoare, or even Kingsley Wood, if that would propitiate the critics. Dalton also heard from another Tory source that Chamberlain actually sent for Amery and offered him the choice of any office, other than the premiership itself if he could bring his rebels in. Amery had thereupon asked whether Chamberlain proposed to bring in members of the Liberal and Labour Parties, to which he replied "I hope that will not be necessary". Amery had then refused.¹ Although much of this is questionable it is possible that some sort of approach was made, probably by phone. According to Rowse, who might have got his information from Amery, rather than a secondary source: "Chamberlain rang him up, expressing regret that no place had been found for him hitherto, would he now join the Government? Amery being the leader of the Conservative malcontents, Chamberlain must have hoped that this would bring them back and enable him to go on".² If any such approach occurred - and Amery, the man at the centre, makes no reference to one in his memoirs - it should not be interpreted too narrowly, as Chamberlain was also making overtures to the Opposition Parties.

With Amery in the chair, the National Members discussed and discarded as unworkable the possibility that Chamberlain would reshuffle yes-men into the important Cabinet posts, but felt there was a real danger that "Margesson will organise an Iron Guard and fight a rear-guard action".³ They decided therefore to support a Prime Minister who enjoyed the confidence of the country and was able to form an

¹ The Fateful Years, p.308.

² All Souls and Appeasement, p.106.

³ Nicolson, diary entry 9 May, 1940, p.81.

all-party Government, and issued a statement to that effect. Although the Chairman had tried to restrict the discussion to principles and avoid personalities, he was not able to prevent some expressing their views on such a vital question. Macmillan recalled, yet again, speaking out "strongly against Halifax, who was being canvassed as the next Prime Minister, and in favour of Churchill".¹

Naturally the whips and the Prime Minister were fully informed of all these proceedings, one of which took place in Chamberlain's presence. That same day Sir Herbert Williams and representatives of his group, which had been persuaded by Dunglass to vote for the Government on the condition that it would be drastically overhauled, went to the Prime Minister. According to the Manchester Guardian, which put a polite interpretation on the meeting, Williams, Thomas Levy, Sir Reginald Clarry and Sir George Mitcheson urged Chamberlain "on behalf of themselves and other Conservatives to remain in office but make sweeping changes in the Government".² Channon, with his inside knowledge, threw a somewhat different light on the event: "Williams and three other powerful Tory MPs . . . agreed to continue their support, but demanded drastic changes in the Government".³

Although Churchill, immediately after the debate, had advised Chamberlain to soldier on, "This has been a damaging debate, but you have a good majority . . . let us go on until our majority deserts us", the Prime Minister realised that this was quite out of

¹ The Blast of War, p.76.

² Manchester Guardian, 10 May, 1940.

³ Diary entry 9 May, 1940, p.248.

the question.¹ Already he had come to the conclusion that the Government could not go on as it was, and that a real national government was essential in order to restore confidence. He could attempt to form such an administration but if he could not be the head he would have to give way to "anyone commanding his confidence" who could.² While he could try to conciliate the Conservative opponents of his Government, the main thing was to make sure whether the Labour Party was prepared to serve under him or not. From those closest to Chamberlain it is apparent that he was under no illusions on that score. Halifax recorded that when he saw Chamberlain on the morning of the 9 May they discussed the "possibility of Labour being willing to serve under him and agreed that the chances were negligible".³ The Prime Minister, in fact, had already received information concerning the Opposition's attitude. His Parliamentary Private Secretary had asked Channon to discover "whether they would be willing to serve under Neville". Channon approached Nathan, the "plump Jewish Colonel" who sat for Central Wandsworth, who, after sounding out opinion, reported that the position was hopeless, "that even if the Labour leaders would serve under Chamberlain, the back-benchers would never allow it".⁴

¹ The Twilight War, p.233. Churchill's loyalty is in strange contrast to the suspicions that Channon had concerning him. On the 25 April he noted that Churchill "has now thrown off the mask, and is plotting against Neville . . . Winston, it seems, has had secret conversations with Archie Sinclair, A V Sinclair and Mr Attlee and they are drawing up an alternative Government". There is no evidence for this whatsoever: Churchill, although ambitious, was ever a loyal colleague.

² The Twilight War, p.234.

³ Fulness of Days, p.219. It was this assumption on which the afternoon meeting of Chamberlain, Churchill and Halifax was based.

⁴ Diary entry 9 May, 1940, p.248.

Yet why did Chamberlain, knowing this, invite Attlee and Greenwood round to Downing Street on the evening of the 9th and press them to enter a Government under his premiership? The answer surely lies in an entry in his diary:

"I knew that I could not get it, but it was necessary to get an official confirmation of the Opposition attitude, if only to justify my resignation to my own Party."¹

This "usual explanation" has been rejected by Laurence Thompson on the grounds that it "leaves a number of questions unanswered". Unfortunately he does not mention any of these questions but goes on to suggest that Chamberlain was playing a subtler game. "What he may have hoped for was a Labour refusal to serve under either himself or Churchill, which would have enabled him to put renewed pressure on Halifax to change his mind. It was for this . . . that he was prepared to hang on as long as possible".² This is unlikely. The meeting between Chamberlain, Halifax and Churchill on the 9th to decide the succession, which took place prior to the formal approach to the Labour leaders, will be studied later but Halifax's reluctance at, and Churchill's eagerness for, supreme power were already clear. Churchill, and presumably those present, had by then concluded that any mantle would fall on him but inevitably, before there could be any question of resignation or commission, a formal attempt had to be made to save the Government by inviting the Opposition Parties to join it. Soundings conducted privately by junior ministers were obviously insufficient and would be viewed as such by Government and Party, and consequently Chamberlain's account for the delay, that it was

¹ Quoted in Macleod's Neville Chamberlain, p.291.

² 1940: Year of Legend, Year of History, p.87.

necessary to receive "official confirmation", should not be questioned. It is interesting to note that Dalton recorded Chamberlain's request for "an early and definite answer" from the report of the meeting given him by Attlee and Greenwood, something that scarcely fits in with a picture of the Prime Minister hanging on "as long as possible".

Apparently Attlee hardly knew what to say in answer to Chamberlain's invitation but he and Greenwood somehow managed to explain that the Prime Minister completely misunderstood the situation and there was no prospect of the Opposition joining him; they both disliked and distrusted him. "It was not a pleasant task", Attlee later recorded, "to tell a Prime Minister that he ought to go, but I had no option but to speak the truth. I said: 'Mr Prime Minister, the fact is our party wont come in under you. Our party wont have you.'"¹ However, they could not speak definitely without the approval of their Executive, but they were certain that the answer would be 'No'. Asked whether they would serve in a National Government under another Prime Minister, they replied that on this, too, they must consult their Executive, which was now assembling at Bournemouth for the Party Conference. Chamberlain asked for an early and definite answer to both questions:

1. Would Labour enter a Government under the present Prime Minister?
2. Would Labour come in under someone else?

Attlee promised to telephone Downing Street next day with their decisions.

Throughout the 9-10 May the House was "full of rumour and intrigue, plot and counter-plot".² While some Members maintained

¹ A Prime Minister Remembers, p.32.

² Channon, diary entry 9 May, 1940, p.248.

Chamberlain would stay, others pressed the claims of the chief contenders, Halifax and Churchill. Amery's name was also being canvassed, probably because of his prominent role in the crisis. Apparently Beaverbrook took the view that Amery was the man "best qualified all round" to lead Britain, while Greenwood and other members of Labour's front bench informed Davies that the Tory that they would soonest serve under was Amery. He, of course, was on the Right of the party as his opposition to sanctions in 1935 indicated, but he had at least been consistent, unlike other Tory leaders. "I think my interest in Family Allowances", he wrote, "has also appealed to them". Nevertheless he discouraged the idea, as he was sure the question would be settled in the "inner circle" and, so long as Churchill and Halifax were available, it did not seem to him that the question of an alternative would arise.¹

Lloyd George apparently told Attlee that should Chamberlain resign he might advise the King to send for the leader of the Opposition.² Attlee consulted Dalton, who dismissed the idea of a Labour Prime Minister in the existing situation. Given the strength of the parties in the House, the Prime Minister had to be a Conservative, and they agreed the choice lay between Churchill and Halifax. Dalton frankly admitted that he favoured the latter as Prime Minister, with Churchill concentrating, as Minister of Defence with great authority, on directing and winning the war. He also noted Attlee's "agreement with my preference for Halifax over Churchill, but we both think either would be tolerable".³ Attlee's memoirs are contradictory on

¹ Diary entry, The Unforgiving Years, p.370.

² The Fateful Years, p.309.

³ Dalton Papers, Diaries, 9 May, 1940.

this point, stating his preference for Churchill: "he did not share the view, held by Dalton and some others, that Halifax would be the best choice".¹ The position is even more confused by Spears recording that Attlee, in conversation with Bracken, expressed the view that if there were a change of Government, his people, who had never forgiven Churchill for Tonypandy, would expect it to be under Halifax, with Churchill as Minister of Defence. Bracken, entirely on his own responsibility, had insisted that Churchill could not and would not serve under Halifax and had persuaded Attlee not to refuse to serve under Churchill if the situation arose.² Amery repeats this story, but records it happening on a different day, while Attlee was dining with Bracken.³ However, Attlee had no recollection of any such conversation with Bracken at any time, nor of dining with him on the 7th, an evening when he had much else to do.⁴ Whatever the truth of the situation, the important thing was that Labour, provided the conditions were right, were prepared to join a coalition under either Halifax or Churchill, and that this seems to have been realised by the latter.

It is clear that Chamberlain would have preferred as his successor, Halifax, with whom he had been so closely associated. His biographer, Feiling, states this quite definitely. That the succession fell elsewhere was due to a meeting on the 9th, when Chamberlain, Halifax, Churchill and Margesson met in the Cabinet

¹ A Prime Minister Remembers, p.31.

² Prelude to Dunkirk, pp.130-131.

³ The Unforgiving Years, p.371.

⁴ The Fateful Years, p.309.

room. According to an account which Margesson twenty years later gave Beaverbrook, the chief whip "told Chamberlain that his own party could no longer be relied upon to support him, and that he should resign. Chamberlain asked who Margesson considered should succeed to the Premiership. Margesson answered that the House of Commons would prefer Halifax."¹ The discussion which followed - although Churchill makes no reference to that which preceded it - was fully described by Churchill in the Twilight War, but by a lapse of memory it was transferred to the following morning.

Chamberlain made it quite clear that the question under consideration was whom he should advise the King to send for should his own resignation become necessary. Churchill, the Prime Minister felt, would not command the support of the Opposition, a point which the First Lord refused to be drawn on, remaining in silence. "It certainly seemed longer", Churchill recalled, "than the two minutes which one observes in the commemoration of Armistice Day". At length Halifax spoke, urging the difficulty of a peer leading at such a time of crisis when "he would be held responsible for everything, but would not have the power to guide the Assembly upon whose confidence the life of the Government depended".² This effectively

¹ Beaverbrook, p.351.

² The Twilight War, p.235. There is some controversy over who was exactly responsible for Churchill's silence. Beaverbrook gives the credit to Bracken, as does the latter's biographer, whereas Eden attributes it to Kingsley Wood. On 9 May Churchill and Wood lunched alone with Eden. According to Eden's diary, Wood thought that Churchill "should succeed, and urged that he should make this plain". Eden adds, in Taylor's view from recollection and not from his diary: "I was surprised to find Kingsley Wood there giving a warning that Chamberlain would want Halifax to succeed him and would want Churchill to agree. Wood advised "Don't agree, and don't say anything." The Reckoning, pp.96-97. Taylor suggests that the recollection may be an unconscious transference of credit from Bracken to Wood. Beaverbrook, p.530.

settled the matter. A short while later Churchill told Eden "he thought it plain N.C. would advise the King to send for him. Edward did not wish to succeed. Parliamentary position too difficult."¹

On the next day came the staggering news of Hitler's invasion of Holland and Belgium. Chamberlain's reaction was to feel that the changed situation made it necessary for him to stay in office, at any rate until the immediate crisis was over. Sir John Reith remembered finding him in "good form", "stimulated" by the news from the Low Countries, and "ready for action if encouraged and authorised to act".² Symptomatic of his changed attitude was the instruction to Reith, that in his capacity as Minister of Information, he was to attend all meetings of the War Cabinet in future, beginning with the one about to assemble at 11.30 am. At the same time the news of his intention to remain, coupled with an explanation that in view of recent developments the confusion of a change or reconstruction of the Government must be avoided, was given out by the Whips' Office.

Maurice Cowling has written that in the 36 hours after the debate Chamberlain tried three ways of rescuing himself. "First he let it be known that Hoare and Simon should be removed. Then, he tried to persuade the Labour Party to enter a coalition. Finally, after discovering, the day before the German invasion of the Low Countries, that Labour would not enter a coalition under him, he decided that the invasion had made it possible for him to stay."³ In the first instance, the reference to Hoare and Simon was made by Dunglass ("without", as Nicolson noted, "committing the Prime Minister")

¹ Diary entry, 9 May, recorded in The Reckoning, p.97.

² Into The Wind, p.382.

³ Cowling, The Impact of Hitler, p.381.

prior to and not after the vote on 8 May, when it was apparent, even to Chamberlain, that a reconstruction was essential.¹ The approach to the Labour leaders was, as we have seen, to obtain official confirmation of the Opposition attitude in order to justify his resignation to the party. That confirmation did not arrive until the afternoon of the 10 May, several hours after the invasion of the low countries, and Chamberlain's early morning decision to stay, although related to the commencement of hostilities, can be interpreted somewhat differently to the view expressed by Cowling.²

Meanwhile the Watching Committee had been in session, discussing the German invasion but without much definite information. It appears that the Committee at last determined on Churchill as Prime Minister, to lead Britain through the immediate dangers ahead. On leaving the meeting Nicolson encountered Emrys-Evans, who informed him that in view of the military crisis, the political crisis had been postponed. This news was telephoned to Salisbury, who said that "we must maintain our point of view, namely that Winston should be made Prime Minister during the course of the day".³ This viewpoint Nicolson later put to Dunglass, that they would never allow Chamberlain to get away from the reconstruction owing to the invasion. "He says that the reconstruction has already been decided upon, but that the actual danger of the moment really makes it impossible for the Government to fall . . . we must have a triumvirate of Chamberlain, Churchill and Halifax to carry us over these anxious hours."⁴

¹ Diary entry, 8 May, 1940, Diaries and Letters, p.79.

² See page 732.

³ Diary entry 10 May, 1940, p.82.

⁴ Ibid.

Nicolson saw the "sense in this" and hoped that the Labour and Liberal Opposition would agree.

The Liberal Party did. That morning Sinclair saw Attlee, in the latter's room at the House of Commons, and said that, in view of the morning's news, Chamberlain had better carry on a bit longer.¹ Later the same day Sinclair issued a statement on behalf of his party:

"The German attack aimed at Britain and France has been launched with characteristic disregard of the rights and freedom of small states through Holland and Belgium, whose forces are gallantly resisting the outrage. The assault must be broken by the skill and courage of the fighting forces of the Allies backed, in this as in other countries, by the firm will of a united people.

Recent events have proved the necessity for a prompt and radical reconstruction of the British Government; but the opening of the first critical battle in the west is not the moment. Meanwhile let us redouble our efforts in every sphere to defeat the enemies of freedom."²

Not so Labour - they were to give the final push which resulted in Chamberlain's departure that day. Nevertheless, there is some confusion as to how this was done. According to Amery the news of Chamberlain's intention to remain was not released until the Labour

¹ A Prime Minister Remembers, p.33.

