

The New Opposition

THE British political situation possesses all the appearance of having undergone a major transformation in the past month. In the industrial field, it is now recognized, the abandonment of wage restraint and a new demand for a 40 hour week, has made the Trades Union Congress (in the words of The Times) "once again an opposition body." And the last time the House of Commons met "the two great parties were ranged, solidly and bitterly, against each other." The post-war honeymoon in British politics now appears to be over and, following in its train, are the serious possibilities of the revival of those industrial and political battles that once characterised the Baldwin years in the 1930's. In spite of qualms among the militant Left about Mr Gaitskell's qualities when he was appointed Labour leader, a new feeling and understanding has come to infect the great majority of this year's delegates to the Labour Party Conference (at Blackpool from October 1st to 15th). This feeling appears to have come from the ease with which the Labour Executive and trade unions have succumbed to the demands for militancy and a "return to the socialist solution."

The post-war political bi-partisanship between Labour and Tory, the wage truce in industry and the front-bench co-operation in Parliament has had a stifling influence on British politics and on efficient government. It has certainly made the British people a less-informed nation. The political dynamism which stimulates creative and new thinking has been absent; the vitality and understanding that comes from open controversy is no longer a feature of British politics. All this has been responsible for what in your correspondent's view is the colourless character of British public life today. The government has been able (at least up to the time of Suez) to pursue policies which increasingly give the impression that it is the Cabinet and not Parliament which is sovereign in the country. True, many constitutionalists would argue that this has always been the case. But never has Cabinet Government been more explicit in Britain than it has been since 1951. One has only to recall the speeches of the Colonial Secretary to appreciate the degree of

contempt with which Parliament is currently treated by Ministers of the Crown. These tendencies have made the Government a less answerable institution and has, therefore, made for possible inefficiency in the administration.

New Unity

The apparent new unity expressed in the proceedings of the Labour Party Conference may very well provide the basis for a return to Parliament of a "new" opposition. Indeed, this is the overwhelming impression one gets of the Labour Party Conference. The unanimity that emerged on all crucial questions and above all the election of Mr Bevan to the position of Treasurer and thus to that, of de facto deputy-leader of the Party portends a political "collaboration" in the Left which is likely to be of decisive influence in the immediate future.

It is well to examine the possible causes which have contributed to this "new" situation. The crisis in the Labour Party over the last three years (indeed ever since 1950) has taken the form of a political estrangement of Mr Bevan from the leadership. More fundamentally, this was a reflection of the conflict over policies espoused on the one hand by the then Mr Attlee and by Mr Bevan on the other. The Attlee leadership, though a spent leadership, was clear on the policy the Party was to follow: it was one of rank revisionism in the sense that much of the "social changes" worked out in 1945 had become permanent features of British life and thus there remained little to be done which was fundamentally new. The Bevanite alternative was not as clear as this—it was more in the nature of an instinctive revulsion against the apparent bankruptcy of the old leadership. And this revulsion was at the same time being experienced by many of the rank and file members. For three years, a sharp bitterness enveloped the Labour Party. It contributed more than any thing else to the course of the last two general elections in Britain,

Gaitskell and the Working Class

The resignation of Mr Attlee and his elevation to the peerage coupled with some pertinent changes in the leadership of a number of trade unions has since presented Labour

with a wholly new situation. The choice of Mr Hugh Gaitskell was natural to the old leaders. It at least did mean that no major leftist trend was being let loose; indeed it was logical that a policy of "respectability" should call for such a choice. And it was equally natural that the Bevanite wing should regard the appointment with the utmost derision. In the eyes of the Bevanites, Mr Gaitskell was a perfect example of an imperfect leader for Labour: he was academic and middle-class, and his philosophy was not in the British "socialist tradition". It was said that Mr Gaitskell was a Keynesian and thus more concerned with a policy of gradually implementing his notions of equalitarianism rather than socialism as such. And so ever since 1950 Mr Gaitskell and Mr Bevan have been at odds with each other. According to the New Statesman "for six years these two men have fought one another and giving no quarter". The untenability of this position is now recognized in influential Labour circles, not because of the need to provide the old platform for Mr Bevan but because Mr Gaitskell is vet to establish himself in the Party and among the working class. The continuance of disunity can spell doom to the Labour Party. The delegates at Blackpool recognise this anger and this has fostered the idea of "collaboration", viz, of giving Mr Bevan a place in the Labour hierarchy, it is now being suggested that Blackpool like the Conference of 1935 and 1945. will prove an historic turning point in the fortunes of the party.

