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THE DECLINE OF THE LIBERAL PARTY IN BRITISH POLITICS

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The Liberal Party is the symbol of a distinguished heritage and the claimant of but six parliamentary seats. Its future is dim; its past has at times been glorious. During many years of activity it helped impart to the parliamentary process a tone and dignity that have been identified with the best values in English political life.

We lack a definitive explanation of the Liberal regression, and it is unlikely that one will ever be produced. But several important factors relevant to the collapse of a great party are worth inquiry. Liberal leadership and tactical policy are influential elements in the Liberal decline. Moreover, the electoral system, although not the fundamental cause of the phenomenon, has hastened the process through its unrepresentative aspects. Finally, the absence of an organized group loyalty and the inability of the Party to secure the services of a powerful economic patron have contributed to the Liberal decline.

I. LEADERSHIP: GLADSTONE, ASQUITH, LLOYD GEORGE

The years between 1868 and 1885, described sometimes as years of parliamentary sham, were characterized by relatively light strains upon the parliamentary process. The Conservative Party was being reconstituted, party issues were not of great magnitude, and in Parliament and in the country personalism received extraordinary attention. The era of Gladstone produced magnificent personalities and many important individual achievements. It is also a period in British history during which failures in Liberal leadership contributed to the disintegration of a great party.

Gladstone's inadequacies as party leader were hidden behind a facade of righteousness. While Gladstone was authoring new chapters in the art of political morality, Disraeli was extracting from Toryism elements fundamental to its survival and Gorst was constructing an effective Conservative Party organization. Between 1868 and 1874 the Liberal Party was held loosely together by

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Gladstone; he resigned the nominal leadership in 1875, confessing himself "bewildered by the Liberal party's lack of purpose."¹ Remaining in the capacity of actual head (although non-titular), he "did not in any true sense lead the Party, and he prevented it from finding another man who would breathe into it fresh life."² Dr. R. Spence Watson, first president of the National Liberal Federation, states that during the first meeting of the Federation the chairman immediately emphasized absence of "real leadership" in the party.³ The Federation fell into the practice of adopting resolutions considered part of the party program, while the leaders were unsuccessful in their attempts to resist such moves.⁴ Schnadhorst's subsequent reorganization of the party machinery brought together the Central Office and the staff of the Federation for the purpose of restricting the ability of the Federation to determine party programs;⁵ however, in 1891 the Federation imposed upon the leaders the Newcastle Program, which has become famous for all its disastrous consequences. It blocked formulation of a sound tactical program and it contributed toward party fragmentation. The Central Office finally acquired broad powers dwarfing those of the local associations, but already there had been achieved irremediable damage.

Gladstone's introduction of Home Rule in 1886 produced one of the greatest issues of the nineteenth century and with it realization of the futility of conducting party warfare without the existence of a reasonable degree of party cohesiveness. Whig and Radical wings were already straining against each other, having by 1885 "no common objectives in view;"⁶ Home Rule accentuated the phenomenon. Gladstone not only ruptured his party — he sacrificed domestic to foreign policy with dire consequences. His attitude on Home Rule drove into the Conservative Party men like Joseph Chamberlain who, as part of Liberal domestic policy, had urged

¹Hamilton Fyfe, *The British Liberal Party* (London: 1928), p. 89; W. H. G. Armytage, *A. J. Mundella, 1825-1879: The Liberal Background to the Labour Movement* (London: 1951), p. 153.

²Sir Henry Slessor, *A History of the Liberal Party* (London: 1944), p. 122.

³R. Spence Watson, *The National Liberal Federation, 1877 to 1906* (London: 1906), p. 8.

⁴Cecil S. Emden, "Party Organization and Policy," in Elisabeth Wallace (ed.), *Readings in British Government* (Toronto: 1948), p. 24.