² Manchester Guardian, 11 May, 1940. Reith recalled Chamberlain telling him that Sinclair had "apologised" that morning. Into The Wind, p.382.

leaders were in train for Bournemouth, and so Davies telephoned Greenwood, on his arrival, securing a denial that the Labour Party would agree to this, and issued it to the press.¹ This story has been perpetuated by a later historian, but it is incorrect.² The Labour leaders were, in fact, in London on the morning of 10th when the news was put out by the Whips' office, and Attlee had then discussed the continuance of the administration with Sinclair.³

What is more important however is that Reith recorded that Chamberlain had seen Attlee and Greenwood that morning and that the Prime Minister had understood that they were "prepared to defer the political crisis in view of this new one. But there was a Labour Conference at Bournemouth next day and they would have to conform to decisions taken there".⁴ In one instance the statement is incorrect, as the conference was that day and not the 11th. But as to a further meeting between the Prime Minister and the Labour leaders, mentioned by Reith, Eden noted in his diary that Chamberlain had informed the Cabinet that the "new attack must cause hold up, only temporary. He had communicated with Attlee in this sense, who had accepted. He had asked Attlee to put out notice which would include support of Government pro tem".⁵ Attlee, however, subsequently denied that any further communication with Chamberlain took place, and in any

¹ Amery, diary entry 9 May, 1940, Amery Papers. Boothby also attributed a central role to Davies in the crisis. "One day", he wrote, "I hope Clem Davies will tell the full story of the fall of the Chamberlain Government and the advent to power of the Great Coalition. He played a considerable part, behind the scenes, in events of that historic weekend." I Fight To Live, p.220.

² The Anti-Appeasers, p.232.

³ Dalton, The Fateful Years, p.310.

⁴ Into The Wind, p.382.

⁵ The Reckoning, p.97.

case, it is inconceivable that a man like him would have committed his party to a hold-up without consulting his colleagues.¹ It may, of course, have been Attlee's private view that the political crisis should be deferred, for this is the impression gained from Davies's record of the crisis.² Nevertheless, this does not overcome the difficulty of irreconcilable accounts: in Reith's view a meeting took place; Eden merely mentions communication; Attlee flatly denies any communication.

It is possible that no meeting took place but that communication by telephone did. Attlee, in his denial, may have used the word 'communication' in respect of meetings, although this we shall never know. Ruling out a meeting, but assuming that a telephone conversation did take place, it is possible that Attlee may have mentioned his misgivings about an immediate reconstruction. This could have created in Chamberlain's mind the fiction of support, but significantly Reith records that Labour "would have to conform to decisions" taken at Bournemouth. Attlee may, therefore, have given his personal opinion but, in character, added the rider of the necessity of his colleagues' support for such a step. In this way the conflicting accounts can be patched together.

One further point that must be considered is Chamberlain's request for a notice of "support of the Government pro tem". Dalton has the Prime Minister making this request on the evening of 9 May, at the meeting with Attlee and Greenwood. This seems to be incorrect as the two existing questions, to be answered "early and definitely", ruled out any real necessity for a message of support. These answers would

¹ A Prime Minister Remembers, p.33.

² 1940: Year of Legend, Year of History, p.86.

be available within 24 hours and consequently it would hardly be necessary for Chamberlain to request that Labour issue a notice of support for his administration during such a short intervening period. In any case the Prime Minister was unlikely to make such a suggestion when he had already gauged - even before the official confirmation of Labour's attitude - that the Government was in its death throes.

It is possible, therefore, that any request for support pro tem must be linked with the German invasion of the Low Countries, and that the impression, given by Reith and Eden, that the request was made on the morning of 10 May, is correct. Dalton, in fact, knew nothing of the previous night's meeting until that morning, and he, in writing his diary, may have confused a further request by telephone with the meeting on the 9th.

Dalton considered the request as an endeavour by Chamberlain to remain in office on a permanent not pro tem basis. Presumably he was asked to draft the notice while Attlee saw Sinclair, and framed it in such a way that it was unlikely to help Chamberlain. Attlee and Greenwood accepted it, the former presumably swallowing his personal feelings, and issued it to the press:

"The Labour Party, in view of the latest series of abominable aggressions by Hitler, while firmly convinced that a drastic reconstruction of the Government is vital and urgent in order to win the war, reaffirms its determination to do its utmost to achieve victory. It calls on all its members to devote all their energies to this end."¹

¹ Reith recorded that during the morning Cabinet meeting "a tape message was handed to Wilson, who passed it across to me. It was a statement by Attlee and Greenwood; they were not prepared to serve under Chamberlain". Into The Wind, p.583. It is likely that Reith was thinking of Dalton's statement, which was more general than he imagined, for the refusal of Attlee and Greenwood did not come until 5 o'clock, at a Cabinet meeting at which Reith was not present. Cab.119(40).

"This was not", Dalton commented, "quite what Chamberlain wanted", namely a message of support for the Government's continuance into the grave crisis.¹ Nevertheless, the statement did not absolutely rule out the possibility of Labour support, but the very absence of the commitment could have been little other than the writing on the wall for Chamberlain's hopes of remaining at the helm. That the omission was noticed by observers can be gauged from the leading article in The Times, where it was remarked that "it was something of a surprise that the Labour Party did not accompany their decision with a rider to the effect that they were prepared for the moment, and in the hour of acute crisis, to give their support to the present War Cabinet without prejudice to reconstruction at the earliest possible date".²

Following the publication of the statement the Labour leaders travelled to Bournemouth, where the National Executive, without too much discussion, reached some unanimous decisions. It was resolved that they were prepared "to take part, as a full partner, in a new government, under a new Prime Minister". Dalton was responsible for putting in "under a new Prime Minister". Some of his colleagues doubted whether these words were necessary, but he, possibly influenced by Davies's telephone message, emphasized: "if you don't make it absolutely plain, the Old Man will still hang on".³ At 5 pm Labour's resolution was read over the phone to the Prime Minister's Private Secretary and communicated to Chamberlain. The official records reveal that Chamberlain, at the end of the War Cabinet meeting that afternoon,

¹ The Fateful Years, p.310.

² The Times, 11 May, 1940.

³ The Fateful Years, p.311.

"said that, as his colleagues were aware, the Labour Party had been asked whether they would consider in principle co-operating in the Government (a) under the present Prime Minister, or (b) under some other Prime Minister. The Labour Party's answer had now been received. Their reply to the first question was in the negative and to the second question was as follows:

"The Labour Party are prepared to take their share of responsibility as a full partner in a new Government, under a new Prime Minister, which would command the confidence of the nation."

The Prime Minister said that, "in the light of this answer, he had reached the conclusion that the right course was that he should at once tender his resignation to the King. He proposed to do so that evening."¹

Clearly any remaining hope that Chamberlain had of remaining at the helm - even temporarily - had been dashed by Labour's reply, which like the earlier statement, contained no reference to support for the present War Cabinet, and therefore Dalton's claim that the "final blow which dislodged the 'old limpet' was struck by us at Bournemouth that afternoon appears to be justified".² Shortly before 6 pm, following a meeting with Ministers who were not members of the War Cabinet at which they had been told that the Labour Party "were not willing to serve under him" and that he "felt it his duty to resign

¹ War Cabinet Minutes, 10 May, 1940, 119 (40).

² The Fateful Years, p.312. According to Halifax's diary note, the Prime Minister had already decided not to wait, and had arranged to see the King that evening to advise that Churchill should take over. L Thompson, 1940: Year of Legend, Year of History, p.90. This may be so, but he certainly waited for the Bournemouth message before announcing his intention.

in favour of Churchill", Chamberlain went to see the King, tendered his resignation and recommended Churchill as his successor.¹ The latter accepted the King's commission and set about forming what his predecessor had not been capable of, a truly national administration.

It is necessary to add that some observers have put the "final blow" which dislodged Chamberlain at Kingsley Wood's door. Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott record that Kingsley Wood told Chamberlain - exactly when it is not mentioned, but the implication is that it occurred at the 11.30 Cabinet meeting - "that he would have to resign. The invasion of the Low Countries made a coalition necessary. If Labour would not serve under him, Chamberlain must go. Kingsley Wood was emphatic. Chamberlain had always trusted him and accepted his advice. Now there was a hint that Kingsley Wood had been plotting behind Chamberlain's back, planning his overthrow. Chamberlain had expected greater loyalty from so old and proven a friend. Such loyalty was denied to him. Wilson was infuriated by Kingsley Wood's betrayal, but could do nothing. Chamberlain recognized the kiss of Judas. That afternoon he called the Cabinet once more, and announced that he was no longer Prime Minister."² A J P Taylor has accepted this at its face value and written that "Kingsley Wood led a revolt against Chamberlain within the Cabinet". Elsewhere he has recorded that Wood "shattered the dream: now more than ever, he insisted, Chamberlain must go. Wood had started his career as an insurance expert. Though hitherto Chamberlain's Sancho Panza, he knew when to take out a cover note for the future. He reaped his due reward when the new government was formed".³

¹ Into The Wind, p.383.

² The Appeasers, p.339. The source for this statement is given as "private information", something which makes difficult the task of verifying or disproving it.

³ Beaverbrook, p.532; English History, 1914-45, p.474. Both Pelling,

There is some evidence that seems to support the view that Wood was not being straight with Chamberlain, if not going behind his back. Churchill records two interviews with Kingsley Wood during this crucial period, one on the morning of the 9th, and the other on the 10th. At the first, Wood, whom Churchill described as "very close to the Prime Minister as a colleague and a friend", informed him that Chamberlain was resolved upon the formation of a National Government, and if he could not be the head he would give way to anyone commanding his confidence who could. "Thus", Churchill recalled, "I became aware that I might well be called upon to take the lead".¹ The following morning at about ten o'clock Wood again visited Churchill, having just been with the Prime Minister. "He told me that Mr Chamberlain was inclined to feel that the great battle which had broken upon us made it necessary for him to remain at his post. Kingsley Wood had told him that, on the contrary, the new crisis made it all the more necessary to have a National Government, which alone could confront it, and he added that Mr Chamberlain had accepted this view".² The implications to be drawn from both these interviews are that Kingsley Wood realised a National Government had to come, and that he was in favour of Churchill leading it, and furthermore, appears to have convinced the latter that Chamberlain's decision to stand down was not unrelated to advice he had tendered the Prime Minister prior to the second interview. Either for this reason, as Gilbert, Gott and Taylor suppose, or through Churchill's

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Winston Churchill, p.435, and Thompson, The Anti-Appeasers, p.233, accept this view.

¹ The Twilight War, pp.233-34. It is probable that Churchill and Wood later lunched together, and that Eden attended, and that this was the occasion of Wood urging Churchill to make plain his willingness to succeed Chamberlain.

² Ibid.

genuine appreciation of Kingsley Wood's ability, or the need to keep on good terms with prominent Conservatives, Wood was promoted in the new administration, receiving the post of Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Yet it is one thing writing that Kingsley Wood was taking out a cover note for the future and another that he was planning Chamberlain's overthrow, indeed accomplished it by insisting the Prime Minister must go. It seems clear that Wood - possibly for nobler motives than observers credit him - did all that he could to reinforce Chamberlain in his resolve that a National Government was necessary, if not vital, but the facts will not fit the interpretation that he administered the death-blow. Whatever Wood may have told Churchill at 10 o'clock, Chamberlain, an hour later, according to Reith, was ready "to put out of his mind what had happened in the last 2 or 3 days" and take the country through the immediate threat from abroad.¹ As to the Gilbert and Gott view that Wood led a revolt at the 11.30 Cabinet, such an occurrence goes unmentioned in the memoirs of participants (notably Churchill) at the meeting. Furthermore Eden's diary refers to a statement by Chamberlain, made after the Cabinet, "of what had been his intention (to make way for Churchill), as W. had told me. Added that new attack must cause hold-up, only temporary".

However, Eden went on to record that the Prime Minister had approached Attlee, who had agreed to the hold-up and, according to Chamberlain, further agreed "to put out notice which would include support of Government pro tem, but when announced on tape (in Cabinet) it did not say more than support of war effort. This impressed many present with difficulty of prolonged delay, especially as conditions for change might become more rather than less difficult. For Prime

¹ Into The Wind, p.382.

Minister there was also risk to personal position if appearance of clinging on were given. K.W. took that view, but no one expressed it."¹ Unfortunately Eden does not spell out what he meant by "impressed many present", and whether this meant ministers actually expressing themselves against delay. Significantly he does not single out Kingsley Wood as intervening, but merely to comment on his fear for Chamberlain's personal position, although he did not "express it". Presumably, therefore, no conclusion was reached as to the future of the Government, or at least Eden implies that one was not. What is unequivocal, however, is the importance of Labour's decision not to announce support of the Government "pro tem", which "impressed many present" at the meeting.²

There is a further point to consider - if a Wood "revolt" had been decisive why did Chamberlain not go to the palace immediately? In fact he continued until the Cabinet in the afternoon when, after informing ministers that he had "thought matters over", he made known Labour's reply, which he received during the meeting, that they were not willing to defer the political crisis in view of the new one.³ Chamberlain then resigned, informing both his War Cabinet, including Wood, and the sixteen or so ministers outside, that he was doing so on the grounds that Labour was not willing to serve under him. Labour then, rather than Kingsley Wood, was responsible for the final blow.⁴

¹ Eden, diary entry 10 May, The Reckoning, p.97.

² It is interesting to note that Churchill, in the early afternoon, appeared to be of the opinion that the task of forming a government was imminent, and he went so far as to discuss posts with Amery. My Political Life, p.373.

³ Eden, diary entry 10 May, The Reckoning, p.97.

While it is true that Chamberlain was still hanging on at 5 o'clock awaiting official confirmation of what he must have known would be Labour's attitude (but he would have been less than human if he had not hoped against hope that Labour might after all agree to his continuing temporarily), his critics go too far in describing him as "incorrigibly limpit, always trying new tricks to keep himself firm upon the rock".¹ Chamberlain had already realised that a National Government was essential to avoid fighting the war on a party basis, and that it was quite beyond his power to form it. With this in mind he had decided, at the meeting with Churchill and Halifax, to advise the King to send for the former after his own resignation had been accepted.² This resolve had been weakened following the German invasion of Belgium and Holland, when Chamberlain was inclined to feel that the great battle which had broken upon Britain made it necessary for him to remain temporarily at his post. That he hung on during the 10th, therefore, was due more to what Amery called his "high sense of duty", a conviction that he must take his country through the immediate emergency, than any desire to clutch limpet-like on the premiership.³

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Thompson, in sympathising with Amery in his reluctance to accept the India Office, has described Kingsley Wood as an "obedient arch mediocrity". The Anti Appeasers, p.234. This, of course, fits in with the traditional picture of "political pygmies" holding sway during the thirties while the "giants", like Amery, Churchill and Lloyd George were excluded. For Wood at least this is perhaps inaccurate. Austen Chamberlain, in dismissing Ministers as incompetent, described Wood as "a brilliant exception", the most capable administrator among recent Postmaster-Generals. Letter to Ida Chamberlain, 19 January, 1935.

¹ "It's as hard getting rid of him as getting a leech off a corpse", said Bracken, while another Tory rebel compared Chamberlain to a "dirty old piece of chewing-gum on the leg of a chair". Diary entry dated 16 May, 1940, Dalton Papers.

Throughout the crisis Labourites, Liberals and Tory dissidents had remained in close contact with each other, contacts which were to continue during the reconstruction of the Government by Churchill. Thus Attlee and Greenwood were able to report to their Executive on the 11th that the Liberals were in, and satisfied, Sinclair to have a Service Department, and that Lloyd George was outside and detached from the main body of the Liberal Party. This came as a relief to some members of Labour's Executive who had been anxious that Lloyd George be included on the grounds that he and the Liberals, if they were outside, might steal Labour's clothes and become the Official Opposition. It is necessary to add that Lloyd George had been invited to join the Government, but had declined when informed that the invitation depended on Chamberlain's approval. The animosity between the two men, dating back to the First World War, resulted in Lloyd George writing with some bitterness that he had no interest in joining a Government in which Chamberlain was so "indispensable to you that you cannot invite to your counsels the man who had the greatest and the most successful experience of the conduct of the last war, without first of all obtaining his doubtful consent".¹ Churchill subsequently followed this up with an unconditional offer but Lloyd George again

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Channon implies that Chamberlain's resolve to advise the King to send for Churchill rather than Halifax weakened after the morning Cabinet, and that there was a "final try" to convince Halifax "to take it on". Diary entry for 10 May, The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon, p.249.

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The Unforgiving Years, p.369.