The prospect of "collaboration" between Messrs Gaitskell and Bevan holds out an equal prospect for the Labour opposition in Parliament to take on a new character. The course of events at the T U C Conference and the Labour attitude on Suez seemed to assure the emergence of a virile opposition once again. The Labour Party Conference further strengthened this prospect. In spite of certain drawbacks and weaknesses (which were reviewed in this Journal), the policy statements on 'Equality', 'Personal Liberty' and 'Colonial Plural Societies' represent a certain step forward. The Conference adopted these with the undertaking by Mr Gaitskell that Labour, when in power, will tax

capital gains and revise the whole taxation system so that the alleged current tax evasions by business enterprises will be suitably countered. On the Colonics, an undertaking to gradually abolish colour bar practices was agreed and some fine sentiments were expressed for the proposal (and it remains no more than a proposal) that, one percent of the national income be devoted to the financing of colonial economic development. On Suez, the Conference decided on negotiation and a pacific settlement. And some ideas are being worked on retirement pensions and social welfare facilities.

There have been published in a short space of time the Socialist Union's 'Twentieth Century Socialism', Mr. Gaitskell's pamphlet, 'Socialism and Nationalisation' and the more fundamental works by John Strachey and C A R Crossland entitled 'Contemporary Capitalism' and 'The Future of Socialism' respectively. From a different point of view, G D H Coles 'World Socialism Restated' challenges certain contemporary policies of Labour and pleads for some international socialist-communist cooperation. All these publications reflect a deep intellectual ferment in the Labour Party. For once a serious search for a long-term programme suitable to the times and yet maintaining a continuity with the policies of Keir Bardie is being undertaken.

Of all these publications the most pertinent, in your correspondent's View, is that written by Mr C A R Crossland, M P. It is certainly one of the most thoughtful expositions of Labour's future policy. It combines a severe social, economic and political treatment with a remarkable unity. It suggests that the questions which worried earlier generations of socialists are no longer of relevance today. The contemporary society is in Mr Crossland's view, "not capitalism" and, therefore, the "ownership of (he means of production)" is no longer a question for Labour policy. In contrast "Equality" should be the principal aim of contemporary socialism and Mr Crossland undertakes a lengthy analysis of the various ways in which this can be achieved. By and large, the analysis turns on fiscal and educational measures. And yet the tax reforms suggested appear to be directed at the owners of wealth; thus while in a fundamental sense the whole existence of Capitalism is denied, the elaborate set of fiscal

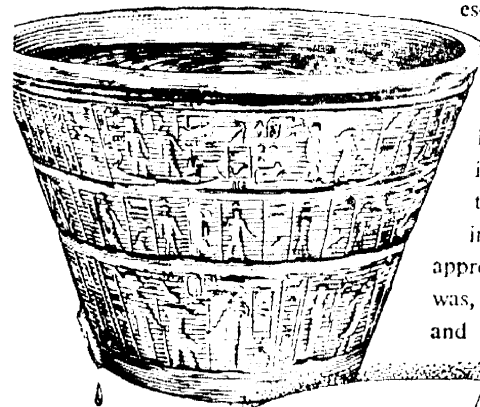
and educational proposals suggested (for equality) are in fact directed at the main economic arsenals of power in the country the "owners of the means of production."

This possible inconsistency is not peculiar to Mr Crossland. The search for equality is destined to become the main aim of the Labour Party. So far, it appears to be divorced from the crucial questions of social ownership and state leadership in commerce and industry (and this is a feature of Mr Gaitskell's pamphlet). How far then can Labour's concept of equality be different from that of the Conservatives who speak in terms of a doubling of the standard of living in the next 25 years and who are still pursuing a tax system which remains progressive and con-

tinues to redistribute incomes? It may very well be possible for Labour's equalitarianism to become indistinguishable from that of "Butlerian Conservatism."

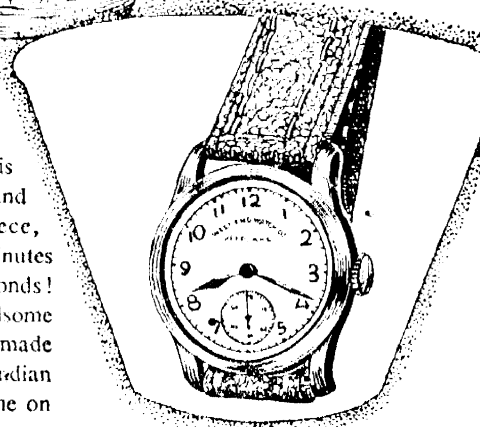
It was not expected that the Blackpool Conference would examine so important and complex a matter as this. Even the "old-time Socialists" like Mr Frank Cousins (who dominated the recent TUC Conference with such devastating effect) and Mr Bevan did not speak or argue for increased nationalisation. The intellectual ferment in the British Left has just, started and resolution of conflicts will take some time. The Conference itself appeared to tilt the balance of power within the Labour leadership in favour of the "keep left" wing.

WATER CLOCKS were all very well—



—in Ancient Egypt! Water escaped at a fairly even rate from a small hole in the base of a large vessel. A scale of hours painted inside indicated the time by the level of the remaining water. This gave the approximate hour, but it was, at best, an uncertain and cumbersome method.

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