

# FABIAN SOCIETY

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## LABOUR'S NEXT STEP

*A Wartime Strategy*

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# FABIAN SOCIETY AND WAR

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# LABOUR'S NEXT STEP

## *A Wartime Strategy*

*For the right moment you must wait...  
but when the time comes you must  
strike hard, as Fabius did.*

Fabian Tract No. 1

LONDON  
THE FABIAN SOCIETY  
11 Dartmouth Street, SW1

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*The pamphlet has been prepared by the Publications Committee of the Socialist Clarity Group, consisting of A. Albu, B. Kelly, P. Gordon Walker and W. N. Warbey. Its chief material and ideas are based upon a number of articles in Labour Discussion Notes, published monthly by them.*

May 1940

	<i>Page</i>
1 The Challenge to Labour -	3
2 Labour and Foreign Policy -	5
3 Labour's Position in the War -	8
4 Power for Labour in Wartime	11
5 Conclusion - - -	18

Appendix : Electoral Changes in the last War and Proposals for this war 19

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# LABOUR'S NEXT STEP

*A Wartime strategy*

## 1 THE CHALLENGE TO LABOUR

British Labour is the last great democratic force left in the world that is capable of giving a decisive lead to the peoples in the present crisis of European civilisation. In fascist countries democratic socialist movements have been battered down into small, though indestructible, illegal organisations. Russia has turned away, through fear or ambition, from the true course of world socialism. In France the socialist movement is divided and weak, though it can yet revive and take its stand beside British Labour. In America the trade unions are strong and growing but they are divided and not yet ripe enough to play a decisive political part in their own national affairs or in world politics. Thus, though British Labour can hope for aid and allies, there is no other force that can take its place at the present critical historical stage in the vanguard of the forces of progress.

We find ourselves at the moment at the tail-end of a period of almost unbroken reaction extending from the years just after the last world war. The forces of socialism and progress have during these two decades been steadily defeated and forced into retreat. Fascism has triumphed in two major countries and in many smaller ones; in the still democratic countries of Europe labour movements have suffered serious defeats, such as the General Strike in Britain or the break-up of the Popular Front in France; even progressive nationalist movements in peasant countries, in China, India, Spain and South East Europe, have been driven into retreat or stagnation.

The only sectors of the world front on which advances have been registered have been in predominantly agricultural countries, like New Zealand or Scandinavia. Amongst the highly industrialised countries labour movements flourish only in those countries (like Belgium, America, Britain) which have made least progress from *laissez faire* capitalism towards a planned economy. Even these have, in one way or another, been impeded by the menace of war.

British Labour, though in important respects peculiar, is essentially of the same type as the social democratic movements that arose in every industrial country of Europe. They were designed primarily for the day-to-day industrial and social struggle within the limits of the capitalist system. They did not much concern themselves with ultimate objectives, nor were these ever clearly defined, but it was tacitly assumed that success would ultimately come as a result of the intensification of these struggles; that, by them and by inevitable economic development, sooner or later capitalism would be transformed into socialism.

These ideas and methods were admirably suited to the

conditions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in which they arose; undoubted progress, of the highest social value, was achieved, and well-organised mass-movements were built up to defend and advance the workers' interests in the factories and through Parliament. In the last twenty-five years, however, developments have taken place which have called into question the traditional aims and methods of the Labour Movement. From the history of recent years two disquieting facts stand out. First, fascism has shown—especially in Germany—that the next step towards an integrated economy, which can conquer mass unemployment and overcome recurrent economic crises, need not automatically occur as a consequence of the efforts of the Labour Movement, but can be forced on society by brutal and reactionary means in the course of which the industrial and political instruments of working class struggle are smashed to pieces. Secondly, in those countries which have become fascist, the social democratic movements, of the same essential type as the British Labour Movement, failed either to offer a constructive alternative to the masses or even to defend their own organisations. In every case Fascism succeeded after social democratic movements had disappointed the people's expectations.

These are unpleasant facts, and the British Labour Movement must face their implications. Is it possible at all for movements like ours, that grew and developed as a product of competitive capitalism, to cope with the political and social challenge of the twentieth century? Or are such movements doomed; are they out-of-date? That is the question posed inexorably by the history of the last quarter of a century. It is an uncomfortable question, against which it is only too easy to deafen one's ears by intensification of activity, by registering further growth in membership and achievement, by self-encouragement from a review of the amazing development of our movement from its obscure beginnings. But it is a question that Labour must frankly ask itself, if it is to rise to the testing occasions of the time. What must Labour do if it is to escape, sooner or later, the fate of so many continental Movements? How far must it develop or reconsider its political strategy and tactics; in what ways must Labour change and adapt itself internally?