¹ Lloyd George to Churchill, 29 May, 1940, Lloyd George Papers.

declined. Apparently he was not anxious to serve with Chamberlain, and had decided to hold himself in reserve as a possible peacemaker, arguing "I shall wait until Winston is bust".¹

From their contacts with the Tories, the Labour leadership were also aware that certain key posts were to go to Amery and other rebels.² It was the latter, in fact, which were to intervene to overcome the only serious hitch in the negotiations. Chamberlain, in his farewell broadcast, had announced that he was staying on as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Leader of the House. The Labour leaders, who had not been consulted, were furious at the position assigned to him but got no change out of Churchill. Their objections were shared no less strongly by the Watching Committee and by the Edenites, some of whom went round to see Amery.³ With them came Davies to explain the exasperation of the Labour leaders and of their grave doubts whether they could join the Government after all. Salisbury was also informed and was deeply disturbed at the thought of Churchill's insistence on the retention of Chamberlain wrecking the prospect of a real National Government. He promised to convey at once to Churchill the strong objection felt by himself and his Conservative associates, as well as by the Opposition, to the proposed arrangement. Both Amery and Macmillan put it down to Salisbury's intervention that Churchill altered his plans, so that Kingsley Wood became Chancellor while the Prime Minister himself retained the leadership of the House.

Even so the retention of Chamberlain as Lord President of the Council caused Labour's executive to "boggle a bit". Morrison apparently

¹ Sylvester, Life With Lloyd George, p.481. See also pages 264-82.

² The Fateful Years, p.314.

³ The Unforgiving Years, p.374.

was very awkward and didn't think that the Government would stand up any better than the last one, and that it would not impress the public. For these reasons he was inclined to stay outside. However Attlee and Greenwood, Labour's negotiating team with Churchill, managed to gain acceptance of the terms, arguing that to get Chamberlain out altogether was impossible. "It would create such bitterness among his friends as to make the life of the new Government 'brutish and short'."¹ With the executive's approval Churchill was able that night to publish the names of the five in the War Cabinet and the three Service Ministers, and within days he had completed his war-time team. It is interesting to note that Churchill's reluctance to shift Chamberlain had not extended to Chamberlain's leading colleagues. Simon was elevated to the Woolsack, where in Attlee's phrase he would be "quite innocuous" while Hoare received nothing.²

Churchill was to describe his administration as:

"the most broad-based Government that Britain has ever known. It extends from Lord Lloyd of Dolobran (on the Right) to Miss Ellen Wilkinson (on the Left)."³

Though there was equality in the War Cabinet (Attlee, Greenwood, Chamberlain, Halifax, plus Churchill as Prime Minister and Minister of Defence), outside the major offices went to recognised politicians in accordance with party strength. Fifteen posts of cabinet rank went to the Conservatives, four to Labour and one to the Liberals. Sinclair, as official leader of the Liberal Party, found it embarrassing

¹ The Fateful Years, p.313.

² Ibid.

³ Lord Lloyd had once expressed an interest in fascism although he proved himself to be a steadfast opponent of appeasement. The European Right, p.67. Ellen Wilkinson was, of course, the ex-Communist and prominent Labour left-winger.

to accept the office of Air Minister because his followers felt he should instead have a seat in the War Cabinet. As this ran contrary to the principles of a small War Cabinet, Churchill proposed, and it was agreed upon, that Sinclair should join the inner cabinet when any matter "affecting fundamental political issues or party union was involved".¹

A J P Taylor goes too far when he claims that Hoare was the only appeaser to be removed.² Of the Chamberlain Cabinet as it was in October, 1938, fourteen were still serving in May, 1940; seven of them were removed, and seven were retained by Churchill in offices of Cabinet rank.³ Neither is the same author right when he says that the Conservative anti-appeasers "received few rewards: Duff Cooper, the true hero of Munich, for instance, only got the Ministry of Information". One can add to this solitary example Amery (India), Cranborne (Paymaster-General), as well as a considerable number who got minor ministerial posts. In fact of the 25 Conservative opponents of Munich, two of whom were by this time dead and two were already in Chamberlain's war-time administration, 14 were to obtain office under Churchill during the course of the war and the caretaker Government which followed it.⁴

That Churchill could not sweep out those who had been most closely associated with appeasement and fill the Government with those who had criticised foreign policy before the war was partly due to the

¹ Churchill, The Fall of France, p.9.

² English History, p.478.

³ The seven retained were: Halifax, Wood, Inskip, MacDonald, Simon, Brown, Chamberlain.

⁴ Apart from the 18 accounted for above, 3 anti-appeasers died on active service: Cartland, Duggan and Joel; Keyes, hardly fitted for a ministerial post, became Director, Combined Operations Command; only 3 received no reward: Adams, Bower and Ropner.

precarious nature of his position. Even though he was Prime Minister, Chamberlain was the leader of the party with a large majority behind him. Consequently Churchill could not afford to outrage Conservative opinion by welding the axe too heavily, and even if he had, considering the small number of the dissidents, he would not have found the necessary personnel to have filled a large proportion of the administration's places.

To sum up, Chamberlain was swept from power by the situation arising from an all-party revolt within the House of Commons. The revolt, in a sense, was a popular front, encompassing Labourites, Liberals, Independents - all previously supporting the Government's war effort - as well as Conservative backbenchers, and was openly displayed in the division lobbies. Chamberlain was not actually defeated but the fact that his Government's existence was strongly challenged in war-time when, as the Prime Minister was reminded by loyal backbenchers, unity was needed above all else, was the equivalent of defeat. Though he would have liked to avoid it he sensed that he had no real option but to resign; the Government was "doomed", wrote Margesson, "since a coalition was impossible under poor Neville".¹

His resignation marked the end of an era. The so-called National Government, with its 9 years of Conservative rule prolonging the dominance of the Conservatives during the twenties, had reached its term, as had the disunity within the nation. Yet it was thanks to Chamberlain that the country was not divided and plunged into political chaos. His willingness to resign and then to accept office under Churchill was true magnanimity in defeat:

"All my world has tumbled to bits in a moment.

The national peril has so swamped all personal feelings

¹ Margesson to Baldwin, 4 March, 1941, Margesson Papers. Quoted in Pelling's Winston Churchill, p.434.

that no bitterness remains. Indeed, I used to say to Annie (his wife) before war came that, if such a thing happened, I thought I should have to give way to somebody else, for I knew what agony of mind it would mean for me to give directions that would bring death and mutilation and misery to so many. But the war was so different from what I had expected that I found the strain bearable, and perhaps it was providential that the revolution which over-turned me coincided with the entry of the real thing."¹

¹ The Life of Neville Chamberlain, p.383. In later years Amery compared the conduct of Chamberlain with that of Asquith in 1916 and considered that the latter behaved with a far finer judgement and public spirit.

C O N C L U S I O N

During the five-year period of this study the National Governments of Baldwin and Chamberlain enjoyed the support of an overwhelming majority in the House of Commons. In all, there were 431 National supporters in the assembly that Baldwin brought about in 1935, an overall majority of 249. Lloyd George clearly pinpointed the danger in such a House:

"I do honestly think that a majority which is so large as to make a Government independent of sound criticism is a disaster to the country. If not altogether, it makes the Government so indifferent that they can delay response to useful suggestions from outside until it is almost too late to put things right."¹

Of the 431, all but a handful followed successive Prime Ministers unflinchingly. In Parliamentary debates critical speakers, including dissident Conservatives, almost invariably equalled and often surpassed the Government-supporting speakers both in numbers and intensity of argument. Yet when divisions occurred the voting figures revealed consistently large, unimperilled Government majorities. Even in 1940, following the reverses in Norway, Chamberlain could still command a majority of 81.

But it would be a mistake to assume that Government supporters were merely lobby 'fodder'. On the contrary many Conservatives - as well as members of the Opposition Parties - were in sincere sympathy with the policies pursued by the Government. In addition, supporters who had misgivings about the Government's policies were

¹ Letter from Lloyd George to his political agent, A H Henderson Livesey, May, 1938. Lloyd George Papers.

unwilling, either through fear for their own political future or a genuine belief that it was not in the country's interests, to take any action which might have caused the downfall of the Government and possibly the elevation of the Labour Party or some other combination to power.

Nevertheless, it would appear that a number of 'yes-men', members ready to support the Government in any and every division, existed on the back-benches. The Conservative dissidents certainly thought so. J R J Macnamara recorded how "there are an awful number of 'yes-men' nowadays . . . Being loyal has become mixed up with effusing 'yes'. Once or twice during this Parliament's life-time we have been lectured on loyalty . . . The authoritarian state of the old school tie is as dangerous as the dictatorship of the mailed fist".¹ His colleague, R T Bower, wrote to The Times in November 1938 to complain of the attitude of his fellow Conservatives during a debate on defence:

"Critics of the Government from all parties were present in force; the majority of its supporters were absent. The Government may derive satisfaction from the thought that many of its supporters have such confidence in it that they do not even wish to hear its account of the past or its policy for the future on the most vital question which faces us to-day: others will be left uneasily wondering whether such ostrich-like confidence augurs well for the survival of our democratic institutions in these parlous times."²

¹ The Whistle Blows, p.151. Macnamara felt that Baldwin was "unintentionally responsible for the era of the 'yes-man'."

² The Times, 16 November, 1938.

The passive acquiescence of members composing the Government majority resulted, so it was thought, in the Government's ability to treat Parliament in a high-handed way, making grave decisions without the necessary consultation. Macmillan felt this keenly. "We are", he said, "being treated more and more as a kind of Reichstag to meet only to hear the orations and decrees of the Government of the day".¹ A recent American writer has taken this up and assumed that the practical effect of having "an effective body of 'yes-men'", which Chamberlain "inherited" when he succeeded Baldwin, was that from May 1937 to March 1939, the House of Commons was "excluded from positive participation in foreign policy".² Another American historian has argued that for all practical purposes Britain was not a democracy but an oligarchy in which the Prime Minister functioned almost dictatorially. She writes:

"The role of the House of Commons in British Foreign Policy during the 1937-38 session of Parliament can be briefly stated - it was essentially that of the Greek chorus. The tragic hero was Neville Chamberlain, who destroyed himself and very nearly destroyed his country by his virtues and his faults. The chorus alternately defended his acts and gloomily foretold the horrors in store, but it was powerless to stay him from his course.

. . . In the twentieth century the proper place of the British House of Commons is not that of the Greek chorus impotent to influence the decrees of fate."³

¹ House of Commons Debates, 6 October, 1938, Col.488.

² W R Rock, Appeasement on Trial, p.325.

³ Marion L Kenney, The Role of the British House of Commons in British Foreign Policy during the 1937-38 Session, p.144.

The British historian, L C B Seaman, has also concluded that Chamberlain emasculated Parliament and thereby "most nearly approached the conventional image of a political dictator . . . though nominally at the mercy of such democratic limitations upon his power as a free Press, unfettered parliamentary debate, the almost unchecked right of public assembly, and the necessity of maintaining unanimity in his Cabinet and an undiminished majority in Parliament, succeeded in virtually ignoring all these inconveniences, at least until the spring of 1939".¹

Were, then the first 22 months of Chamberlain's premiership an abnormal period in Britain's political life, as these three have suggested? In the opinion of this writer these months were not so remarkable, and the assumption on which this view is based, that the House should control the executive, is misleading in that in practice it is more nearly true to say that the Government controls the House. In the British party system the Government normally has a parliamentary majority, whose support is based on loyalty to Government personnel, acceptance of the principles of the party concerned, and a common dislike of the alternative, which would be drawn from the Opposition. Thus any Government can, for the most part, rely on its backbenchers, who come to heel at the crack of a whip, providing the administration with whatever support it required.

Furthermore, the role of the House of Commons in foreign affairs as distinct from any other parliamentary business is definitely a reduced one. Government reactions to events abroad must needs be swift, thus denying the House time to meet to consider and reflect

¹ Post-Victorian Britain 1902-51, p.283.

on the situation. In consequence discussions, negotiations, agreements (such as Munich) and foreign relationships may be entered into by the Government without the necessity of prior parliamentary authorisation. Parliament, therefore, does not share in the decision of whether or not to act; it approves or disapproves an action which has been started or completed.¹ Even the latter is subject to qualification: no Government, as its supporters well know, could suddenly reverse its policy as a result of criticism and still retain its prestige at home and abroad.²

A further difficulty - similarly overlooked by Thompson in his account of the "ineffectiveness and paucity" of the National dissidents - in the Commons playing a more active role in foreign affairs is that the average member, with a multiplicity of problems facing him, is unable to possess the specialised knowledge necessary to withstand complicated foreign negotiations, and in any case is more concerned with domestic issues, economic and social affairs, which appear to affect his constituents more.³ "A Government", it has been said, "which satisfies a member on domestic policy need not fear his criticism on foreign affairs."⁴

In effect, therefore, owing to the special circumstances appertaining to foreign relations, the political power of the executive - in any case much greater than the American historians

¹ Hitler's march into the Rhineland on 7 March, 1936 was not debated until almost three weeks later, on 26 March. The vote of confidence in the Government's foreign policy took place on 6 April, a month after Hitler moved. Even if the Commons had wished to stop Hitler it had lost its opportunity.

² Baldwin's prestige probably dropped to its lowest ebb in December, 1935, following his repudiation of the Hoare-Laval proposals. Part of the latter package involved the cession of British territory, part of Somaliland to Italy, without requiring parliamentary consent.

³ The Anti-Appeasers, p.3.

perhaps appreciate - is heightened and that of the legislature decreased. That is not to say that the House cannot exert an important influence on foreign policy but rather that its opportunities are more limited.

Seen in this light, the May 1937 to March 1939 period was not such an abnormal one. The House was functioning as it should, and in its duty of holding the executive responsible for its actions, was debating, and more often than not, criticising the National Government's foreign policy. The innumerable questions and foreign policy debates are testimony to that. The supporters of the Government who were critical of its course made comparatively mild criticisms of appeasement while the Opposition was much more vehement in condemning what the Government was doing. But, and here is the crux of the matter, the Government's course was not affected by such activities. Its overwhelming majority, the reduced role of the House in foreign affairs, the widespread desire both inside and outside the House for a peaceful solution of international problems, all conspired to give the Government a free hand. Nevertheless, it is my view that the Government had a freer hand than it would otherwise have had, because one element of control was largely missing.

Those familiar with the British Parliamentary system will remember that the Government exists only because it won a majority at the last election and will continue to exist only if it secures a majority at the next. Herein lies much of the element of control the House of Commons has over a Government. The Government governs under constant criticism from the Opposition Parties, but in opposing they do not expect to defeat the Government, knowing they will be voted down. Their tactics are not directed to defeat or convert the

Government - the latter role, generally speaking, is that of dissidents within the Government party - but to influence the electorate. What the Opposition say may be so persuasive that the political pendulum may swing against the Government. This is something a Government cannot afford to happen over a sustained period, for only a small change in voting at the next election is necessary to compel the Government and Opposition to change places. Thus the former is forced to maintain a close contact between policy and public opinion, and no matter how great a Government's majority, criticisms aired in debate, and if they are held by the electorate, may force the administration to radically amend its proposals, or even to withdraw them in the interests of survival.

In practice, as we have seen, Chamberlain was able to conduct foreign affairs largely as he wished, until the inexorable march of events led to an upsurge of British public opinion and obliged him to change course and adopt half-heartedly what was, to all intents and purposes, the policy of his political opponents. What then had gone wrong? Apart from factors already considered, the Opposition Parties and dissident Conservatives - although they had established a recognisable alternative to Chamberlain's policy - never gained sufficient hold over public opinion before March 1939 to require the Government to change its course. If anything they, and not the Government, were unrepresentative of public opinion as the electoral record indicated.