⁵*Loc. cit.*

⁶Fyfe, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

adoption of free education, housing, old age pensions, the eight-hour day for miners, and workers' compensation.⁷ The Conservatives were simultaneously urging the reconciliation of classes. Disraeli told his party to win over part of the working class or perish and Tory reformers sponsored reform of some working class inequities;⁸ Toryism inflated its periphery to include not only middle-class but also working-class elements. Gladstone underestimated the ability of the Conservative Party to broaden its electoral base. As early as 1864, when debating extension of the franchise, Gladstone had expressed confidence that the legislation would not reshape party tactics and that he was unafraid of the acquisition of political power by the working class because they were a disorganized lot, bred to a set pattern in English political life.⁹

Liberal disintegration reached one of its most acute phases during the tenure of Herbert Henry Asquith. The Party had come to office in 1906 unprepared for the assumption of ministerial responsibility.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the Premier was Campbell-Bannerman, "the first leader since Fox, in whom advanced Liberals could expect to find full sympathy, understanding and confidence."¹¹ He died in 1908 and his views were often different from those of his suc-

⁷Charles W. Boyd (ed.), Introduction by Right Hon. Austen Chamberlain, *Mr. Chamberlain's Speeches* (London: 1914), Vol. I, pp. 57-64, 151-165, 189-193, 215-224. See for Chamberlain's views Slessor, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-22.

⁸R. J. White (ed.), *The Conservative Tradition* (London: 1950), p. 208.

⁹Cecil S. Emden, *Selected Speeches on the Constitution* (London: 1939), Vol. II, p. 173. See Gladstone's Reform of the Franchise Speech, May 11, 1864. "It is not a fact, as I believe, that the working men who are now invested with the franchise, act together as a class, and there is not the slightest reason to suppose that they would so act together if there were a moderate and fair extension of the suffrage. . . . But I appeal to the evidence of all, who know anything of the facts, to say whether we have not seen the working classes, in places where they possessed the franchise, instead of being disposed to go together as a class, rather inclined, as a general rule, and under all ordinary circumstances, to follow their superiors, to confide in them, to trust them, and to hold them in high esteem. Their landlords in the country, their employers in the town, their neighbors and those whose personal characters they respect — they are the men whom the working classes commonly elect to follow."

¹⁰H. L. Nathan, H. H. Williams (eds.), *Liberalism and Some Problems of Today* (London: 1929), p. 11. Nathan states: "We Liberals are trying to avoid the mistakes of 1906. If, as it is sometimes suggested, the hopes of that period were never completely harvested, it may well be due to the fact that the seeds were not scientifically sown beforehand. The victory took us all by surprise."

¹¹Slessor, *op. cit.*, p. 149

cessor.¹² Asquith's haughty indifference to various promised reforms detracted from the budget recommendations of 1909. Redistribution of the national wealth left him cold. Government under Asquith proceeded with extraordinary caution, and as Premier and party leader he was "without initiative in ideas and policy."¹³ There is "no body of thought or trend of political development which can be called by his name. . . . A study of Asquith, then, is not the study of any political movement or philosophy. It is the study of a man and his actions, a problem of character."¹⁴ The high point of his career came during the Parliament crisis of 1910; his manipulation of the party was then practically flawless. He returned after that to the position of inactivity from which he approached things best. His leadership during the Ulster crisis was muddled and hesitant, and during the war years he was criticized as the ineffective leader of the "Old Gang."¹⁵

Asquith's helplessness was furthered by the manipulations of Lloyd George. He made meaningless the different wings of the Liberal Party, using these to advance his career. Until 1916 he courted the Gladstone faction; after 1916 he ousted Asquith from the Premiership and utilized the Conservatives during the Coalition. His opportunism made of him a kind of Liberal Ramsay MacDonald, and it placed the Liberal Party in a ludicrous position. He created the Coalition Lloyd George Liberals and the Independent Asquithian Liberals.¹⁶ His return to the Liberal Party inspired internecine conflict between the factions. The party machine was controlled by men opposed to Lloyd George, but they were forced to rely on his personal fund; he contributed much of the money used to fight the

¹²Herbert Sidebotham, *Political Profiles from British Life* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1921), p. 118; J. A. Spender, *Life, Journalism and Politics* (New York: 1927), Vol. I, p. 155.