The tasks are not easy. The history of all labour movements on both sides of the Atlantic has shown that it is difficult for them to change and adapt themselves quickly. British Labour, however, is fortunately in a better position than any movement has ever been to prove itself equal to its responsibilities. It has deep roots and traditions in a people that has had a long political training. As a result of its own historical development Labour is now an integral and responsive part of the whole people, and can hope to adjust and change itself with the development of this people. Finally, Labour has demonstrated a sustained power of self-develop-



ment that is continuing during the critical events of the moment. This does not reduce the seriousness of the present challenge, nor the need for careful and detailed re-examination of Labour's traditions and assumptions. But it does give general grounds for confidence.

In this pamphlet we deal with the particular challenge to Labour arising out of this war. War always serves to concentrate and speed-up historical developments. This war, involving the total energy of whole nations, presents the essential challenge of the age in a concentrated form over a short and highly critical period. Labour must be prepared to act boldly in the very near future if it is to play its rightful part in the process of social change.

## 2 LABOUR AND FOREIGN POLICY

Today we are fortunate to live in the period of possible socialism. It is a moment to which labour and socialist pioneers have looked forward and for which they have sacrificed themselves, often in humble anonymity, for over a hundred years. It is natural, now that we can see with clearer eyes the real nature of the struggle and the lineaments of actual socialism, that we should have to reject or readopt some of the cherished forecasts, ideas and methods of our forerunners. We must examine our immediate tasks, not in the light of pioneering expectations, but in the light of what is actually emerging from our present-day society.

The central characteristic of the immediate political situation, from Labour's point of view, is that *there is no single issue or aspect of public life from which Labour can escape and to which it can shut its eyes, abdicating responsibility.* Labour's policies and responsibilities must range over the whole field of national life. Labour's decisions, whether it is in power or not, have immediate and practical consequences that affect the people. This means that Labour's independent policy must always be translated into terms of the actual political problems of the people; it must be realistic—not of course in the sense that it must be opportunist and adjust itself to every change in political forces—but in the sense that it must always take into account the facts of the situation; it must be possible—not idealistic.

In the realm of foreign policy, above all, Labour cannot make an escape into 'pure' or abstentionist socialism. The fate of the British workers, of the whole British people, is in fact tied up with world affairs, with the fate of other countries and other socialist movements, with the dominant political complexion of Europe. Indeed, at the present juncture of capitalist development, foreign affairs are more decisive for the fate of the British workers than any other set of factors. Labour must judge foreign affairs from the point of view of its own interests; it must evolve and declare its own independent foreign policy. But, even further than this,

Labour—through its important position in society, through its power to wreck or realise the force of the national effort in any particular direction—must make decisions that have immediate or practical effects on the nation's foreign policy.

The notion that Labour can in some way abstain from national decisions, that it can 'keep its hands clean' by abstaining from all action except on a limited domestic field—this is a part of the old traditional philosophy that was suited to a pioneering movement without responsibility, but which is totally unsuited to the tasks that Labour has to face today. Labour cannot, even if it wishes, escape from foreign policy. Its actions have practical results. Were it to abstain, it would in fact be making a decision that had practical consequences. If it were to take such a line in the present war, it would, by failure to cooperate, be hindering the national effort and aiding Hitler. But, just because it cannot abstain, it is all the more important for Labour to maintain its essential independence—to pursue a foreign policy that suits its own interests and aims and which therefore cannot be the same foreign policy as its opponents'.

It has taken over a quarter of a century for the Labour Movement to become sufficiently mature in outlook to develop a comprehensive and independent policy over the whole range of domestic and international affairs. In 1914 Labour already had an important history behind it in Britain, but, compared to the later Movement, it was still small, still immature in outlook. In common with all the other members of the Second International, Labour in those days concentrated mainly on the narrow field of industrial affairs. In foreign policy there was little if anything to distinguish Labour from the left-wing radicals, who equally refused to dirty their hands with any concrete foreign policy and persuaded themselves that the real world with which they were concerned could exist and be improved without any connection with the world of international relations, diplomacy and militarism. Keir Hardie's report to the 1907 Conference on Parliamentary activities accurately reveals the attitude of the Movement as a whole :

Questions of foreign affairs, education, the welfare of subject races, militarism (that sinister foe of progress) . . . have been dealt with by members of the Party speaking for their colleagues . . . these things, however, have been merely incidental to the real work of the Party.

British Labour, in common with other members of the Second International, adopted an idealist pacifism—which was really tantamount to ignoring foreign affairs altogether and leaving them entirely in the hands of the ruling classes. Typically, attention was concentrated on the single issue of resistance to war by industrial action—the ordinary weapon by which Labour was wont to fight the domestic battles that it really understood. The actual implications of a General Strike in such circumstances were never realistically worked out. The consequences of disrupting the



national life in a crisis that involved the whole people—and therefore the Labour Movement itself—were never squarely faced. No other attitude to war, no other possible way of securing the workers' interests was considered.

The collapse of international Labour at the outbreak of the Great War was not a great betrayal by leaders and movements that became suddenly afraid—it was the historical disclosure of the lack of realism shown by the Labour Movements of that time in the important sphere of foreign policy. August 1914 showed clearly enough the consequences of having no foreign policy at all.