In the 77 by-elections, following the general election and preceding the outbreak of war, Labour won 13 seats and retained 12, whereas the Liberal Party merely held one, and the dissident Conservatives suffered the loss of the Duchess of Atholl. Looking at the Labour record in more detail but over a shorter period, the

analysis of by-elections held between April 1938 and August 1939 revealed that the average swing to that party was 4.5%. This, however, was insufficient evidence of such a move against Chamberlain's administration as would have brought about a Labour victory had a general election been held. It was partly the recognition of this fact, that Labour alone could not defeat the National Government, that persuaded Cripps to launch the Petition Campaign. Labour, as Cripps indicated in the electoral researches contained in his memorandum to the executive, having received 38% of the national vote in 1935, as opposed to the National 54% and Liberal 7%, required a substantially higher swing than the party was then getting to put it into office. Such a view is strengthened by information derived from the earliest opinion polls conducted during this period, which suggest that Chamberlain still had majority support, and by local government elections in which Labour made little advance after the sweeping victories of 1934, actually losing 50 seats in 1936 and 79 in 1938. Thus George Orwell may well be correct when he concluded that the average Englishman was generally satisfied with the Government.¹ "However much one may hate to admit it", he wrote, "it is almost certain that between 1931 and 1940 the National Government represented the will of the mass of the people. It tolerated slums, unemployment and a cowardly foreign policy. Yes, but so did public opinion . . . it is fairly certain that the bulk of the English people were behind Chamberlain's foreign policy".²

The question that now remains to be answered is why the Labour and Liberal Parties and the Conservative dissidents failed to exercise

¹ See also J Jupp's electoral researches, The Left in Britain, 1931-41, M.Sc. Thesis, University of London, 1956, pp.101-3.

² England, Your England, p.207.

any element of control, or put more succinctly, why they failed to shift public opinion in the constituencies thereby pressurising the Government to change its course. It may be that the public would not be moved and that this immobility can be traced to what Correlli Barnett has termed the twentieth century British national character, which was shaped by the "flames of evangelical moralism and romantic idealism" through the workings of the Church of England public school and the Nonconformist sect. As a consequence of this "spiritual revolution" English policy ceased to be founded solely on the expedient and opportunist pursuit of English interests, as it had been in the eighteenth century. International relations were no longer seen as being governed primarily by strategy, but by love, the brotherhood of men, morality and reason. And so "in applying the qualities of gentleness, trustfulness, altruism and a strict regard for moral conduct to a sphere of human activity where cunning, cynicism, opportunism, trickery and force, all in the service of national self-interest, still held sway", the British public in the 1930s stood "disarmed and blinded by their own virtues".¹

Certainly many of the British by this time were wedded to ideas of justice, community of peoples and peace; and particularly the latter, in the light of the well publicised horrors of the 1914-18 conflict. Nevertheless implicit in the above beliefs was the use, through righteous indignation, of force in their defence, a factor underestimated by Barnett. Whatever else one makes of the Peace Ballot, the fact that a majority of some 6 million to 2 million was in favour of some sort of military action is testimony to that. And how else can one explain the transition of the Labour and Liberal Parties -

¹ The Collapse of British Power, p.63.

the custodians, if any, of this spiritual revolution, and in which, as the analysis of religious beliefs indicated, the Nonconformist sects were still important - from trust in reason and goodwill to instead preparing to resist Fascist expansion by countervailing power?

Excluding, then, the Left, what is one to make of the Right, and with it the National leadership in the 1930s? Why, when, as Barnett argues, they too were permeated with the spiritual revolution, did they not share the ire of the Left against the dictators? Had they, in their trust in human goodwill and good nature, "entirely left out the Christian doctrine of original sin"?¹ In the view of this writer it may be that the Right was not as transformed as Barnett imagined, but the old wolf was still there in sheep's clothing. It is possible that the National Government in its foreign policy was torn between an eighteenth century expedient and opportunistic pursuit of British interests and a twentieth century concern for goodwill and reconciliation, and here the tragedy lay. The effect of such a double standard is well illustrated by the moral cum cynical approach to the Italian aggression in Abyssinia, when the Government inspired men of goodwill both at Geneva and in the British election that followed, only subsequently to dash such hopes by planning to partition Abyssinia after the classical fashion.

Whatever the truth of the matter - and national character is so intangible - a majority of the British public, in the late thirties, went along with the Right's approach to international problems, rather than the opposition's confrontationist grand alliance for collective security purposes, despite its advocates declared opinion that it alone

¹ The Collapse of British Power, p.61.

could preserve the peace. It is easy to imagine that goodwill, reconciliation and peace were so paramount in the public mind that the efforts of the anti-appeasers to change the Government's course were almost doomed from the start. There is some truth in this, and yet it is well to remember that nations can face up to unpalatable facts. Britain did so in the spring of 1939, and it is conceivable, given stronger pressure from the opposition elements, that this - or something approaching it - could have occurred earlier. To ascertain why this did not happen, although partly due to factors considered earlier it is necessary to turn to the internal histories of these opposition groupings to adequately account for Chamberlain's free hand in his first 22 months.

In W R Rock's work on the critics of appeasement it was claimed that of those opposed to the National Government "the most realistic . . . were the dissident Conservatives . . . It was on the basis of their programme that collective resistance to aggression was eventually attempted".¹ Elsewhere the dissidents were described as "a small band of clear-sighted men stronger in quality than numbers, who temporarily broke with their party because they were greatly alarmed by Hitler's growing power in Germany. They believed that concessions to the dictators only whetted their appetites and encouraged them to make even larger demands. Consequently they held that Britain, in close co-operation with France, must stand firm in the face of the increasing truculence" of the dictators. "Since the Labour Party", the writer continued, the Liberal Party being ignored, "though it protested against appeasement in as loud a voice as the dissident Conservatives, was actually less willing than Chamberlain to rearm and face the grim possibility that national arms might have

¹ Appeasement on Trial, p.335.

to be used, these Conservative opponents of Chamberlain were his most telling critics and his most worthy adversaries".¹

Rock's statements appear to be based on the assumption that the dissidents were a definite grouping, unanimously pressing for a precise programme in foreign and defence affairs. Rather the reverse was true: not only was there no complete unanimity of opinion on an alternative policy to that pursued by the Government but there were also contradictions, divisions and differences of emphasis among the ranks of the Conservative rebels, conclusions that Neville Thompson also reached. Consequently the opposition on the part of National backbenchers to the Government's course was less substantial than Rock, or perhaps legend, would have us believe, but nevertheless opposition of a kind there was.

Whereas Adams placed his faith in the pure doctrine of the League, an all-embracing collective security, others, of whom Churchill was pre-eminent, favoured a more limited, European form as the most effective way "to contain, to restrain and if necessary to frustrate German domination".² This makes nonsense of Thompson's view that the critics were too convinced that the League had failed to expect an effective barrier to German expansion to be created within its framework.³ Adherents of this limited League approach laid themselves open to a charge of cynicism and expediency in their acquiescence to the Government's abandonment of sanctions. Here were the very men who were advocating collective security against Germany resigning themselves to Italy's flagrant violation of the Covenant an action which constituted

¹ Appeasement on Trial, pp.15-16.

² House of Commons Debates, 14 March, 1938, Col.100.

³ The Anti-Appeasers, p.100.

a most perilous blow to the effectiveness of the League, the institution in which they placed their hopes. Nevertheless to suggest, as Thompson did, that the dissidents were thereby "largely responsible for breaking the instrument which could have been used to restrain Hitler" strains the bounds of credibility.¹

In addition to the above members a number, Amery and Austen Chamberlain chief amongst them, dismissed the League approach. They hoped that it would be possible to build a Four Power basis for peace, in which Britain's part was limited to the Locarno Treaty and friendly support of France and Italy in keeping Germany within bounds. It was not until 1938 that some measure of agreement existed amongst the dissidents as a whole on the need to establish what in Churchill's parlance was loftily called the 'grand alliance':

"If a number of States were assembled around Great Britain and France in a solemn treaty for mutual defence against aggression; if they had their forces marshalled in what you may call a grand alliance; if they had their staff arrangements concerted . . . and if it were done in the year 1938 - and, believe me, it may be the last chance there will be for doing it - then I say that you might even now arrest this approaching war."

But as to membership of such an alliance differences were again apparent. Amery's hopes of co-operation with Italy had still not been dashed (as they had for the majority of the dissidents), even by the annexation of Austria in March 1938, whereas Churchill - and later Eden - looked more to co-operation with the Soviet Union. The latter, of course, was a relationship distasteful to most loyal

¹ The Anti-Appeasers, p.100.

Conservatives, which was why Amery, or so he claimed, chose to play it down although it is quite possible that he too failed to overcome his distaste at help from such a quarter. Even at the height of the Czech crisis in September these differences could not be bridged and the dissidents were unable to formulate a common policy complete in all details.

Nevertheless it would be unfair - in the light of the above - to conclude that "neither Churchill nor Eden had any real alternative to the Government's Czechoslovak policy".¹ Whatever their differences both Churchill and Eden saw the necessity for making it clear to Hitler that Britain meant business, and that this could only be done by clear warnings, fleet movements and the like, close association with France, and, where Churchill was more insistent than Eden in 1938, putting Russia to the forefront. Such a course could not be other than an alternative to the Government's Czechoslovak policy in September 1938, otherwise British policy after March 1939 becomes incomprehensible.

In view of this, it is possible, although this writer considers it undesirable, to reverse Thompson's argument and suggest that the switch in March 1939 from the Munich policy to that of Chamberlain's opponents indicates that it was the Prime Minister if anyone who lacked a "real alternative" and not Churchill and Eden. But in writing this it would be wrong to imply, or attribute as Rock does, sole authorship of the alternative or grand alliance policy to the Conservative dissidents. Such was a policy that was clearly evolved in all three political parties, and has been traced as such in these pages.

It is interesting to note that Cowling, in considering whether an alternative course would have been successful or not, has suggested

¹ The Anti-Appeasers, p.178.

that the policies of Eden and Churchill (and the Liberal and Labour Parties) were "much the same as Chamberlain's". Whereas the opposition "emphasised the need to rescue the League and moved, when this failed, towards demanding collective resistance to dictators", Chamberlain and most Conservatives "contested the League's centrality and asserted the significance of other methods of maintaining peace". In reality, however, there was no real "contrast", the difference being merely "verbal". The new policy, Cowling argued, involved the same aim as the old and the same search for issues with which to bring France and Germany together. Even when the language was different, it pursued the same combination of rearmament and reconciliation as had been pursued since 1933, and maintained the same hope for agreement about treaty revision, disarmament and a German return to Geneva. By March 1939 Chamberlain had been pursuing this for two and a half years. He had also been opposed for two and a half years for doing so. "The objection, however, was not so much to appeasement as to his insistence that collective security was dead".¹

There is much that is accurate in the above. Politicians of all parties hoped for reconciliation - a German return to Geneva, disarmament and treaty revision - and linked this, at least after the summer of 1937 with rearmament. But was the "difference" - Chamberlain's insistence that collective security was dead - merely a verbal one as Cowling would have us believe? From the views of Chamberlain's opponents expressed in these pages it would appear not, for once a League or collective security approach was accepted as central to the maintenance of peace all other methods were viewed in a different light. Thus a strongly-armed front with France, Russia and other countries anxious to maintain the peace would not only be the means

¹ The Impact of Hitler, p.11.

of checking current and preventing future aggression but would also be the essential pre-requisite for discussions on treaty revision with Germany. In this sense the difference was not so much verbal as fundamental. An 'opposition' Government would have seen the organisation of collective resistance to the dictators as a prelude to the pursuit of other methods held in common with Chamberlain and not, as the latter envisaged, to be practised immediately while the peace-loving nations were disorganised and therefore at a disadvantage.

A serious defect in this grand alliance or alternative policy was that if war had broken out in 1938 as a result of the pursuit of the dissidents' policy very little thought had gone into the question of how Great Britain and her proposed allies would have fared vis-a-vis Germany. Although it was recognised that Britain had a certain leeway to make up in the air and in other aspects of her defences there appears to have been no fundamental examination of other weaknesses in the proposed allied camp, and the general assumption that it was more than a match, collectively speaking, in a struggle with the Nazis appears to have been made. Perhaps the absence of such speculation reflected the underlying belief that things might not come to such a pass and that Hitler would eventually draw back from the brink, thus removing the threat of war. Despite this optimism, and the evident shortcomings, which became obvious after the outbreak of war, it would be unwise to dismiss or disregard the grand alliance policy, as there was no other course that British statesmen could have followed, as the sequel to Munich showed.

It is also important to remember that the alarm felt by Churchill and company at Hitler's growing power was not the cause of Eden and Cranborne, along with their adherents, moving into opposition. What precipitated their resignations was Chamberlain's haste to reach a

general settlement of differences with Mussolini, in which the Prime Minister was supported by Amery, Boothby and others of those acutely aware of the German danger. It was only later that year that the Edenites joined with the more traditional rebels in opposing the policy adopted by the Government over the Nazis' threatening attitude to Czechoslovakia.

Neither did the dissidents see eye to eye over the Spanish conflict, reflecting, despite their small numbers, the divisions of the Government supporters at large. Three trends can be discerned. The first was a pro-Franco section that included Austen Chamberlain, which was well-satisfied with a situation in which the policy of non-intervention was operating to the advantage of the Nationalists. A larger grouping was that of the true neutrals, who were anxious to operate non-intervention in the cause of peace and to discourage any violation of that policy by Germany, Italy or Russia. Churchill, apart from one or two aberrations, and a majority of those involved in his group and that of Eden can be so described. The third, somewhat minimal, sympathised with the elected Spanish Government. Atholl and Hills should be noted here, although one or two more came to be associated with them during the course of 1938. When all is said and done it seems hardly credible that members acutely aware of the threat from Germany should have ignored strategic factors of paramount importance and pursued a policy so divorced from Britain's national interests. One can understand support for appeasement going hand in hand with sympathy for Franco but for the anti-appeasers to have failed to note that Hitler lost no opportunity in gleaning every possible advantage from the conflict, which they more than any other group in the party should have seen, makes them almost as culpable on this issue as those holding the positions of power.

Similarly three trends were apparent over questions of home policy in the post-Munich period, when the dissidents again chose to go their separate ways rather than uniting. While Eden exerted his energies in pressing for the formation of a truly National Government, Churchill insisted on the need for concentrating all their efforts on the demand for a Ministry of Supply. Amery, meanwhile, was advocating a form of compulsory service, largely to the exclusion of all else. The differences were such that they failed to support each other when their chosen subjects were brought before the House. Excepting the support that Churchill and Amery gave to Eden's campaign for an all-in Government, Bracken and Macmillan were the only members to follow Churchill's lead in the Supply debate of November 1938. Similarly Amery's motion, the following April, in favour of compulsory training was not signed by either Churchill or Eden.

The dissidents, far from "breaking" with their party, which to be fair was contemplated by a few in desperate straits in the post-Munich period, remained integrally Conservative, with the exception of Atholl, and she if anything was driven out.¹ Nevertheless, the unanimous retention of the Conservative or Government label should not blind the observer from noticing the acute division over tactics that existed amongst them. The majority worked on Eden's belief that Government policy and personnel could only be altered by remaining loyal and utilising reasoned and careful persuasion in the wake of the gradually deteriorating international scene, which incidentally the ex-Foreign Secretary hoped would enable him to replace Chamberlain. This, of course, had been the assumption behind Eden's resignation, and not, as Thompson has suggested, a belief that the Government would collapse as a result of his going.²

¹ It is perhaps significant that the only woman dissenter became the sole martyr.

² The Anti-Appeasers, p.148.

Eden's followers, then, for the most part, looked at things from the standpoint of men who wished to influence events through the Conservative Party, and it was this essential moderation - hardly conducive to policy or personnel changes in the immediate future - that was to create friction within the rebel circles, a handful complaining that they were being too soft and gentlemanlike for the dangerous situation Britain was in. These, in addition to Churchill and his few associates, placed less faith on polite pressure and more emphasis upon belligerency, and were not only ready on occasions to mobilise support within the party but to go without in the hope of either stiffening Government policy or removing its leading personnel.