¹³R. B. McCallum, *Asquith* (London: 1936), p. 12.

¹⁴*Loc. cit.*

¹⁵George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (New York: H. Smith and R. Haas, 1935), pp. 12, 335; J. A. Spender, "Lord Oxford and Asquith," *Contemporary Review*, 130 (December, 1926), p. 681. Spender states: "Well I remember the efforts in the last months of 1916 to warn him what was brewing in his own Government. They were all useless. He would not believe what he was told, and if he believed it, would not have lifted a finger to save himself. A Prime Minister of his disposition needs an organized party with an active press behind it to repel attacks on him."

¹⁶D. C. Somervell, "The Twentieth Century," in Sydney D. Bailey (ed.), *Political Parties and the Party System in Britain* (London: 1952), p. 39.

elections of 1923 and 1924.¹⁷ He also financed the research which produced the costly Coal and Land reports.¹⁸ When Asquith resigned from the leadership in 1926 the party was no longer a major force, its wings were incurably divided, and the sentiment of rank and file in the country was immersed in the great controversy. Liberal F. W. Raffety concluded that the "Leaders do not understand their own party."¹⁹ Ramsay Muir observed "in every part of the country the progressive Liberals are ready for revolt."²⁰

II DOCTRINE AND TACTICS

Some observers regard the Liberal Party as essentially reformist; others critically call it a do-nothing party insensitive to the needs of English society. Both views need reassessment. During the last years of the nineteenth century, various party elements sponsored a doctrinal reorientation that allowed necessity to "deal with special social ills. The Benthamite and Spencer objections to State action was dead."²¹ Evolving within the party was the view that freedom cannot long be sustained unless it is guaranteed by the state. Herbert Spencer condemned the party for shelving Liberalism and adopting the New Toryism, or the new socialism.

Persistent in some circles is the tendency to identify the party with one specific and negative type of economic doctrine, *laissez-faire*. Ramsay Muir states: ". . . there is hardly an important Liberal act which is not a denial of *laissez-faire*. The only period in English history in which the state tried to repudiate all direct responsibility for the social well-being of its citizens was 1780-1830."²² Charles Trevelyan explains: "I never felt *laissez-faire*

¹⁷Ramsay Muir, "The Liberal Party," *Contemporary Review*, 130 (July, 1926), p. 7.

¹⁸*Loc. cit.*

¹⁹F. W. Raffety, "Party Greater than Leadership," *Contemporary Review*, 130 (August, 1926), p. 168.

²⁰Muir, *op. cit.*, p. 8; National Liberal Federation, *Proceedings, 43rd Annual Meeting, Weston-Super-Mare, June 15 to 18, 1926, with the Resolutions Adopted, The Annual Report, The Speeches* (London: 1926), pp. 55-56. See for comments on divided leadership *Liberal Magazine*, XXXIV (November, 1926), p. 640. See statements of Lady Violet Bonham-Carter relative to her father's resignation and divided leadership.

²¹Slessor, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

²²Ramsay Muir, "The Meaning of Liberalism," *Contemporary Review*, 130 (November, 1926), p. 546.

inherent in Liberalism, or I could never have remained as long as I did in the Libera Party."²³ Harold Storey states: "I have been a typical active Liberal of the rank and file *for a good many years, and to me* — and, I believe to my friends and fellow workers also — Liberalism has never meant *Laissez-Faire*; it has always meant a constructive policy of social reform."²⁴ Professor Muir, writing in 1926, argues that it is "the business of government" to secure freedom by intervention.²⁵