The last war taught the Labour Movement a great deal, and compelled it to formulate its views on, amongst other things, war aims and the post-war reconstruction of Europe. During and after the war the British Labour Movement grew enormously, began to enrol individual membership and was soon twice to hold governmental office. Through all the period between two wars Labour revealed a capacity rapidly to extend its range of policy to cover foreign affairs. At the same time, it steadily widened the scope and sharpened the precision of its domestic policy. It is significant that in both its periods of office Labour gave marked attention to foreign affairs and that, in this field, it was distinguished above all other inter-war governments.

But through the greater part of this period international affairs were in such a condition that they did not compel Labour to undertake a thorough consideration of its attitude. War seemed distant; the instruments of foreign policy were diplomacy, reconciliation, the League of Nations, disarmament, and so forth. The conditions of these times still permitted Labour a certain ambiguity. On the one hand it was learning the importance of foreign policy; on the other it was heir to the war-weariness that followed 1918. The 1933 Labour Party Conference was able without any sense of incongruity to pass one resolution for joint industrial action to prevent war and another supporting the League of Nations. ✓

The rise of Hitler meant that the ambiguity must be clarified. It became increasingly obvious that the world was threatened by a war about whose outcome the Labour Movement could not possibly be indifferent—a war into which Labour would have to throw its weight in the interests of democratic workers in all countries. Labour made the adjustment with encouraging rapidity, revealing that as a great democratic body it was capable of a swift and radical development of its policies. In a series of Conferences from 1934–1939 the Movement worked out almost unanimously a policy in terms of the interests of the British workers. The attempts led by Lansbury and Cripps to retain the traditional pacifist and abstentionist policies of the Movement were squarely met and defeated.

We must recognise, however, that it is to a particular instance,

a particular constellation of foreign affairs, that Labour has been able to adjust its policy so admirably. And the most obvious characteristic of this particular instance is that in it the *immediate interests of the working class and the immediate interests of the ruling class converge*. This has created certain consequential difficulties for Labour; for *it has inevitably tended to obscure, both in reality and in the public mind, the essential independence of Labour, its essential differences from the Government*. This is a consequence that Labour must seriously consider in deciding what tactics to pursue as the war develops.

### 3 LABOUR'S POSITION IN THE WAR

Labour's position in this war is therefore essentially the result of Labour's own independent approach to the problem, in the light of the real interest of the working-class in this country and of world socialism. Labour correctly and concretely interpreted these interests as involving the necessity, in the first line, for the defeat of Nazism. In this it found itself in immediate agreement with the Government, which had finally come to the same conclusion for fundamentally different reasons. Thus a second essential element of Labour's position is that *it has its own independent ideas about the way the war should be fought and the ends for which it must be fought*. This attitude of independence has been made clear both in speeches and in actions; it has been fully grasped and backed by the Movement at large.

When we consider the further implications of Labour's position, however, we find that there is much confusion in the Movement and uncertainty about the general political strategy which Labour should pursue. This confusion reveals itself especially in the widespread and often unclear controversy within the Movement about the electoral truce. It reflects the material doubts and internal tensions attendant upon the eve of decisions more significant and pregnant than any Labour has ever been called upon to make before. The first full dress discussion of these vital decisions will open at the Bournemouth Conference. It has never been so necessary for the mind of Labour to be clarified about its immediate next step. It is a step which may by its direction decide the fate of the Movement—there may be no turning back.

What, then, are the implications of this situation? They may be determined in two ways: either by a logical deduction from the premises of Labour's present position or by an empirical review of the steps that Labour has been compelled to take by the development of the war and its repercussions on internal social and political relationships. Both conclusions point the same way—namely, *to the perspective of a struggle for Labour power during the war itself*.

If the problem is approached logically, it becomes clear that



Labour, as a result of the position it has already taken up, can rest content with nothing less than the aim of a decisive voice in the war conduct of this country. The ends for which this war is fought cannot be separated from its means; propaganda, the pronouncement of war aims, secret and open agreements with other countries—all these will influence the final settlement of Europe. But, above all, the fate of Europe will rest upon the complexion of the Government in power in this country at the end of the war. Capitalist war aims, whether or not they are now fully realised or expressed, will involve coercion of Germany, and the thwarting of any socialist and democratic movement in that country—if necessary by armed intervention and political dismemberment. The whole foreign policy of the present Government has shown that it fears popular social movements on the continent only a degree less than it fears the armed imperialism of Nazi Germany. For the fulfilment of Labour's Peace Aims, a social and economic reconstruction of Europe is the prime essential. To secure and make permanent such a reconstruction it is above all necessary that in Germany and Great Britain a socialist and democratic transformation shall be carried through. Nothing short of a Labour Government, or at the least a Labour-dominated Government, can give a reasonable guarantee that these two essential tasks are carried out. A capitalist Government in Britain will do its utmost to thwart both. *Thus the need to struggle for political power during the war itself follows inevitably from Labour's general attitude to the war.*