It follows that Eden and Churchill and their respective followers were never close during this period; nor were they until Churchill was firmly in the saddle. Perhaps if they, particularly Eden and his associates, had been more willing to co-operate and run risks they might have formed a more effective movement, possessing - not what Thompson assumes they should have had "a considerable influence" - but at best a hope of deflecting the Government from, or more likely modifying, its course.¹ However, as things were it is unlikely that the activities of either group had any real influence on Chamberlain's policy, although they of course created - in conjunction with the Opposition Parties - a climate of opinion that, given the events of 15 March, the Prime Minister could not ignore. Similarly the decision to establish a Supply Ministry and to introduce conscription, steps which the Government had consistently opposed but which its opponents had advocated, with increasing persuasiveness, were only taken as the international scene worsened, when it was essential for Britain to

¹ The Anti-Appeasers, p.168.

show her determination to resist further aggression. Save for setting out these alternatives, the dismissal of Swinton, unjust as that now may seem, and the persistent critical but inaccurate scrutiny of Britain's defences, which must have goaded and stimulated the Government in its efforts to rearm, it would not be unkind to say that overall the dissidents achieved little. But then one must remember the overwhelming odds against them: they were but a handful against the many, backed by the weight of the party machine.

Nevertheless in their failure they - Churchill and Eden - triumphed, their shortcomings eclipsed by the greater ones of the administration they were to replace. In this sense Thompson is too harsh. He writes "judged by the tests of clearsightedness and consistency which they applied to others these men were also failures, though no more so than other politicians in that tragic decade". However, lumping dissidents and loyalists together and branding them all as failures overlooks the fact that even in failure there is a question of degree. And in this sense the dissidents, whatever their failings were not quite in the same category as those in whose hands power rested.

It is also well to remember that the dissidents were, for the most part, scattered individuals and even though they occasionally belonged to groups, their composition was ever fluid. Of the staunch rearmers that Churchill gathered around him, and who co-operated together in the July Deputation, several drifted into appeasement. Similarly not all of those who abstained at the time of Eden's resignation failed to vote for Munich, an occasion which also saw new faces in the ranks of the dissidents. The debate of 7-8 May, 1940 further confuses the issue: some of the traditional opponents of Chamberlain sided with him while further Conservative recruits swelled

the numbers in the Opposition Lobby. Thus one has to be very cautious in describing them, avoiding if possible phrases like Rock's "small band of clear sighted men", as if membership was rigid throughout the period of dissent.¹

Rock also views the dissidents as 'rebels' without qualification, as if they addressed themselves singlemindedly to the German problem and Britain's armament deficiencies. Although this is implied in The Gathering Storm it is far from being the correct picture. There were many other questions of an imperial, foreign or domestic nature which ranked extremely high on their order of priorities, and on many of these matters they followed the Government loyally. Thus their stand was much nearer that of the majority of their party than has been recognised or that they admitted, and this should be borne in mind when considering such expressions, used freely in these pages for want of an alternative, as 'rebels', 'dissidents', 'dissentients', which unfortunately convey a greater separation from their party than in fact existed.

A further question remains: could they have overthrown the Government had they set their minds to it? Some historians are of that opinion, arguing that the "greatest failure (of the opposition elements) perhaps was that of the dissident Conservatives. They alone could have shaken the Government or overthrown it, as they did in May 1940."² Before the war, they preferred Chamberlain to Attlee, in practice if not in theory".³ Such an interpretation finds little support from the evidence of the crucial votes of these years, and

¹ Appeasement on Trial, p.15.

² They did not.

³ A J P Taylor, The Observer, June 20 1969. From a review of Naylor's Labour's International Policy.

in the membership of the dissident groupings. Thirty-five rebelled on the occasion of Eden's resignation, 26 at Munich, while the membership of Eden's group, the largest, never appears to have exceeded 30, even in the summer of 1939. Yet a revolt, if it was to have any chance of success, would have required a much more substantial number of rebels than 30, considering the Government's majority was in excess of 200, as the Munich divisions indicated. Of course it could be argued that if Eden and Churchill had broken with the Government, co-operated with the Opposition Parties, leading what Harvey termed "a Gladstonian crusade", the numbers of the dissident Conservatives might have grown, but that is not to say that they would have been sufficient to overthrow it.¹ In fact, it could well be that the path of revolt might well have lessened the numbers of the dissidents, several of whom were already in grave difficulties with their constituency parties and were unlikely to court further troubles. Any attempt, the, at open revolt to oust the Prime Minister, was, at best, so doubtful as to make the attempt almost foolhardy, and it was a path they never trod - and most of them had no intention of - as a group.

While the activities and views of the dissidents were carefully set out, research was also undertaken to discover whether some sort of economic or sociological factors differentiated the opposing factions of members. That is, was it the younger members, or those that attended public schools, or the university graduates, or the landowner and ex-officer classes, or some other particular group, who loyally supported the Baldwin-Chamberlain Governments, or who had sufficient temerity to differ with both leader and front bench?

¹ Harvey Papers, 56395, 8 October, 1938.

As we have seen attempts have been made to draw a dividing line between loyalists and dissidents. Rowse has argued that the anti-appeasers were representatives of the older landed aristocratic tradition, having an hereditary sense of the security of the state and the toughness of the eighteenth century aristocracy, while the appeasers in contrast were essentially middle class, not aristocrats.¹ But as the analysis of the Munich sides revealed, there were those supporting appeasement who were drawn from the great landed families, the Stanleys for instance, who should have had that hereditary sense of the security of the state. And amongst anti-appeasers there were plenty of the non-aristocratic figures too, businessmen like Boothby and Bracken, although the proportion of the latter was lower comparatively on the anti-appeasement side. It appears, therefore, that any attempt to link together the anti-appeasers or the appeasers simply on the grounds of class bond is doomed to failure.

But did the dissidents differ in some other respects from their colleagues? Was it age? The figures set out below are the results obtained from the analyses - similar to those used by D L Lammers - of the rearmament lobby associated with Churchill, of the Eden and Munich abstentions, and of those joining forces with the Opposition or failing to support the Government in the critical vote of May 1940. The first column indicates the party's average, as it stood at the General Election of 1935.

Party	Rearmers	Eden Abstentionists	Munich Abstentionists	Avowed rebels May 1940	Abstentionists May 1940
49 yrs 4 mths	53 yrs 2 mths	41 yrs 5 mths	40 yrs 10 mths	39 yrs 5 mths	42 yrs 0 mths

Clearly age appears to have been a factor. Whereas those pressing for a rapid and increasing rearmament were almost four years older on

¹ All Souls and Appeasement, pp.13, 114-5.

average than the party, in each of the other cases the reverse holds true, the differences extending from 7 to 10 years. It cannot have been entirely accidental that on the critical occasions referred to above the majority of the dissidents were drawn from the younger members of the party.

The comparable figures for education can be seen in Table I. The dissidents on each occasion save one, that of the university figure for the abstentionists in May 1940, bettered the party averages for public school and university attendance. Education, like age therefore, appears to have differentiated the dissidents from the loyalists supporting the Baldwin-Chamberlain Governments.

Great difficulties were encountered when trying to effect a breakdown of Conservative membership according to occupations and professions. It was noted that a certain amount of overlapping could not be avoided, as a number of MPs were, for example, both landowners and ex-officers, or both barristers and businessmen, whilst some others held company directorships who were not primarily businessmen. Bearing this in mind the figures were as seen in Table II. The results reveal a surprisingly high armed forces and official services slant to the dissidents, and although the majority derived from the forces, a significant minority were drawn from the Foreign Office. Apart from this, the most significant fact in the analysis of occupations concerns the small proportion of Conservative members who came from the ranks of business at a time when that element was rising as never before. It is possible that this small number of businessmen amongst the anti-appeasers gave Rowse his erroneous impression that the appeasers were essentially middle class, but of course one doesn't have to be a businessman to fall into the middle class bracket, as many of the anti-appeasers did by virtue of their professional background.

T A B L E I

	Party	Rearmers	Eden Abstentionists	Munich Abstentionists	Avowed rebels May 1940	Abstentionists May 1940
Public School	56.2%	75.0%	86.7%	88.0%	83.9%	67.9%
University	60.9%	75.0%	70.0%	72.0%	71.0%	55.6%

T A B L E I I

	Party	Rearmers	Eden Abstentionists	Munich Abstentionists	Avowed rebels May 1940	Abstentionists May 1940
Land	9.7%	12.5%	10.0%	7.7%	3.2%	7.4%
Professions	32.3%	31.3%	30.0%	30.7%	25.8%	25.9%
Armed Forces, Official Services	19.4%	43.8%	46.7%	53.8%	48.4%	37.0%
Business	40.9%	12.5%	6.7%	7.7%	16.1%	23.5%

This discrepancy between party and dissident figures for those involved in business raises the question as to whether such interests influenced the Government's course in 1938. Was it that Chamberlain's Cabinet thought in terms of business and economic advantage, more so than the men of 1914? Whatever the truth of the matter, at least the occupation figures do not lend support to such a view. An analysis of the 1938 Cabinet revealed how small the number of those grouped under business was; three, the same figure as that of the 1914 Cabinet. Yet what did emerge from the analysis was the fact that the 1938 Cabinet was more aristocratic than that of 1914, and this cannot but be discomfiting to the views of Rowse. As with his class argument, that of occupation - for the appeasers - is not a wholly satisfactory theory, and neither is it convincing for the dissidents, although here a slightly stronger case can be made.

Turning to the electoral results two patterns appear, as the figures in Table III indicate. 62.6% of those associated with Churchill on the armaments issue were either unopposed or sustained with very comfortable majorities at the General Election. This was in direct contrast to the 42.7% of the parliamentary party, but similar to the research undertaken by J M McEwen into three other critical periods of the party's history. The periods - the Nigeria Debate of 1916, the Carlton Club Revolt of October 1922, and the dispute over India's constitutional future in the 1930s - were examined by McEwen in an effort to discover what differentiated opposing groups of members. Neither age, education and occupation particularly distinguished the rebel Conservative Members, in 1916, or 1922, or 1935, from the rest of the party, but one factor was found to be common to the dissentients on all three occasions: most of them were men with safe seats, with majorities exceeding 10,000, representing county constituencies in South England. This, too, has

T A B L E I I I

	Party	Rearmers	Eden Abstentionists	Munich Abstentionists	Avowed rebels May 1940	Abstentionists May 1940
Unopposed	5.7%	6.3%	3.2%	---	6.1%	7.4%
Majorities exceeding 10,000 votes	37.0%	56.3%	32.3%	30.8%	24.2%	27.2%
Others	57.4%	37.5%	64.5%	69.2%	69.7%	65.4%

been found true of the Conservative rearmament lobby in the 1930s. Perhaps such a discovery is hardly surprising, but it should not be forgotten that Coalition Ministries were in power each time, and that many of the Conservatives who upheld their leaders were members with marginal seats, whose hopes of re-election depended heavily upon a working agreement with other parties and the continuance in office of the Government of the day.¹

If we examine the later figures in Table III, those for the abstentionists of February and October 1938, and May 1940, and the rebels openly siding with the Opposition on the latter occasion, a different pattern emerges. Unlike previous rebellions a majority of the members involved represented constituencies which were not safe and were liable, in the event of an election, and a small shift of opinion, to change hands. The results, in fact, indicate that on the four occasions alluded to, the percentage with less secure seats rises by between 7 and 12% above that of the party and between 20% and 25% that of the rearmer. This is somewhat surprising as one would expect members with the more marginal seats to be intensely loyal, their hopes of remaining in Parliament depending, as was noted above, on the continuance in office of the Government of the day.

But why should a different pattern have emerged in the closing years of the 1930s? Certainly the circumstances were highly unusual in that the dissidents acted as they did at a time of national peril. It might be claimed that in what they felt to be a grave emergency they were merely putting country before personal political interest and loyalties. Doubtless it could also be argued that Conservatives sitting for the more marginal areas, in some cases industrial

¹ For further details see McEwen's Ph.D thesis Conservative and Unionist Members of Parliament, 1914-39, p.439.

constituencies, were more likely to appeal to the 'liberal' vote if they favoured a League policy, or one of standing up to the dictators, thus making all the difference between re-election and defeat. Whatever the reason, it is significant that in the respect of electoral majorities, those disagreeing with the Government's course in international affairs showed a marked divergence from previous occasions of dissent.

It does not appear that the dissidents represented a particular viewpoint or grouping within the party, such as the extreme Right, as Quintin Hogg suggested in the case of the rearmament critics. Neville Thompson's claim that the diehards supported the administration's foreign policy is similarly impossible to substantiate, as is J R Jones' view that appeasement was the policy of orthodox Tories. Eden, for instance, described his followers as a "fair cross-section of the party" and that phrase might be equally applied to the dissidents as a whole. Some of the rebels, being party to the Next Five Years Group, the Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction, and the Conservative Special Areas Committee, were clearly interventionist in economic affairs. Others were for laissez-faire, believing that the well-being of the economy depended on impersonal forces which were uncontrollable. Some were diehards over India, Abyssinia or Spain, while others were more liberal. A few more faced both ways, social reformers in some respects but true blue in others.

Out of this condensed and somewhat unsatisfactory survey, what generalisations as to the background of Tory dissidents may be drawn? In the first place it would appear that, excepting the rearmament lobby, the majority of the rebels were drawn from the younger members of the party. In addition, the numbers attending public school and university indicated that they were better educated than their Conservative counter-parts, while in occupation they had a definite armed forces

and official services slant, with few representatives of the business community. Similarly, although there were a few that could be linked with the older aristocratic tradition, there was no pronounced class character amongst the dissidents. In ideology they were drawn from all sections of the party, neither limited to Left or Right. Finally, again with the notable exception of the rearmlers, the dissidents sprang from constituencies where their majorities were on the wrong side of 10,000, seats which could change hands in the event of a general election.

Nevertheless, having drawn these generalisations, the view that the basic dividing line between dissident and loyalist supporters of Chamberlain and Baldwin, although doubtless influenced by age, education and electoral factors, was really one of experience - something implicit in the occupation figures - judgement and temperament appears more substantial. Indicative of this is Nicolson's comment on the Munich abstention: "We therefore sit in our seats which must enrage the Government, since it is not our numbers that matter but our reputation. Among those who abstained were Eden, Duff Cooper, Winston, Amery . . . That looks none too well in any list. The House knows that most of the above people know far more about the real issue than they do".¹

As has been noted above, generally speaking, the members returned in 1935 - or any House for that matter - did not know much about foreign affairs, nor were they greatly concerned with them. By contrast many of those members who dissented at the Government's course were found to have lived or worked abroad, to have travelled or in some way to have been placed in close relations with particular

¹ Diaries and Letters, 1930-39, pp.375-6.

foreign interests. Take for instance the 9 representatives of the diplomatic service sitting on the Conservative benches following the election of 1935. Of these, 8 - Briscoe, Castlereagh, Crichton-Stuart, Duff Cooper, Emrys-Evans, McEwen, Patrick and Sandys, were to be associated with the dissidents on one occasion or another.¹ Another ex-diplomat, Nicolson, the National Labourite, could be added to their number. A further 3 had connections with the Foreign Office. Eden and Cranborne, of course, who resigned over Chamberlain's approach to Italy in February, 1938, but also Austen Chamberlain, who, had he lived, might well have opposed Munich.

Much the same can be said of those who pressed for a more comprehensive rearmament programme: they were often ex-servicemen or had in the past some connection with a service department. Churchill, Amery and Chamberlain were ex-First Lords of the Admiralty, to which Horne had once been attached as a junior minister, while Guest had been Secretary of State for Air, a post Churchill had once held, together with the War Office. Of the others, Keyes was an admiral of the fleet, Moore-Brabazon had held high office in the Royal Flying Corp, and Croft was a Brigadier General in the Territorial Army. Their expert knowledge gained as a result of the various activities equipped them to be masters of their chosen field of defence.

It certainly appears from the history of these years that apart from these members - and to do justice, not all of those with specialist knowledge were dissidents - and a small number of others without the same experience but with the courage to follow their lead, the Government satisfied its supporters. There were exceptions - as over

¹ Crichton-Stuart was probably amongst the abstentionists in May, 1940, while McEwen associated himself with Focus and with Amery's motion in favour of compulsory service. The others either abstained in February or October 1938 etc.

the Hoare-Laval Deal, the slow abandonment of appeasement, the timing of the declaration of war, and more generally over aspects of rearmament - but in the main support held firm, particularly in the disastrous year of 1938. Let us return to the example of the Munich debate referred to above. The administration received an overwhelming vote of confidence, even though the party's specialists, or 'natural leaders' in foreign affairs, several of whom, as we have seen, had long held convictions as to the aggressive intentions of Nazi Germany, refused to endorse what they felt was the Government's dangerously futile course.