During the first years of the twentieth century the Liberal Party was instrumental in directing criticism to many of the inequities produced by property. When the Labour Party was significant only in its support of Liberal proposals, Liberals evolved important fragments of the case against capitalism. Nevertheless, willingness to attack inequity and reluctance to accept its logical consequence — reformism — characterized Liberal leadership. Charles Trevelyan explains this attitude: "I could never get in the Liberal Party a full-blooded condemnation of our economic system, and the direct intention to replace it by another. Until the Lloyd George era the condition of the people did not become the main end in Liberal politics."²⁶ In Parliament, Liberal legislation tended to be piecemeal, adjusted to some, although few, of the greatest needs of the period. It served to dredge the river but only when it was below its customary level. Party doctrine was tuned to the acknowledgement of certain social rights, but in the legislative arena the conception of democracy was largely legal. The party leaders twisted the legal machinery while preserving the thread

²³ Harold Langshaw, Preface by Charles Trevelyan, *Socialism and the Historic Function of Liberalism* (London: 1925), p. vi.

²⁴ Harold Storey, "Types of Liberalism," *Liberal Magazine*, XXXIV (October, 1926), p. 563.

²⁵ *The Times*, London, September 1, 1926. See Muir's reply to Sir Ernest Benn's letter published in *The Times*, London, August 26, 1926; Labour Party, *The Daily Herald's Hundred Election Points* (London, 1931), p. 23. See for copy of the Liberal Industrial Report of 1928 and its broad statement of economic policy: Muir, "The Meaning of Liberalism," *op. cit.*, p. 551. See for Muir's blueprint for state economic action G. D. H. Cole, *History of the Labour Party from 1914* (London: 1947), p. 218. Cole states that the Liberal Party fought the election of 1929 on a program which domestically "was not very different from that of Labour." It "included fully as trenchant proposals for dealing with the unemployment problem." The Liberal "Yellow Book proposals for economic development had stolen the Labour's Party's thunder."

²⁶ Langshaw, *op. cit.*, pp. vi-vii.

count of the social fabric. Nevertheless, the party participated in the guidance of history to the stage when there no longer could be ignored the consequences of its peripheral inquiries. In doing so, it assigned to itself within the party system a position of inflexibility, almost one of rigidity — and parties rendered rigid are ultimately made prostrate. As a center party, it failed to foresee the danger in residing too long in the center.

Beginning in 1918 the Liberal decline was sharp and decisive. Asquith and Lloyd George had a hand in it; changes in the economic climate also contributed to the phenomenon. Moreover, historical circumstances and party concessions were bringing closer to each other Labour and Conservatives. The progressive element within the Liberal Party meanwhile expended great effort to convince the party leaders that they should adopt a broader social policy.²⁷ They were informed that it was feasible to wait for a Conservative criticism of free trade as a preliminary to the return to power of the party.²⁸

During 1918, the year of marked Liberal disintegration, the Labour Party produced a socialist manifesto, but in the country it tempered doctrine with caution and moderation while it presented itself as the heir of Liberalism. There existed to the left of Labour no great party based upon doctrinal defense of class, and thus was afforded to Labour the opportunity to act at times much like the political adversaries to its right. The convergence of Labour and Conservatives produced important effects upon Liberal Party doctrine and prospects. Both parties sought to repudiate the existence of a distinctive Liberal doctrine while they extended their efforts to win over Liberal membership.

Is there a distinctive Liberal position? For many years Liberals have differentiated between themselves and Tories. Both are doctrinally conservative, but between the two there remains in practice this distinction: the Conservative Party often turns away from conservative principles and toward defense of private collectivism. The Liberal is opposed to this and he believes that he is better equipped, moreover willing, to carry out conservative principles. He endorses a nation of small property owners, while the Conservative Party derives much of its economic power from the bigness of Bourbon

²⁷Muir, "The Liberal Party," *op. cit.*, p. 8.

²⁸*Loc. cit.*

interests. He agrees with Francis Bacon that property, like muck, is of value only if it is spread.²⁹

The Liberal is also opposed to a broad reform program that would require for its implementation an extensive amount of socialization, but he is not offended by a limited amount of state ownership in areas where private interests cannot do the job. However, he is convinced that public ownership is of no great advantage when the best that can be offered thereby is only a somewhat better job.³⁰ He is in agreement with Labour on full employment as an objective, but, unlike Labour, he believes that it can best be brought about under the regimen of private property. If he is hesitant to ecstasize over full employment it is because he realizes that its implementation necessitates more than a traditional measure of economic planning and that its fulfillment threatens greater inroads upon private property than he thinks he ought to go along with. He wants the best in two worlds, and he feels that the present state of things has yielded him neither.