A review of the actual developments shows that Labour is emphatically heading in this direction. Labour's conduct in the war has passed through three rough stages. The first stage was characterised by wholehearted support for the war, indeed by a lead to the people over the Government's head; by support (though not entirely uncritical) of the National Government in the interests of national unity; and by a declaration of Labour's independence, especially in the practical form of a refusal to join the Government. The second stage was characterised by increasingly sharp attacks and pressure on the Government, both by the Labour Party and the T U C. Labour divided against the Government over the sugar duties and pensions; it moved a vote of no confidence over Palestine. The inadequacy of the Government's rationing scheme was attacked, and a persistent fight was made on behalf of the unemployed and the dependants of men in the armed forces. On 16 December 1939 Mr. Attlee said at Durham:

We are supporting this country against aggression, but I must remind you that we are still deeply critical of the Government's past, critical of its present, and distrustful of its future.

The *Labour Party News Bulletin* for 12 January 1940 declared that the Labour Party 'disputes the Government's ability either adequately to organise the country for the life and death struggle



in which we are now engaged, or to make a satisfactory peace.' On the industrial side, the T U C secured at least some of its demands through the setting up of the National Joint Advisory Council and through representation on various advisory and administrative committees. This second period was brought to an end by a very significant decision of the Labour Party not to join with the Government in a series of joint public propaganda meetings but instead to organise a series of regional conferences of its own members.

The third stage has been characterised by a growing feeling that independence is not enough. It opened with the T U C's public refusal to accept the Government's view that wages must not keep up with prices. Ernest Bevin's declaration on this subject was the sharpest yet made by a prominent Labour leader. Harold Laski's pamphlet, *The Labour Party, the War, and the Future* (issued by the Labour Party), gave clear expression to Labour's growing will-to-power. At Blackburn on 13 January 1940 Mr. Attlee said that the 'Labour Party is in profound disagreement with the Government and *hopes to replace it.*' Hints of a similar kind began to creep into the speeches and writings of several other leaders of the Labour Movement. There has thus been a gradual transition in Labour's attitude, a tendency to move from the position of supporting the Government in order to win the war to the position of *opposing* the Government in order to win the war. This tendency in practice follows the lines which we have shown to be theoretically the right and necessary deduction from Labour's whole attitude to the war.

We must not, however, be complacent about this development. So far the practical fight against the Government has been conducted on comparatively minor questions of detailed administration; the demand for a complete change in the methods of conducting the war and in the political leadership of the nation has been made only in occasional and disconnected words, and not at all in deeds. Not only the leaders, but the Movement as a whole, have not yet realised the full implications of Labour's position, have not yet been able to see this war as fundamentally not only a national and imperialist struggle but also as a terrific social conflict in which Labour *must* seek to gain a dominating position if the outcome is to be favourable to the forces of socialism and democracy.

One reason why the Movement hesitates is that the further detailed implications of this policy are still unclear. How can a democratic movement struggle for power during a war? How must it direct its activities in the detailed work of Parliament and political propaganda? Proper ardour coupled with the lack of clarity has produced heated and often uncritical controversy over such issues as that of the electoral truce. Too much attention has been concentrated on this question as an *isolated* issue. If we are to get it into its proper perspective we must relate it to a much larger plan of political strategy; we must see it as a part of the necessary struggle for power for Labour during the war.



#### 4 POWER FOR LABOUR IN WARTIME

Labour is in a stronger position today than it has ever been to give a decisive lead to the British people. A war serves to concentrate the deep needs and desires of the people upon a few central political issues. The people of Britain today clearly want a speedy but conclusive end to the war. They want a victory that will lay the foundations of a securer, happier and peaceful Europe. In a word, they want an efficient conduct of this war, the maximum concentration of all the democratic forces in the world against the fascist menace, and convincing and constructive peace aims. At the same time, and as a part of these fundamental desires, the people want a socially-just domestic war policy that shall call for real and not sham equality of sacrifice.

Now it is possible that this present government or some other mainly capitalist government may in the end succeed in winning the war, after an arduous and probably long-drawn-out struggle and at the cost of much social injustice at home. It is certain that *such a government cannot win this war in the manner and for the purposes that the mass of the people desires*. Labour, on the other hand, can give a national lead that is in conformity with the basic desires of the people.

Labour, in the first place, wants the resounding and utter defeat of fascism with greater conviction than the Government. Labour welcomes the prospect, which the Government fears, of the social changes all over Europe for which the defeat of Nazism will open the way. This difference was shown in the years from the invasion of Abyssinia down to Munich; it was shown again in the critical and doubtful days before the actual declaration of this war. This profounder desire for absolute victory on the part of Labour than of the Government is one of the most important political characteristics of the present situation. It lies at the foundation of Labour's ability to give a more convincing national lead than any capitalist government, however able.