One further point needs clarification, that of the political future of those that dissented from the Government's foreign and defence policies. Eleven of those involved in the July Deputation or Churchill's rearmament associates later rose to Ministerial rank, while 13 of those that abstained at the time of Eden's resignation, 17 of the 26 abstaining at Munich, and 20 of those voting against the Government in May 1940 can be similarly categorized. Of these a sizeable proportion rose to the highest offices of state including three cases which speak for themselves: Churchill, Eden and Macmillan. But why did so many obtain preferment? The answer surely lies in the fact that the dissidents, or more correctly Churchill, captured the leadership of the Conservative Party in conjunction with the premiership, positions from which he could make or break the careers of his supporters. Although the number of personnel required to form an administration and the need to tread warily compelled him to retain some of his opponents, Churchill, contrary to what Taylor has argued, appears to have favoured his friends, not forgetting those that had loosely sided with him in the lonely days of the thirties.

Churchill's ultimate success has convinced Thompson that his 'aim' throughout had been 'to capture the party in good working order'

rather than to break it and thereby risk his chances of becoming Prime Minister.¹ This is more nearly true of Eden than Churchill, for it is doubtful if the latter, in the period 1935-40, ever consciously worked to capture the party leadership, at least until May 9-10 1940, and that was only after the intervention of friends. Indeed it seems that there were marked variations in the attitude he adopted, with the only consistent aim throughout being not the premiership, but to influence events. This, at times, such as the July Deputation, he attempted to do through the Conservative Party and, to exert continuous influence, by gaining admittance to the Government. Two obvious occasions can be cited, on both of which he proceeded warily and became far less critical: in March 1936, when his future was in the balance over the newly-created post of Minister of Co-ordination of Defence; the replacement of Baldwin by Chamberlain, when for nine months he worked on the assumption that his chance of returning to office depended on his adopting a less critical view of the problems with which ministers were faced. Gaining admittance to the Government, however, even at such a lowly post as Solicitor General, which he had in mind in March 1936, is not the same as striving for the premiership. What with his reputation and his lack of a following within the party, Churchill must have realised that the premiership, however much he desired it, was out of the question, and it was, save for the fortuitous circumstances of May 1940, which no-one, not even he, could have foreseen. It is necessary to add that at other times, in order to influence events and possibly gain office, he was willing to go outside the party to mobilise support - Focus, In Defence of Freedom and Peace, the New Commonwealth Society are testimony to that. The only known occasion when, to do the above, he was prepared to risk breaking the party, was at the height of the Czech crisis and

¹ The Anti-Appeasers, p.14.

significantly he was almost alone.

Another factor that must be borne in mind when considering why Churchill left the party in 'good working order' was that he was a member of the Conservative Party, that he had been elected as such, and that he had to seek re-election as such. Bearing in mind Bower's words that 'the lobbies of Parliament are paved with the political tombstones of those who have in the past underestimated the strength of party machines', Churchill was not anxious to take the step, probably irrevocable after the crusade over India, of fighting the leadership, probably to face an uncertain and short, political future. Thus, save for the above example and milder occasions of defiance, as over the Ministry of Supply in November 1938, Churchill, in the interests of political survival, made the necessary allowance for the fact that he was a member of the Conservative Party. Survival, then, rather than an ulterior motive, undoubtedly influenced his attitude to Government and party.

The activities of an Opposition, as we have seen, normally constitute a check on the Government. What the Opposition says may be so persuasive that the political pendulum may swing, threatening a change of administration at a forthcoming election. The Government, in its interest to survive, is thereby compelled to maintain a close contact between policy and public opinion, even though this may entail the modification or even abandonment, of some of its most cherished plans. Judged by this standard, the Labour Party in the late 30s proved a singular disappointment. Labour was convinced that the policies of the National Government were utterly wrong. Their spokesmen said so again and again, with ever increasing insistence. And yet the Government was able to conduct policy largely as it wished - at least until March, 1939 - without fear of endangering its political position.¹ A L Rowse summed the situation up:

"Here we are (1938) after six years of National Government, after six years of disastrous misconduct of our foreign policy, with the evidences of ruin all about us, in the Far East; in the Middle East, in the Western Mediterranean, on the home frontier; here we have all these evidences of the ruin of our policy since 1931 - and the hold of the National Government is not even in question; nor is there any immediate prospects of its being shaken."¹

Small wonder that no historian has found it necessary to dwell at any length on Labour's impact on those years, or to attribute to the party any significant shift in Government policy.

Why then was the party not able to show up and capitalize on the failures and mistakes of the Government's policies? Ralph Miliband attributed the party's ineffectiveness, not only over Spain but over the whole field of foreign affairs, to the fact that the Opposition "quite deliberately narrowed its field of political action, and was content for the most part to go through the motions of parliamentary battle. To have done more would have been to upset conventions (of parliamentary politics) to which the Labour leaders were as deeply wedded as their opponents. It would have meant a reversal of the habits of decades. It would not have been democratic".²

What Labour's leaders could have done, according to Miliband, was firstly to have embarked on an unremitting campaign of meetings,

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With the exception of the Hoare-Laval Pact.

¹ 'The Present and Immediate Future of the Labour Party', Political Quarterly, 1938. Duff Cooper, too, noted that "There is no more remarkable phenomenon in post-war British politics than the failure of the Labour Party . . . Sound Parliamentary institutions demand a powerful opposition and a possible alternative Government. For this reason the incompetence of the Labour Party in recent years has been a source of weakness to Great Britain." The Second World War, p.142.

demonstrations, marches, rallies and petitions, all designed to mobilize a body of public opinion sufficiently strong to force the Government on to different courses, or to force changes in its leadership, or to sweep it out of office. Secondly, they could have used, if not abused, their parliamentary opportunities to harass the Government, to obstruct its business, to refuse to participate in the "sedate parliamentary minuet which was the Government's best guarantee against effective challenge". And they could also have sought to mobilize their industrial strength and used that strength as a means of pressure upon the Government.¹

This is altogether too facile a view of the situation, ignoring the political facts of life. The vast majority of Labour Members would never have sanctioned obstructionist tactics in the House of Commons; and there were sound electoral reasons for not so doing. Skilful Government propaganda associating obstruction and persistent opposition with political extremism could have capitalised on already existing fears of Labour's ultimate objectives, and this would have paid handsome dividends in the event of an election. In consequence, the party could simply not afford to be too intransigent, and by acting responsibly it was hoped that Labour might be seen by the timid floating vote to be essentially a respectable organisation. "It has", wrote Sir Ivor Jennings, "to go regularly to chapel in its Sunday suit and to frown on such of its members as would like to go hiking. Since it may be accused of revolutionary tendencies, it must show itself more strictly constitutional than any".² Obstruction, then, would scarcely have borne fruit

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Parliamentary Socialism, p.235. This corresponds to the view expressed by Labour's Left, cf Bevan's speech, House of Commons Debates, 24 August, 1939, Cols.203-4.

¹ Ibid, pp.233-34.

² Parliament, p.181.

but rather would have boomeranged against the party at the hustings, particularly since Labour had not lived down the public's image of the 1931 events and the charge "Bolshevism run mad".¹ Interestingly enough Labour, at the time of Munich, was anxious not to push their censure of the settlement too far in case Chamberlain went to the country on the strength of it.

As to an unrelenting campaign of meetings, demonstrations and the like, Labour was particularly active in their field - probably more active than ever before or since. Indeed there were some in the party who, intent on the domestic scene, were of the opinion that Labour was too active. A trade union member actually wrote to the Daily Herald urging Labour's leaders to put themselves in touch with union opinion:

"They would learn that we in the workshop are sick and tired of the maudlin sentimentality and rhetoric of our leaders, and that we should like to hear a little less about Germans, Italians, Abyssinians, Spaniards, Russians, and others, and would like to hear a lot more about what must be done for the English, Scottish, Irish, Welsh, Indians and others in the Empire whom it can assist."²

Neither was industrial action on the cards. 1926 was uncomfortably close and the Trades Disputes Act of the following year had outlawed strikes "designed or calculated to coerce the Government". Furthermore leading trade unionists Citrine, Bevin and Hicks, to name but a few, would not have brooked anything that smacked of extra-parliamentary opposition. In retrospect Citrine explained the union leadership's attitude:

¹ Philip Snowden's description of Labour's programme.

² Daily Herald, 11 November, 1937.

"We were meeting at a time when contempt had been lavishly sprayed over Parliamentary institutions. It was said that democracy was played out and that government by consent, as distinct from dictatorship, was dead. I tried to show that it was not for the trade union movement, which had repeatedly attested its belief in democracy, to strike a blow at its institutions. We ought not to give the Fascists encouragement by ourselves trying to change by force the views of a democratically elected Parliament."¹

No, the root cause of Labour's ineffectiveness in the late '30s, as at other times, was not that the party was wedded to the conventions of parliamentary politics, which it should be admitted the majority of its members were. Rather that Labour was crippled by its own confusions, by which is meant a lack of cohesion within its own ranks. It is interesting to note that Shinwell, after living through the bitter divisions of the '50s, described those of the '30s as among the "worst" he had known. He continued:

"Members were at sixes and sevens . . . My firm opinion is that the facts of life eventually imposed by the reality of war and the need to win it had the result of unifying the party; without that pressure for the nation's survival there would have been the possibility of a complete break-up of the Labour Party in 1939-40."²

Perhaps Shinwell exaggerated the danger of disintegration but his comments illustrate the fact that Labour is in essence an awkward anti-Tory coalition, a system of uneasy alliances, composed of working

¹ Men and Work, p.360.

² I've Lived Through It All, p.153.

class organisations with instrumental ambitions, middle class reformers with social consciences, and Socialists of various kinds trying to impose their own ideological cohesion on the movement. In a party so ideologically and temperamentally various, the thirties, with their challenge and the need to respond, resulted in Labour moving in several directions at once. Rather than overcoming the mutual suspicions and distrust felt by the disparate elements encompassing Labour, the international situation created further dissension and, on occasions, sectional struggles. It is no exaggeration to say that on every issue of fundamental urgency that confronted Britain between the General Election and the downfall of Chamberlain, the party faced several ways, groups and individuals advocating the very reverse of the official Labour policy. The end result was that not only was party energy dissipated but that Labour failed to arrest the nation's attention.

1935 had witnessed the split, at Brighton, between the pacifists and those prepared to go beyond economic sanctions, and the resignation of Lansbury on the very eve of the election. Undeterred by their defeat at the Conference the pacifists were to remain a constant thorn in the side of the movement, hampering, for instance, the development of a realistic arms policy, for it was in part the desire not to alienate too wholly the pacifist feelings in its own ranks that led Labour into the clumsy technique of voting against rearmament. In the same way they were to detract from the party's strong stand in foreign affairs at several critical stages in the thirties. At Munich, with the bulk of the party violently against Chamberlain, one Labour Member effectively voiced the sentiments of the pacifist minority by uttering 'Thank God for the Prime Minister'. Neither did they allow the party to enter united into war, 9 pacifists signing a manifesto calling for peace negotiations with Hitler, who they felt still held out the prospects of peace. Nevertheless it would be

unwise not to recognise that theirs was a declining influence within the movement; by 1935 the pacifists were but a small, although vocal minority within the parliamentary party. Only 13 of those returned at the General Election could be distinguished as such, and they, it was discovered, were unrepresentative of the party, being older, better educated, and having a professional-commercial bias in occupation.

No less disaffected by the decisions taken at Brighton - which were far from amounting to an independent socialist foreign policy - was the party's doctrinaire Left. The differences there heralded the approach of a weary time of bitterness and distrust between the bulk of Labour and the Left Wing, dissipating the energies of Labour in sectional struggle. During the Spanish conflict, the Left turned no less against the leadership as against the National Government, and it too, was in part responsible for the party temporising over rearmament. Meanwhile in January 1937, with subjects of international and national importance urgently clamouring for attention, the Left, in conjunction with the Communist and Independent Labour Parties, launched the distracting Unity Campaign. Several months of turmoil followed, full of recriminations before the united front collapsed amidst threats of expulsion. 1938 and 1939 witnessed further campaigns and widely publicised expulsions, including that of Cripps, generating considerable bitterness, and further damaging the credibility of Labour as His Majesty's Alternative Government. How could it be otherwise when the fronts were based on the premise that Labour could not defeat Chamberlain singlehanded but must rely on the co-operation of other groups? Moreover, such a background of dissension and party-in-fighting left a feeling of divided loyalties and a confusion of council in the public mind. It could not but give an

impression of limpness to Labour's opposition to the Government that would surely have had its effect in the event of a general election.

The effectiveness of a political party is however determined not only by the cohesion within its own ranks but by the quality of its personnel and leadership. "We hear it frequently stated", Duff Cooper noted in 1939, "that all the clever young men at the Universities are socialists. But what happens to these clever young men when they go down. They never find their way into the Commons".¹ This was no partisanship. Instead of making use of its young graduates, Labour simply had the wrong men in Parliament. Three-quarters of the Party were over 50 and a third over 60, which produced the highest average age of the major parties, 54 years 7 months. In addition, the average Labour Member had a narrow education, his preserve being the elementary school, in contrast to the Conservative's Oxbridge and the major public schools. A majority of the parliamentary party, or 56.5%, had not, in fact, progressed beyond the elementary stage, while only 9.1% and 18.2% had attended public school and university, figures which compared very unfavourably with their political counterparts. Similarly, the formative years of the Labour politicians were spent within the confines of shop, office, mine or factory, very few - 28.6% - originating from the higher stratas of society. The existence of many ill-educated as well as elderly back-benchers, including a number with a defective lack of vigour who had been retired by their trade unions to the Commons, lacking in experience beyond their immediate trade, must have weakened the party's debating strength in the House and lessened its impact on the country.

In fairness it must be said that not all of Labour's deficiencies were of its own making. Labour politicians were comparatively poor and consequently unable to afford secretarial and research services

¹ The Second World War, p.142.

available to the Conservatives and, on a more mundane note, taxi fares to ferry them to the cheaper remote London suburbs, where they lived, in the event of a late night sitting. With everything conspiring to make Labour a far from energetic and uncompromising Opposition it is not surprising that the more able and enthusiastic members became disillusioned. This is well illustrated by the remarks of Fletcher, the Labour Member of Nuneaton, to A J Sylvester, Lloyd George's secretary. Sylvester recorded his impressions:

"I found him very pessimistic about the future of the Labour Party. He said that if Attlee had an opportunity tomorrow of forming a Government he (Fletcher) did not know where the perspective Prime Minister could look to find a sufficient number of effective members of such a Government. There were no good backbenchers and Attlee - well what a Prime Minister he would make."¹

Fletcher's comment raised another Labour weakness. In the fast moving world of the 1930s the party had desperately needed guidance to face up to unpleasant realities. Unfortunately Clement Attlee was a man constitutionally incapable of providing a strong lead, and lacked the dynamism to overshadow either Baldwin or Chamberlain. He functioned rather as a chairman or spokesman, and all too often simply personified the ambivalent attitudes that were held within Labour's ranks. Inevitably there was much criticism from his colleagues and there were attempts to remove him, none of which met with success, partly through his ability to accommodate the hostile factions within the party.

A further factor to be considered is that the average Labour Member's interest in foreign affairs was slight, a reflection of the community of purpose on which the party rested. The party had come

¹ An undated minute from Sylvester to Lloyd George, the Lloyd George Papers.

into being in response to a desire for a greater measure of social security and justice for the working man, necessitating an alteration in the domestic environment rather than the international situation. Although the Great War and its aftermath, accompanied with the 'Foreign Legion' of exiles coming over from the Liberals,"intensified the movement's interest in foreign affairs'; it remained a domestically orientated party well into the 1930s.¹ In practice this meant that a large number of Labourites were expertly equipped to deal with particular subjects such as unemployment assistance, the distressed areas, health and so on. By contrast there were comparatively few, usually the middle class members the analyses revealed, whom the party could rely on to debate international policy, of such overwhelming importance in these years. It was only the disconcerting crises of the later '30s, among which the Spanish Civil War has been singled out, that widened the horizons of many 'domestic' Labour MPs and brought home to them the connection between events abroad and the well-being of Britain.