His doctrine is even more fundamentally opposed to socialism than it is to Toryism, and he is aware of that, but he also knows that he must be articulate in combating the party which he feels is usurping his ideology while refuting it with contrary practice; he asks: "Is there any point in forming an alliance with the devil for the purpose of denouncing sin?"³¹ He speaks favorably of progress, and he considers Tory welfare legislation to be the product of "a long list of strategic retreats."³² He believes in change when for social advancement he feels that it is necessary; he is in conflict with the Tories, who will, he believes, endorse change only when they consider change expedient.³³

There is no difficulty in establishing the separate identities of Liberal and Labour doctrines — despite similarities between Morrison's "gradualism" and Beveridge's "welfarism." The Liberal finds himself at disadvantage, however, in his doctrinal conflict with Labour. Primary among the reasons is that Liberalism may be

²⁹Donald W. Ward, *The Way of the West* (London: 1950), p. 92.

³⁰Ramsay Muir, *Politics and Progress* (London: 1923), p. 36.

³¹Desmond Banks, *Out of the Frying Pan. Why Liberals Oppose Tories*, Liberal Publicity Department (London: 1950), p. 6.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 9; Edward Martell, *Crack Back, or the Heckler's Downfall*, Liberal Publicity Department (London: 1950), pp. 1-4.

³³Sir William Beveridge, *Why I am a Liberal* (London: 1945), pp. 1, 7.

sustained only by state protection; it is forced to use the state in its efforts to secure liberty. Socialism also uses the state. The Liberal has found that the argument against socialism is frequently the argument against state action and social reform. Liberalism, in order to exist, must remain a construction force, but it is often difficult to endorse a program of social reform without digesting substantial chunks out of the socialist program. It is for this reason sometimes lacking in the task of evolving adequate statements of the brief against Labour.³⁴ It has no trouble in producing anti-Tory propaganda. It shares with Labour prejudice against the authority wielded by enormous repositories of wealth, and yet it would combat this power with what is essentially a capitalist doctrine.³⁵

The Liberal has not been doctrinally emasculated, although the country and the major parties have absorbed some important aspects of his belief. His doctrinal surface has been heavily chipped, but the hard core remains. Adversaries charge him with unrealism, but it cannot be said that he has been left without a distinctive message — it is, rather, that he has few listeners.

III. LIBERALS AND THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

The English system of single-member constituencies has merits, but these do not include full utilization of the principle of representation. Minorities usually come away short-changed and significant sections of public opinion are thus prevented from securing parliamentary representation in proportion to their existence in the country. Defense of the system by the major parties illustrates the fact that the parties will not wage war on themselves by revising the institution favorable to their domination of the parliamentary apparatus. Electoral revision and the adoption of proportional representation would probably decrease the number of major party representatives in Parliament, lead to the establishment of a multi-party system, and encourage the return of control of the Cabinet to Parliament. More independents would possibly be returned to the

³⁴Tom Myers, *Liberalism and Socialism, An Open Letter to Sir John Simon*, Foreword by Philip Snowden (London: 1923), p. 10. See Snowden's excellent criticism.

³⁵Philip Kerr, "The Fundamental Obstacle to Socialism," in Nathan and Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 107. Kerr was in 1929 a member of the Liberal Party.

House of Commons. The major parties contend that the change would be disastrous to the national interest.