Then Labour alone can make the convincing propaganda, including specific negative and positive pledges, that will rally the democratic forces of the world behind the Allies and gradually drive a wedge between the German people and their Government. One of the factors determining American opinion in this war, although it is fundamentally anti-Nazi, is distrust of British Governments—a distrust built on several years' well-informed observation. Authentic reports coming from inside Germany disclose that, on the whole, British propaganda has failed—that the German people is more solidly behind its Government than it was before Munich, for it has been largely convinced that it must fight to preserve the German nation against Franco-British imperialism. Again, Labour alone can carry out a policy towards India that will win over that great country and at the same time provide a touchstone of Britain's real intentions in this war.

At home, Labour alone can use war finance as a positive instrument of social change that shall (in contrast with the Government's method of war finance which will leave the social structure as little altered as possible) secure a real equalisation of sacrifice by making changes that will be a permanent and important step towards the sort of society that Labour wants to create. This is, perhaps, the most important element of all in a new war-policy for Labour. It is absolutely essential that Labour should produce its own wide and detailed proposals for financing the war.

We have already shown that the Labour Movement and the ruling class will have totally opposed policies for the settlement of Europe after the war. Labour's aim to secure a democratic and largely socialist Europe in which national sovereignty will be curtailed will, again, correspond much more closely with the profound desires of the people than the policies of the ruling class ever can.

In all this Labour will have the advantage that Britain will be the main industrial base for the Allied effort and that, therefore, economic life (and with it the trade unions) will not be so totally disrupted as it has been in France. On the contrary, the power of the trade unions will steadily increase during the war.

Thus, the essential and central conclusion emerges that *Labour and Labour alone can conduct and win this war in a manner that coincides with the basic desires of the people*. It may even appear, as the war progresses, that Labour alone can win the war at all.

How can these basic political facts be translated into terms of democratic politics? How can Labour employ its potentially strong position in order to secure a decisive share of actual political power?

A steady Parliamentary majority is the usual basis for a Government under the British system. But a Parliamentary majority is not an essential; it is no more than a means to an end, namely that the government shall reflect the considered and steady desires of the people. As long as there are no elections and no live registers to enable the people to express its opinions, then other means than the normal must be found to achieve the essential end. The realities of democracy must be made to triumph over its formalities.

The first aim of Labour must be to fix its attention upon the essential of democratic government—open and overwhelming popular support. We have shown that Labour is essentially in a position to win this support; we have shown that Labour has started to make progress towards giving an independent lead to the people. Labour has still much further to go in this direction. It must come more and more into the picture, it must dominate the political scene, not as an adjunct of the Government, but as an eager, convincing and radical alternative to any other possible government.

Before Labour can achieve this, however, there must first be a radical development in the Movement as a whole. There



must be a clear recognition that independence is not enough ; the negative, abstentionist, merely critical attitude must be broken down. In its place there must come a positive attitude to the war ; a recognition that the war must be won, and that *only Labour* can make sure that the war will be won, and that it will be won for democracy and lasting peace. Out of this consciousness, which must penetrate the Movement as a whole, there must then arise a demand for power, and a political strategy that will prepare the path to power.

When the Labour Movement itself knows what it wants, then the next step must be to make the people of the country aware of it as well. There must be a great campaign to win the support of the people for Labour's demands. This campaign must be focussed on Labour's War Policy,—a definite and detailed programme for winning the war and the peace which will demonstrate beyond a doubt that Labour can plan with efficiency and foresight and is prepared to take responsibility and political control in order to put its plans into effect.

Finally, before Labour can claim to form an alternative Government, it must first demonstrate that it is an effective opposition. It must make clear in deeds and not merely in words that it is really fighting to get control of the country's war effort ; it must make its fundamental difference from the existing Government (or any capitalist-dominated Government) so clear that the people will immediately perceive the difference, and will be compelled to choose between the alternatives which are placed before them. If Labour does this, if its lead is vigorous and confident, then there is little doubt which alternative the people will choose.

Once this strategic task has been accomplished, the actual translation of popular backing into parliamentary power is a relatively minor problem of tactics. English history has given several examples of the power of a parliamentary minority that is backed by the people and is able to lead them and call forth their energies, to dominate a majority that dare not face popular hostility (the first two Reform Acts, the repeal of the Corn Laws, etc.). In the present case Labour's chances are even stronger because the majority in Parliament will want the same major aim as Labour—military victory—but will be less able than Labour to give the lead to the country and the world that will alone make victory certain. Moreover Labour has an important and unique source of power in the membership of the trade unions and the Labour Party ; by successful recruiting of membership, by strong representation of the views of this membership, Labour is able, in a way that no other Party can equal, to make a constant 'appeal to the people'.