That Labour fell short of the responsibility of an Opposition to look dangerous, to give the impression that the Government's hold on life was slender and that the two front benches might at any time change places, seems inescapable. Failure to make an impact resulted in the inability to achieve any significant shift in Government plans, and the impairment of the party's own appeal for a firmer foreign policy. Indirectly, therefore, Labour was in part responsible for the disastrous conduct of international affairs during these years. But it is easy to slip into an exaggerated awareness of Labour's responsibility, and therefore the judgement of Francis Williams, then editor of the Daily Herald, is necessary to help restore the balance:

¹ G Young, The Reform of Diplomacy, p.3, quoted in W P Maddox, Foreign Relations in British Labour Politics, p.74.

"With only 154 members in the House of Commons Labour was in any event in no position to divert a policy supported throughout by an inert mass of Conservative back-benchers, who remained totally unmoved even by the sustained criticism of those in their own party whose background and experience made them most worthy of trust in such matters. Whether for praise or blame the main responsibility for British policy must rest with those in whose hands power rested."¹

But was the record of the Labour Opposition one of the complete futility? It is easy to assent, for although Labour took care to advance recommendations in matters of international relations and defence, they were rarely to be implemented. The party, however, should not be judged merely on its ability to influence the conduct of the Baldwin and Chamberlain Governments. Although it remains true that the prime duty of an opposition is to convince the electorate to turn the Government out, it is also, in the words of Leslie Haden-Guest, "to criticise everything, which we of the present Opposition have been doing, and to propose constructive alternatives, which are certainly constantly made from the Labour benches".² Labour then, must also be judged with regard to its criticisms of Government action or inaction and to the content of its own counsel. In short, was what it offered a viable alternative to the policies undertaken by the National Government, which it so strongly condemned?

The corner stone of Labour's defence and foreign policies in the later thirties was the League of Nations; the party repeatedly called for the full enforcement of the principles of the League Covenant and of the building up of a system of "pooled security" as

¹ A Pattern of Rulers, p.183.

² House of Commons Debates, 4 April, 1938, Col.95.

the basis of world peace. In practice this meant that if any member of the League was attacked by another member of the League, or an aggressor outside, all the others would, within their power and according to their ability, make a collective effort to safeguard the aggrieved member of the League through the imposition of economic, and if necessary, military sanctions. Here then was the pure doctrine of the Covenant, a universal conception of the League which was adopted by the party at its Brighton Conference in 1935.

Although Labour's platform was then grounded in a reasonable belief that Britain could not achieve security either by splendid isolation or by a manipulation of the balance of power, it ignored the fact that few nations would make substantial sacrifices and run the risk of war unless their own vital interests were at stake. Such was the fundamental lesson to be derived from the events surrounding the Abyssinian crisis, when collective security was half-heartedly tried against Mussolini. Notwithstanding the almost fatal blow that had been dealt the League in the process, many of Labour's League enthusiasts still clung to the League ideal, a form of collective security, if not insecurity after the Abyssinian debacle, that had ceased to be practical.

In this context Rock has described Labour's policy of collective security of 1938-39 as "vague", noting that many people outside the party "seriously questioned its understanding of what the term really meant and doubted its willingness to accept the realities that a bona fide policy of collective security might entail".¹ Although the party's policy was unreal in the period 1936-7 rather than vague, such a statement is not a reasonable assessment of Labour's attitude during 1938-39, and consequently does less than justice to the party.

¹ Appeasement on Trial, pp.XI, 15.

Taking the Munich crisis as an example, the party called upon the Government to leave "no doubt in the mind of the German Government that they will unite with the French and Soviet Governments to resist any attack on Czechoslovakia", thereby adopting a stand that was in line with Churchill, whom Rock does not describe as vague.¹ Clearly a transition had occurred, but what had caused Labour to move from an unreal conception of collective security at the time of Abyssinian's collapse to a much more definite and limited form during the Czech crisis of 1938?

Not all of Labour's supporters of collective security, it was noted, adopted an unquestioning attitude to the League's future, such as that described above. Some there were, Dalton chief among them, who had supported the League approach as a practical means of maintaining peace, and, watching it in action, realised that, whatever the reason or blame, nations would not now back economic and certainly not military sanctions unless their own interests were clearly involved. With general agreement on defence against aggression increasingly remote, the only alternative, they felt, was to link together those European countries whose interests coincided in a practical, albeit limited form of collective security. In effect, this required Britain, in association with France and Russia, and any other country ready to share in the aspirations and dangers, to form themselves into what Churchill later termed a 'grand alliance', which alone might prevent the outbreak of war and establish a secure peace.

Although only a small minority in the counsels of the Labour Party, the views of Dalton and other like-minded members were to become

¹ Statement entitled Labour and the International Situation: On the Brink.

increasingly dominant as successive crises indicated the impracticability of the Labour ideal of collective security to prevent aggression. Parliamentary colleagues, who had not moved with such certainty, came to accept their opinion that against aggressive militarism there was only one shield - collective security of a limited and practical nature. And that - in a nutshell, co-operation between Britain, Russia and France in a treaty for mutual defence against aggression - was to be the basis of Labour's foreign policy in the two years prior to the outbreak of war.

Apart from the unreality of Labour's League policy in the period 1936-37, what was equally damaging to its appeal for a firm line in international affairs was the party's continued opposition to rearmament, perhaps the greatest blot on its record in the inter-war years. Labour somehow managed, at one and the same time, to support an all-embracing forward policy of collective security and yet to avoid really facing the implications of resistance to aggression, particularly the extent of the burden that would fall on Great Britain with her worldwide commitments. Although it might have been possible at an earlier stage to have a strong League policy without increased war expenditure, by the middle thirties only a strongly armed system of collective security stood any chance of holding the dictators in check. The fact that Labour was prepared to advocate resistance to aggression while opposing rearmament shows clearly that the problem of defence was all too seldom related to its foreign policy of collective security. R H S Crossman frankly admitted the divorce between the two policies, which reopened in 1939 over the Government's decision to adopt conscription:

"You cannot put over a realistic foreign policy of mutual democratic defence, when your attitude to defence

problems is based on anti-militaristic sentiment and a suspicion of the fighting services. To put it briefly, the only logical consequence of Labour's attitude to compulsion is appeasement; the only logical consequence of its foreign policy is the demand for the mobilisation of the nation's man-power, finance and industry for peace or war."¹

In opposing increased war expenditure the party gave a great opportunity not only for misunderstanding by the public but misrepresentation by political opponents. "You it was", accused Quintin Hogg, "who . . . sought to make freedom's survival impossible. You it was who weakened the country when she was in most real need of unity, who sowed suspicion where there should have been confidence and who opposed every useful measure of rearmament the Government put forward".² In retrospect Labour's attitude has been a godsend to the Tories as it has enabled them to attempt to cover up their own deficiencies by dwelling on those of the Opposition. It is easier to defend their own policy of rearmament, including its inadequacies, on the ground that the Opposition not only opposed that but that Labour's effect on public opinion did not allow them to do anything else. Consequently it is well to remember the change of policy in 1937 following which Churchill concluded that "there is really no difference between the political parties upon British rearmament", and this puts into perspective accusations like the above.³

Labour apologists, both then and since, while agreeing that the party steadily opposed rearmament have maintained that this was not on the ground that the level of armaments was excessive, or even that

¹ 'Labour and Compulsory Military Service', Political Quarterly, 1939.

² The Left Were Not Right, p.76.

³ Article entitled 'The Ebbing Tide of Socialism', 9 July, 1937. Step By Step, p.148.

the party was opposed on principle to an increase.¹ Rather, its opposition was based on the conviction that it was impossible to tell what the scale of armaments should be in the absence of a sound foreign policy, rooted in the League of Nations. Such an apologia glosses over the fact that there were several currents of opinion within the party on rearmament, each with its own peculiar reason for opposing, if not raising definite resistance to the defence estimates. From this viewpoint Labour's formula of opposing rearmament as 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 Parliamentary Labour 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 disarmament, who doubted that more arms were necessary to the British contribution to collective security.

The latter group, the League enthusiasts, were the largest and most important of the three. In theory, of course, it was possible for them to show the plain superiority of League forces against any likely combination of aggressors by simply reckoning up the forces of good and evil and deciding that those of the former were sufficiently superior. But an effective collective peace system was never in existence, and even if one had been it was still impossible to calculate the British contribution to the task of resisting aggression on the basis of an assumption that all other League members would supply theirs. That is not to imply that it was impractical to work

¹ Cf Attlee's The Labour Party in Perspective, p.108; Mander, We Were Not All Wrong, p.56.

for some form of collective security but that Labour had to approve of some measure of rearmament to be carried through as a purely British act. Only with a strongly-arming Britain, both encouraging its friends to do likewise, and willing to throw its increasing weight into the balance, would the policy of pooled security have stood any chance of success.

The ambiguity of Labour policy persisted until the summer of 1937, though continuously from 1935 those who saw the sheer necessity of getting the arms with which to fight the dictators, if necessity arose, were gaining ground against those who would on no account back the rearmament policy of the National Government. By July 1937, partly through the pressure of events abroad, particularly the Spanish Civil War, and partly through the efforts of such leaders as Dalton, Citrine and Bevin, who were all acutely aware of the Nazi menace, the impossibility of Labour's position became apparent to a majority of the parliamentary party. Ignoring an executive recommendation to continue as before the party abandoned direct opposition to the estimates of the service departments - and hence to rearmament - when it decided by a vote of 45 to 39 to abstain in such votes in future. Of those in favour of Dalton's move a majority - 62.2% - were drawn from the trade union connection, a marked contrast with the corresponding figures for the pacifist, Left and League enthusiast groupings, where there existed a non-manual, middle class preponderance.

In view of these hesitations over rearmament it is easy to write Labour off as uninterested in defence questions, and yet this would be far from the truth. Following the General Election, which returned to the Commons a number of badly-needed recruits - the personnel for Attlee's Defence Committee - with some knowledge of, and interest in, defence matters, the party was increasingly concerned with the condition and effectiveness of Britain's armed forces. In fact the endeavours

to persuade the Government to establish Ministries of Defence and Supply are worthy of note, but more important was Labour's concentration - particularly in 1938 - on the shortcomings in air defence. Belated it may have been, but even belated attention to Britain's air needs may have made quite a difference in 1940, in terms of the increase and efficiency of the R.A.F.

With the abandonment of its opposition to rearmament, Labour, apart from the later aberration over conscription, threw off its ambiguities and was ready, the following year, to take a firm stand, facing the threat of immediate war. There would have been no Munich for the overwhelming majority of Labour members. Excepting the pacifists and one or two others, the party, including the Left, whose ire against fascism since the early stages of the Spanish war had exceeded that of any other wing of the movement, stood firm, viewing the Nazi demands on Czechoslovakia as "incompatible with the integrity and independence of that country". Rather than "acquiesce in the destruction of the rule of law by savage aggression", Labour called upon the Government to make it clear to the German leaders that they would unite with the French and Russian Governments to resist any attack on Czechoslovakia.¹ Thus the British Labour Movement came out quite unequivocally in favour of resistance to the Nazis, facing the prospect of war, an attitude that Churchill spoke of as doing honour to the British nation.² John F Naylor's assessment then, that Labour, given power, would have gone to war in defence of Czechoslovak integrity" is - assuming that parties pursue in power the policy, or much of it, they advocate in opposition - correct, although he perhaps underestimates such unforeseen possibilities as a German climbdown or a coup against Hitler.³

¹ Statement entitled Labour and the International Situation: On the Brink of War.

1939 witnessed Labour again taking a stand, facing a further threat of immediate war, and as before there was no hesitation at all in the attitude of the party. Right up to the moment of the Nazi-Soviet Pact Labour struggled to bring pressure to bear on the British Government to enter into a mutual defence pact with the Soviet Union. Labour's conception of foreign policy, therefore, remained unaltered. It remained for the Chamberlain Government to turnabout and, in the sweeping diplomatic revolution of March, belatedly return to the concept of collective security. Such a system rested on the assumption of common action between Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union, and became meaningless when the Soviet Union dropped out. With the collapse of its policy, through no fault of its own, Labour, upon the invasion of Poland, supported the declaration of war, protesting only at the delay. The party was firmly committed to the struggle against Nazism and assumed unhesitatingly the responsibility for sustaining the war effort, although refusing to participate in a Chamberlain Government. Excepting pacifists, war-resisters and one or two others, all doubts about armaments, alliances, and war had been resolved by the acts of the dictators.

It can be argued, therefore, that Labour's policy during 1938-39 was an alternative to that pursued by the Government, but would it have succeeded in preserving a just peace against the encroachments of the dictators? A Labour Government in office throughout the period would have sought to formalise and act upon an alliance with France

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Churchill's words were in a sense prophetic - the foreign situation and the stand Labour was making were to give the party a respectability it might not otherwise have achieved so quickly after 1931.

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Labour's International Policy, p.260.

and Russia, and might well have persuaded other nations to participate in a system of mutual aid. The French Government's irresolution, the lack of the certainty of Russia's intentions - possibly factors less important with a Labour administration - the questionable value of some of the smaller European countries, and armament shortages, were all obstacles to be overcome. But, and this is the crux of the matter, would the fortification of peace have deterred the dictators from breaking out, or overawed them if they did? These questions, like the parallel issue of war in 1938, must remain matters of some controversy, if not imponderables of history.

In 1938 the President of the Liberal Party, Lord Meston, described the Parliamentary Liberal Party as "possessing an influence out of all proportion to their numbers, and a debating power which made them feared and respected . . . Rarely since Horatius held the bridge against the hosts of Clusium have we seen a finer stand than Sir Archibald Sinclair and his henchmen have been making against the hordes of Toryism".¹ This was a mere pipedream. Like Labour, with which it compared very favourably in the analysis, the Liberal Party's record was one of ineffectiveness. Indeed it could hardly have been otherwise with a mere 21 Members, including the Lloyd George family party, returned at the General Election. Inevitably its voice was weak in the House of Commons, where it was rare for more than one or two Liberal Members to intervene in the course of the day's debate.

Unable to play a dominant role in national affairs the party began to split three ways: into those with a marked preference for the National Government, those with a marked preference for Labour, and those who were substantially indifferent to both parties. Might it

¹ Manchester Guardian, 19 May, 1938.

not be possible, argued those members that tended towards the Government, to have a Liberalizing influence or policy by acting as the Left-wing of the administration's forces? The precedent of Sir John Simon and the earlier one of Joseph Chamberlain were there to follow. Thus Bernays and Holdsworth, the temptation proving too much, crossed the floor of the House in the hope that by strengthening the hands of the Government, Liberalism would have more influence in the Government counsels. By contrast Richard Acland, Mander and Roberts felt their outlook and sympathies approximated to those of Labour, with whom they were prepared to co-operate - and this was the view that became dominant in 1938 - if it could be done without committing themselves to Labour's ultimate objectives. Others, including Sinclair and Harris favoured independence, remaining a second and weaker opposition, rather than entrusting the Liberal faith to either the Conservative or Labour Parties.

These divisive tendencies are well-illustrated by reference to the party's record in the 1935-40 period. The party split and voted at cross-purposes on every issue of national importance: the Hoare-Laval proposals, Eden's resignation, the Munich Agreement and the final vote of confidence in Chamberlain's administration. The most fundamental split occurred in April 1939 over the Government's reintroduction of conscription, when the party divided almost evenly, 7 voting in favour and 8 against the party's official policy. In addition, the rift with the Lloyd George family party, patched up in 1935, was never completely healed. Lloyd George, by now in decline both politically and personally, thrice struck a note of discord: the opposition to rearmament in 1936; the visit to Germany and the subsequent eulogy of Hitler; the plea, following the outbreak of war, for the commencement of peace negotiations with Germany. Similarly his son Gwilym decided, in 1939, to accept office as Parliamentary Secretary to the

Board of Trade, in defiance of the party's avowed policy not to join the War Government. "We present an appearance of hopeless disunity", Sinclair had complained prior to the 1935 General Election. It was a comment which could almost equally be applied to the period following the election.