### Conditions of Coalition

This political perspective involves a consideration of the possibilities of coalition. A coalition is no more than a political

instrument whose use cannot be advocated or condemned on general principles—but only in the light of particular circumstances. Labour was completely right to refuse to join the Government at the outbreak of war. To join a coalition then would have been merely to become prisoners in the Cabinet. But in certain circumstances a coalition may become a stepping-stone to power. As long as Labour had the necessary popular backing, and was making use of the power which this backing would give, it would not be the prisoner but the master of the Government, even if it had no majority in Parliament. Labour could then translate an actual majority in the country into effective power without the normal intermediary mechanism of an election. As long as Labour had behind it the sanction (either by an election or by a great political campaign) of an appeal to the people that the Tories feared to face—then Labour could make sure that its major policies were carried out and that it steadily won an ever more decisive voice in the effective government of the country.

The appropriate moment for a coalition and its conditions would have to be very carefully considered. It would have to be quite clear that Labour had, by its political activities in the country, removed all danger of becoming prisoners in the Cabinet. The formation of a coalition would have to be an integral part of great Labour advance in the country. It would have to be the consequence of Labour's strategy of thrusting itself forward as the true representative of the wishes not only of organised labour but of the vast majority of the British people. Labour would have to go into a coalition not meekly to collaborate, but as a great challenge to all the forces of reaction and inefficiency.

Labour must deliberately plan its political strategy in order to achieve this result. It must clearly understand the full seriousness of what a coalition implies—the change-over from negative independence to positive responsibility. It must realise that once such a step has been taken it is very difficult to reverse, especially in wartime. The whole attitude of mind in which it enters a coalition is therefore of fundamental importance. It must *force* itself in on its own terms and on its own independent war policy; it must show that it is bringing into actuality and setting in motion the enormous latent power which is possessed by the organised Labour Movement and the popular backing which it can command. If it does not force itself into a coalition in this *active* way—a coalition which it can increasingly dominate—then it may well find itself compelled at some stage to go in weakly, *passively*, merely in order to preserve national unity at a critical juncture in the war. And that would be disastrous for the Movement both internally and in its public appeal.

If such a coalition were to be formed, it would be of fundamental importance that the whole Party (and not, as at the end of the last war, individual members of the Party representing no one but them-



selves) should be involved—and that its representation in the Cabinet should remain answerable to the Party. It would be vitally necessary to have the full backing of the trade unions. Labour members of the Cabinet would have to be in a real sense (and in a sense the Tories can never imitate) representatives of an independent organisation that was cooperating in government. It would be fatal if they were regarded by the trade unions not as their own representatives but merely as just a part of the government.

Conditions would also have to be secured from the other members of the coalition, and (if there were no General Election) from the Tory Party. It is impossible to be precise beforehand, but Labour would have to have a sufficient share of power to exercise a decisive say in government policy. Certain key positions in the Cabinet and guarantees on certain major political issues would be necessary. In substance, Labour's essential condition would be that its own war policy should be put into operation. But more important and more effective than any guarantees that Labour might extract from the Tories would be the real power of Labour's following in the country.

The example of Lloyd George when he took over power in December 1916 is instructive. At that time Lloyd George was by no means sure of a normal parliamentary majority. Half of his own Liberal Party decided to follow Asquith against him. The Tories hated him for his pre-war radical reforms. The two decisive factors that brought Lloyd George to power in the midst of war were: First, his readiness (though reluctant) to conduct a political campaign in the country exposing the Government, and his determination (as he made clear to the Tory leaders) not to 'shrink from the issue of a General Election' if defeated in Parliament. Secondly, the support of Labour, though Labour was far from united on this issue. As Lloyd George made clear in his interview with Labour leaders, it was not so much Labour's parliamentary votes as its powerful influence in the country and through the trade unions that was vital to his government. We need not discuss here the wisdom of Labour's actions at that time: the essential fact was the reality of Labour power. Since 1916 Labour's power has enormously increased.

The most important difference between Lloyd George's position then and Labour's today was that Lloyd George had no organised and solid backing that could enable him to carry out a full social as well as military policy and keep him in power when the immediate crisis passed.

### **Readiness for an Election**

Although an election is not necessary to the winning by Labour of a decisive say in government during the war, Labour's hold would of course be precarious as long as it was only a minority in

Parliament. The conception of power for Labour involves readiness for a General Election. Apart from this, Labour demand for an election and insistence upon it in favourable circumstances could be made an integral and striking part of Labour's forward, democratic policy.

A general election in wartime is by no means unthinkable. Here again guidance can be drawn from the experience of the last war. During the course of the last war a major electoral reform was carried through. The first measure of women's suffrage was conceded; various anomalies were abolished; the total electorate was raised from 8,350,000 to over 20 million. In order to prepare for a possible election in wartime a special register was prepared to include soldiers, sailors and munition workers (who were in large numbers working away from their official place of residence).<sup>1</sup>

The Executive of the Labour Party, in a number of circulars, and Labour leaders at Regional Conferences, have advanced a number of cogent reasons against the conduct of by-elections under war conditions; these arguments could by implication be extended to cover a general election. It would be foolish not to recognise the validity of some of these arguments,—on the assumption that Labour can afford to be satisfied with a 'standstill' in political relationships. But if, as we have shown, Labour will be compelled in its own interests and for the sake of the future of Britain and Europe to struggle to *alter* political relationships, then ways and means must be found of overcoming the technical obstacles to the holding of elections.

In the first place, many of the difficulties of electioneering stressed by the Labour leaders would be equally disadvantageous to both sides. In the second place, Labour has on this issue taken too defeatist a view, a view that is quite incompatible with Labour's general stand in the war. To stress difficulties instead of opportunities is not the part of an advancing movement that aspires to lead the people. Many of the difficulties urged by Labour are not natural difficulties, they depend upon certain laws or could be removed by legislation,—they are not static and eternal conditions. Difficulties due to blackout, evacuation, shortage of funds, paper, etc., could be reduced or removed by drastic legislation, just as the problem of munition workers was specially dealt with in the last war. National registration cards could provide an easy means of identification and check any danger of fraud. The time and duration of elections, the use of cars, the limits of expenditure,—all these problems could be dealt with given the will. Advantage might be taken to introduce into the franchise a number of permanent improvements that Labour has long advocated, such as the abolition of plural voting and University seats and the further restriction of permissible expenditure between and during elections.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix: Electoral Changes in the Last War and Proposals for the Present War.



Labour here has a chance to make resounding proposals that will contribute to the democratisation of the country in a war that is being fought for democracy.

Even where there are ineradicable difficulties due to A R P etc., they are not such as should deter an advancing movement; they would melt away before enthusiasm and hard work. The Silvertown election showed that, even with a very stale register, the people will vote in the face of all difficulties. Labour's actual deeds at Silvertown refuted Labour's official words on this issue.

As the Canadian General Election showed, an election need not interfere with the major task of defeating Nazism. Labour would demand a more effective, democratic conduct of the war, would fight with a policy that would rally the people to the real national cause as represented by Labour.

The main issue around which the different views and tendencies of the Movement are collecting is the electoral truce. To some extent it has become a symbol of the internal differences of opinion in the Movement. As we have shown, it would be a great mistake to treat this question in isolation, or to imagine that a mere decision either to break or maintain the truce is in itself going to bring about far-reaching changes. The electoral truce is not, as such, incompatible with a policy of Labour independence. Whatever a minority of detractors inside the Movement may say, the electoral truce does not imply a political truce. It is only necessary to compare 1939-40 with 1914-15 to refute that charge. If the electoral truce is defended as a temporary expedient, providing a pause under cover of which Labour could rally its forces, there is much to be said for it. But it reveals a dangerous sense of inferiority to defend the truce as a permanent expedient for the duration of the war.

On the other hand, many of the critics of the electoral truce have been much too negative in their attitude. The arguments advanced by the National Executive have been ignored, instead of being carefully examined and met by concrete proposals for removing the obstacles as a part of Labour's parliamentary programme. Further, it would be foolish simply to denounce the truce out of hand. Denunciation, if an appropriate occasion is chosen, can be used as a symbolic and ringing way of announcing Labour's next step of independence, the opening of a fully independent Labour campaign for power.

The greatest weakness of all amongst those who have attacked the electoral truce without careful thought is that they have come to regard the ending of the truce as a sort of panacea that will automatically solve all the political ills of the Movement. To a large extent the general desire to denounce the truce is a form of wishful-thinking, which covers a failure to think out fully the implications of the whole political situation. To fight selected by-elections as a test of public opinion and a challenge to the Government is certainly of great importance. But much more

than this, much more than a mere return to full peacetime Labour propaganda is involved. What is involved is no less than the opening and conduct of a political campaign, in which the fate of Labour and the chances of Socialism within a foreseeable time may be the stakes at issue.

## 5 CONCLUSION

In this pamphlet we have dealt with one only, though the most important, of the complex problems now facing the Labour Movement. There are others of the greatest importance, concerned with such matters as the growth and inner adaptation of the Movement; the digestion of a rapidly expanding and inexperienced membership; the possible growth of war-weariness; the detailed strategical and political problems of the military conflict; the problems and internal conflicts which will arise when the war is over; all the problems of assuming increasing control of the economic and political direction of a great country at war.

The essential thing that will give the necessary direction and opportunity to the Movement, without which such problems cannot even begin to be solved, is the determination of Labour to lead the whole people. All of Labour's multifarious activities—industrial, political, parliamentary—must be unified and directed by the perspective of power, or at least a decisive share of power, *while the war is still in progress*. This perspective is dictated both by the logic of Labour's attitude to the war and by the further development of Labour's actual conduct in the war to date. The enormous latent power of organised Labour must be converted into effective power by a conscious decision of the whole Movement to wrest control of this war away from the hands of reactionary imperialists and place it in the hands of genuine representatives of the people.

Labour must turn into living reality the words of Mr. Arthur Greenwood at Poplar on May Day: 'The British Labour Movement is the rock on which Nazism and Fascism will split.'