Nevertheless, the endeavours of the Liberal Party during this period cannot be written off as futile, for the content of Liberal counsel, like that of Labour, is worthy of consideration. It is important to note that the Liberal Party may properly claim to have shown an appreciation of the dangers of European Fascism coupled with a frank acceptance of distasteful measures in order to combat it before any other party. In sharp contrast to Labour, which could not be brought to acknowledge the need for rearmament until 1937, the Liberals evinced early signs of willingness to face the unpalatable needs of the situation. To this end the parliamentary party backed every defence estimate between the General Election and the outbreak of war, the only blot on their copy book being opposition to conscription, which, however, was hastily reversed. Like Labour, Liberals also played their part in securing the Ministries of Supply and Co-ordination of Defence, as well as the increase and efficiency of the R.A.F.

The foreign policy of the Liberal Party, like that of Labour, was grounded in the League of Nations. Ever since Versailles, the party had advocated the maintenance of peace by collective security, general disarmament to lower levels but the retention of defence forces sufficient for the needs of the times, and the use by the League of sanctions, economic or military, against any state which should defy its authority and engage in aggression. With the turbulent state of affairs in the later '30s the Liberal scheme of collective security became more precise:

"Britain should organise within the League such a concentration of resources economic and military, as will make it evident that aggression will not pay. All States Members should be invited to state what military, naval or air force, if any, they are prepared to contribute for the maintenance of the public law in specific areas . . . The vital thing is that the plans concerted for the restraint of aggression should be thought out beforehand and be certain in their operation."¹

By 1938 it was apparent to the parliamentary party that the League of Nations had been rendered so ineffective to make out of the question its use in the situation then confronting Europe. To fill the void Liberals narrowed their horizons and argued that the basis for a practical, if limited, scheme of collective security rested on the agreement between Britain, France and the Soviet Union to unite to resist any breach of the peace by the dictator Powers. If the three Governments gave such a lead the smaller European nations might be persuaded to participate in a system of mutual defence. This was the policy, in effect the same as that of Labour and the dissident Tories, that the party urged on Chamberlain in September 1938 and continued to advocate until it was undermined by the Nazi-Soviet Pact. And such was the policy that Chamberlain belatedly turned to in March 1939, the policy of his opponents, including that of the Liberal Opposition.

Collective security, then, a concept of which the essence in 1938-39 was the grand alliance, became fundamental to the policies of both Opposition Parties, Conservative dissidents, and men and women, Salter and Rathbone for example, who were independent of any

¹ Official statement on British Foreign Policy 1936. Quoted in Mander's We Were Not All Wrong, pp.59-60.

political affiliation. In effect this meant that they were agreed that the Government not only misunderstood the international situation but that its policy of understanding with the dictator Powers, which it pursued to the undermining of the alternative, lacked both principle and, except in the short run, expediency. Notwithstanding this common approach, in the practical everyday operation of politics the Labour and Liberal Parties and the rebel Tories each went their own way. That is not to say that there were not attempts to bring them together - the inter-party contacts between MPs that surrounded the Munich crisis, and in the country the Next Five Years Group, the Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction, the United Peace Alliance and the Petition Campaign - were all witness to that. Nevertheless it remained true that little co-operation was affected between the opponents of the Government until after the outbreak of war, and this could not have been but detrimental to the general cause of opposition.

Why then was an alternative 'National Government' not brought to pass? The answer lies in the fact that the opposition groups, excepting certain Independents, the Liberal and Communist Parties, a section of Labour, and a handful of Conservatives, all of whose support was somewhat intermittant, were, and remained, too divided in their creeds, programmes and political calculations to undertake any effective co-operative effort. While anxious to see a reconstructed National Government with themselves and the Labour leaders included, the Conservative dissidents were for the most part unwilling to enter a Government drawn almost exclusively from the Left. Their desire, the Eden tactic, was for national unity and the gradual winning over, if not the capture of the Conservative Party by peaceful persuasion rather than outright battle, as events proved their diagnosis correct. Co-operation with Labour was only a last resort if unbearable pressure was brought to bear upon them in their constituencies, in the event

of a general election. But what of Labour? The Labour Executive was always suspicious of any entanglement - either with the Communists or Liberals, and co-operation with the latter would undermine the case against co-operation with the former - arguing that a front "would have less electoral appeal than a united and independent Labour Party. It would take the heart out of large numbers of our most loyal supporters", and that it would compromise the party's chances of returning a Labour Government in the forthcoming election.¹ The opposition of the Labour Party was crucial for as Cripps said it "must be the core and centre of every anti-Fascist drive", and by its refusal to participate Labour doomed the agitation before it really got off the ground.²

Nevertheless, Labour, although noted for coming down heavily against the front movements outside Parliament, did not offer unqualified hostility to co-operation with other groups under all possible circumstances. The manifesto, The Labour Party and the Popular Front, 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 Members of Parliament now supporting the Government were to rebel against the Prime Minister's authority". This condition, as we have seen, did not exist until May 1940. Prior to that date the numbers of the more determined rebels on the Government benches never rose above a figure that could not be counted on one's fingers, and considering that the Government's majority was in excess of 200, effectively ruled out any prospect of success.³ Labour, therefore,

¹ Labour Party and the Popular Front.

² Cooke, The Life of Sir Richard Stafford Cripps, p.236.

³ It could be argued, of course, that if Labour had thrown in her lot with even a handful of Conservatives and, as the movement got underway and captured, hopefully, the public imagination, more

was just not interested in joining what appeared little more than a lost cause, as Rowse recalled:

" . . before and at the time of Munich, when things were visibly desperate, and Churchill was willing to come forward on an all-party basis to back up collective security, I kept urging on Dalton the necessity for something like a Popular Front against the Chamberlain crowd. Come to an understanding with the Liberals, approach Churchill and his group - anything to get rid of the old incubus before it was too late; Dalton gave the answer of fact to my fevered anxiety: 'How many Tories in the House can Winston bring over with him? Only 20'. I had to recognise that this was the truth; and there were 365¹ Tories in the unforgiving assembly that Baldwin had brought about in 1935. After that, nothing effective could ever be done. Even after Norway, in the debate which brought down Chamberlain, when Amery told him 'Go! in God's name, go!', the old incubus still had a majority of 80 with him."²

It is necessary to add that not all of the inter-party movements of these years were primarily aimed at finding some new grouping of political forces that would replace the existing administration. Nevertheless contemporaries - and Thompson in respect of Arms and the Covenant - were of the opinion that an ulterior motive lay behind most of the inter-party activities. Yet many of these organisations, however, sought simply to put as much pressure as could possibly be

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Government supporters would have crossed the floor of the House.

¹ 387.

² All Souls and Appeasement, p.53.

brought to bear on the Government to make it change its course, and, in some cases to achieve the same end by penetrating the administration with one or more of their personnel. Into this category falls the World Anti-Nazi Council, Focus, Arms and the Covenant, the League of Nations Union, the New Commonwealth Society, and the Hundred Thousand Group, although it should be admitted that there were doubtless members of these groupings that thought otherwise.

In the age of the great party machines, it seems hard to account for the way in which men and women of all political parties and of none gradually came together in these various movements, whether for the purpose of overthrowing the Government or, as above, changing its policy. Clearly they were launched at particularly promising times. They grew up primarily as an expression of the gathering discontent with the Government's handling of the momentous events abroad: Abyssinia, Czechoslovakia, and, in particular, Spain. Encouragement, if not inspiration, came from the success in the General Election of April-May 1936 of the French Front Populaire; and to a much lesser extent, that of the Spanish Frente Popular. More important perhaps was that they flourished in an atmosphere where, as has been strongly argued earlier, there was very little effective political opposition to the National Government, which seemed too firmly entrenched to be dislodged by the efforts of the Labour or Liberal Parties alone or its policy amended by the activities of its dissident supporters. What motivated them, then, was the possibility of developing a movement, commanding the support of Labourites, Liberals, progressive-minded Conservatives and men independent of any political affiliation, either with the object of evicting the National Government from office and installing by public pressure a government that would adhere to the League and, increasingly as the thirties declined, one which would

definitely stand up to the aggressor nations, or, as the more moderate amongst them hoped, force the existing Government to change its course. In essence, therefore, the inter-party movements provided what the Labour, Liberal and Conservative Parties could not provide, meaningful political activity - an immediate rather than a distant partisan hope of either overthrowing the Baldwin-Chamberlain Governments or of pressurising them to end their questionable foreign and domestic policies.

The failure of these efforts both inside and outside Parliament to secure the emergence of an alternative administration or a situation where the Government must alter its course meant that there was never any serious threat to the National Government and its policies prior to the outbreak of war. But then the situation changed somewhat as conditions presented themselves whereby the Government, even with a majority of 80, could no longer continue.

With the declaration of war Chamberlain prepared to reorganise his Government, inviting all of the opposition elements to participate in the running of the war. The Labour and Liberal Parties declined, although they pledged full support for the war effort. By contrast Churchill and Eden accepted the Prime Minister's invitation to enter his Government, but their followers, including leading Conservatives like Amery and Duff Cooper, remained on the backbenches, continuing to function as a group. Thereupon the Edenites, with their history of disaffection from the Chamberlain administration, grew increasingly disquieted by what they felt was the half-hearted conduct of the war and began, at any early stage in World War II, to work for the elimination of Chamberlain and the formation of a truly National Government to wage war effectively against Nazi Germany.

Their efforts were paralleled by those of the Liberal-Labour Opposition. While both parties agreed to a truce in the normal party conflict, making no attempt to obstruct Government business or to

embarrass the Government by inconvenient debate, they too were intent on bringing about a change of government. Working on the basis that it was quite beyond their power alone to turn Chamberlain out of office, they hoped for a substantial split in the Conservative ranks as it became apparent that the Government was manifestly ill-equipped to conduct the war. Their tactics, therefore, were to allow sufficient time for Ministers to mishandle the war and disgruntle their supporters, and then to plunge into strong criticism, in effect peace-time opposition, in the hope that enough Conservatives would follow their lead to necessitate a change of government.

Their analysis of the situation proved almost correct, the qualification being that they underestimated the importance of their own support for the war effort. As there was fundamental agreement over war with Germany, there were no great debates and divisions, so that the whips became almost redundant and Margesson's hold over the party slackened. The result was the Government backbenchers were released from their practical and partisan obligations to the administration, and intent, as were the Opposition, on waging a successful war, they became almost as critical as Labour or Liberal Members. By May 1940 the consequences were apparent. Hitherto the restlessness among Conservatives had been confined to those who ever since Eden's resignation had constituted a critical wing of the Government forces and they had always proved almost powerless to influence the party. Eight months of war however, and an equal period of political truce, resulted in the manifest questioning of the competence of the Government, as it then stood, in the ranks of the more orthodox Tories. When the issue finally came to a vote many of the latter found courage to back up their views, either by voting with the Opposition or declining to support the administration in the lobbies.

A factor in the spreading of disquiet amongst Government supporters was the formation of the All Party Parliamentary Action Group. Before the outbreak of war Members had been reluctant to appear on the same platform or associate themselves publicly with a political opponent, but now the situation changed somewhat. Members from all sides of the House banded together in the Action Group which, as we have seen, provided a real insight into the war situation. With the group's avowed object to press for the most vigorous prosecution of the war it was inevitable that previously loyal Government supporters should from time to time come into conflict with the administration. Couple this critical role, which some of them had never played before, with contact with men who were determined to do all in their power to change the organisation and personnel of the Government, and it is not surprising to discover that formerly docile backbenchers, who now belonged to the Action Group, became a focal point of disaffection within their party, contributing to the fall of Chamberlain.

Little happened during the early months of the war to convince either Opposition Parties or Government supporters that the War Cabinet was on top of its job. Poland was left to its own devices and Finland, promised much, received little. Meanwhile, the French Army and the British Expeditionary Force took up positions on the Maginot Line, awaiting, rather than provoking, a challenge from the German forces. The 'phoney' war continued to April when a situation had been reached whereby on all sides of the House, there was growing dissatisfaction with the Government's seemingly half-hearted and uncertain conduct of the war. Symptomatic of the disquiet in the Conservative Party was the formation of Lord Salisbury's Watching Committee, composed of leading backbenchers from both Houses, which pressed for drastic changes in both the personnel and the structure of the Cabinet.

The formation of this latest group coincided with a bad turn in the war, undermining the remaining credibility of the Chamberlain regime and provoking a direct parliamentary challenge to its continued existence. This was the German occupation of Norway and Denmark and the failure of the British counter-strokes against the German forces in Norway. The situation necessitated a debate, which was fixed for 7-8 May, when serving members of Chamberlain's supporters, their feelings aroused by the Norway evacuations, bitterly attacked the Government for its handling of the campaign and its mismanagement of the war generally. It was no coincidence that 22 of the 41 rebels voting with the Opposition and 43 of the possible abstentionists were drawn from the Service Members. Clearly the Service vote, or lack of it, was crucial in the fall of Chamberlain's majority. Apart from these, the remainder of the dissidents appear to have been drawn from the Edenites, Salisbury's Watching Committee, the Action Group, and a handful with personal grievances against the Prime Minister.

It is important to remember that the debate was not one of censure, but on a motion for the adjournment. As late as 7 May neither the Labour nor Liberal Parties had decided to vote against the Government, but were still carrying out the policy adopted at the outbreak of war. As one speaker after another, however, from both sides of the House attacked the Government, and especially its leader, with unusual bitterness and vehemence, and found themselves sustained by growing applause from all quarters, the Labour Party - possibly influenced by representations from other quarters - decided that the time was ripe for shattering the political truce. By demanding a vote Labour made the debate into a trial of strength, and although the proceedings continued upon an adjournment motion they assumed the character of a vote of censure. As events turned out, the Labour Party, in what amounted to its most significant decision, if not impact, of the whole decade, played its part in overthrowing Chamberlain and putting

Churchill in his stead.

Unquestioningly the critics of the Government got the best of the debate, but when the issue was finally put to the vote the Government retained an ample peacetime majority of 81. Chamberlain, therefore, unlike some accounts of the proceedings, retained the support of the bulk of his followers and was not compelled to resign simply as a result of a quarter of the National Members abstaining or voting against him. It was not the fall in his majority but the situation created by the challenge to the Government that left Chamberlain with no alternative but to resign. Any hope of waging war on the scale necessary to defeat Nazism required virtually unanimous public and parliamentary support, and to suggest, as Chamberlain did, that he could carry on with the assistance of his friends when the whole Opposition and several of the prominent members of his own party were against him was dangerously impractical. Thus the damaging debate, reopening political controversy after an absence of 8 months, necessitated the formation of a coalition of the main parties in order to avoid fighting the war on party lines and to secure the maximum war effort from the British people at a time of grave danger. This was recognised by Chamberlain as well as being pressed on him by some of his leading backbenchers, but the Prime Minister, no matter what he did, could not establish a real National Government because the Opposition and a sizeable section of his own party would not have him. What brought Chamberlain down, therefore, was the urgent necessity that the widest possible administration be formed, the widespread recognition of the need for this by his own supporters (and he himself), and the Opposition's flat refusal to serve under him on any terms.

The revolt that helped to sweep Chamberlain from power in that it encompassed Labourites, Liberals, Independents and dissident

supporters of the Government was, in effect, a de facto Popular Front. Yet it did not beat Chamberlain in an open vote, although the discontent created by the confrontation was too deep for the Prime Minister to carry on, except for a short while. Neville Chamberlain, after the whole series of crises and controversies that had afflicted Britain since the General Election of 1935, was an impossible leader for the rally of all the forces of the nation that was needed to retrieve the disasters that had occurred and the further disasters that were coming. Neither Liberal, Labour nor dissident Conservative could have rallied to any Government under Chamberlain. He simply had to go, paying the penalty for past mistakes, some not of his making:

"Neither Finland nor Norway in truth brought about the fall of the Chamberlain Government, but accumulated causes of which they were final symptoms, running back to earlier years, part personal to himself but in much greater part the penalty for shortcomings widely distributed and troubles deep-seated."¹

To his credit Chamberlain accepted his fate manfully, relinquishing the premiership without rancour and prolonged strife, thereby enabling Churchill to form the most broad based Government that Britain has ever known.

¹ The Life of Neville Chamberlain, p.432.

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