If Labour is to rise to this occasion, the ultimate energy and drive that brings success will have to be found within the heart of the Movement itself as it exists today and as it is developing. This pamphlet is a contribution to that end; for its whole challenge is a call to the leaders and the membership of our Movement for absolute confidence in the ability of British Labour to achieve in this grave hour what history demands of it.

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## APPENDIX :

# ELECTORAL CHANGES IN THE LAST WAR AND PROPOSALS FOR THIS WAR

### 1 Main Provisions (regarding Absent Voters) of the *Representation of the People Act, 1918* (6 February 1918 : 7 and 8 Geo. V, Cap. 64).

Everyone 'serving in any . . . work recognised by the Admiralty, Army Council or Air Council as work of national importance in connection with the war' can vote at the age of 19. (*Section 5.*)

The Military Authorities must provide registration officers with all necessary information and these naval and military voters are entered on the absent voters list without application. (*Schedule 1.*)

The Returning Officer must send a ballot paper to each absent voter at his last known address. A declaration of the identity of the voter must be attested and returned before polling day. It is then counted as an ordinary vote. (*Section 23.*)

Proxy voting is allowed in certain special cases. (*Section 23, 3rd Schedule.*)

Any person entitled to be registered may claim to be placed in the Absent Voters List. 'The registration officer, if satisfied that there is a probability that the claimant *by reason of the nature of his occupation, service or employment* may be debarred from voting at a poll at parliamentary elections . . . shall place the claimant on the Absent Voters List.' (*1st Schedule, Para. 16.*) (This clause was intended to allow voting by munition workers who might work at a distance from their normal homes.)

The Registration officer could require any necessary information from any householder; the required information could be sent by post. (*1st Schedule, Para. 35.*)

### 2 Rough Proposals for the present situation.

The same general model could be taken for the compilation of a special register to be used for by-elections or general elections during this war and a certain period after it. The regulations for naval and military voters (including women on various kinds of war service) who by virtue of service at home or abroad were precluded from voting in their own constituencies, could be taken over with very little change. Such voters would be automatically registered on information supplied by the military authorities; ballot papers would be sent whenever possible to their present address (on information provided by the military authorities or secured by the Returning Officer from the householder at their last known address) or, where this was impossible, to their last known address. Such voters could vote by post, after establishing their identity at some local office where they were living. National Registration Cards could be used for this purpose; these could be stamped to prevent their being used more than once.

Similar regulations, too, would apply to munition workers and others, not in military service, who would probably be kept from their employment from voting in person on polling day.

All voters who were absent from home under any official evacuation scheme could be dealt with in the same way. Particulars would have to be supplied either by the evacuating or the reception authorities, to the Registration Officer of the constituency from which the evacuees came. They would be entered on the Absent Voters List and would receive a ballot paper in the same way as naval and military voters.

Evacuees under official schemes would be entered on the Register without application. Other evacuees, not evacuated under some official scheme, would be entitled to have their names put on the Absent Voters List. They could make the application by post. Once on the Absent Voters List they would have all the rights of Absent Voters.

The period during which registration of voters was being made would have to be well advertised in the national and local press and the full rights of Absent Voters made clear. The Act could provide for a prescribed amount of advertisement in national and local papers at normal advertisement rates, which the various newspapers would be compelled to publish.

As there would be such large numbers of persons absent under present conditions it might be possible to arrange for absent voters to vote at their place of present residence instead of by post. At every polling booth a ballot-box could be provided for all absent voters from other constituencies who happened to be in that place on that day. They would bring with them the ballot paper they had received from the Returning officer of their own constituency. When voting they would have their National Registration Cards stamped. Each absent voter could be required to give his identity when voting, this to be attested by the election official from the voter's National Registration Card. These testimonies of identity could be returned with the ballot papers to the Absent Voter's home constituency to be checked with the Absent Voters List in that constituency. The various officials would be under oath not to look at the contents of the ballot paper whilst checking the Absent Voter's identity. If the identity were in order the ballot paper would at once be mixed with others. If it were out of order the ballot paper could be destroyed without being seen. The counting of votes would then have to be postponed for three or four days after polling day.

It would perhaps be advisable to stamp the National Registration Card of *every* voter in order to avoid any risk of fraud or personation. All plural voting would have to be abolished, each holder of a National Registration Card being allowed one vote only.

Various rigid restrictions would have to be imposed. The amount of paper that each candidate could use would be rationed and the permissible maximum of election expenses would be reduced. The use of cars would be restricted. Candidates could be allowed a certain limited ration of petrol for electioneering purposes, varying with the nature of the constituency. Special provisions could be made for invalid or disabled voters by the Returning officer, who could either arrange for their conveyance to the polling booth or have the ballot papers taken to them.

The special register compiled for the war-situation would be used either for by-elections or General Elections.

Many of the proposals for this present emergency could be taken over and made permanent by a later Representation of the People Act, such as the abolition of plural voting, the stamping of National Registration Cards, the restrictions on cars and candidates' expenses.



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