The existing electoral system, although detrimental to minority representation, is not the fundamental cause of the Liberal decline. Nevertheless, the electoral system, as presently constituted, goes far in equipping the major parties with a keen surgical instrument with which to finish the job. The single-member constituency offers the Liberals and other minority groups a wasted vote or a state of voluntary disfranchisement.³⁶

The argument that there is no doctrinal position midway between Labour and Conservatism has become, for the major parties, a propaganda instrument against electoral reform.³⁷ Robert Pitman, Labourite, holds Liberal doctrine to be indistinguishable from Conservative belief; he accuses the party of being like the bull in *Tristram Shandy*, "which went about its duties with so grave a face,

³⁶Lionel H. Laing, "The So-Called 'Wasted' Liberal Vote," in James K. Pollock (ed.), *British Election Studies, 1950* (Ann Arbor: G. Wahr Publishing Co., 1951), pp. 114, 121. Professor Laing notes that the Liberal vote cannot be regarded as "a floating one to be captured—there is a hard core of Liberalism which sticks with it." The British Institute of Public Opinion concluded that approximately thirty-five per cent of the Liberals would have abstained from voting in the 1950 national election if Liberal candidates had not been put up in a large number of constituencies; "Notes of the Month," *Liberal Magazine*, XXXIX (January, 1931), p. 2. See for views Sir Andrew McFadyean, Foreward by Viscount Samuel, *The Choice for Britain* (London: 1950), p. 11. See for leadership opinion "Proportional Representation and the Election," *Liberal Magazine*, 53 (August, 1945), pp. 379-80. In Birmingham, 1945 National Election, the vote distribution was: Labour 244,457; Conservative 180,269; Liberal 27,195; others 8,355. Labour polled approximately fifty-three per cent of the total vote and received ten out of thirteen seats. Under proportional representation they would have received seven out of thirteen seats. In Yorkshire (excluding Hull Central) the vote distribution was: Labour 1,239,767; Conservative-National 792,732; Liberal 225,447; others 31,625. Labour received approximately fifty-four per cent of the total vote and forty-three out of fifty-six seats. Under proportional representation Labour would have received thirty seats; Enid Lakeman, *When Labour Fails* (London: 1950), p. 73. "A group of Tory M.P.'s reported in March, 1946, that the House of Commons does not express the people's opinion as expressed in votes, but that they did not propose to take any steps to alter this because they attach more importance to having 'two strong parties.'"

³⁷Marjorie Maxse, "The British General Election; A Symposium," *Parliamentary Affairs*, III (Summer, 1950), p. 414. Miss Maxse, then a Conservative Party Vice-Chairman, states: "The reckless and irresponsible attempt to pile up a mass Liberal vote was foiled by the political sense of the British people."; Frank Gray, *Confessions of a Candidate* (London: 1925), p. 64. The campaign by Labour to identify Liberals with Conservatives was intensified after 1924.

that it was credited with powers which had long ago vanished."³⁸ F. J. C. Hearnshaw, Conservative, opposes electoral reform because there are only two positions, both represented by "the party of order and the party of progress."³⁹ These hypotheses have already been examined and found lacking. The electoral bases of Labour and Conservatism have broadened in recent years, but both parties derive their greatest economic strength from what is essentially class support.⁴⁰ The Liberal Party does not fall within that category; this is one of the strongest arguments in its favor and one of the definitive reasons for its weakness. It owes its existence not primarily to the backing of partisan economic power, and it is heedful of the national welfare while unobsessed with interests of class.

The case for the adoption of proportional representation is representation. Among some authors there is confusion concerning the case against it. Professor Hearnshaw opposes electoral reform and the adoption of proportional representation because he believes that it would break the two-party system and encourage all parties to secure seats in Parliament at the sacrifice of many aspects of national policy.⁴¹ The consequences would be disastrous to strong and stable government. Professor Ferdinand Hermens argues that proportional representation gives rise to a system of many parties,

³⁸Robert Pitman, *What Happened to the Liberals?*, A Tribune Pamphlet (London: 1951), pp. 3, 16.

³⁹F. J. C. Hearnshaw, *Conservatism in England* (London: 1933), p. 14.

⁴⁰S. H. Pierssene, "Political Party Funds," *Parliamentary Affairs*, I (Autumn, 1948), pp. 49-50. Pierssene, General Director, Conservative and Unionist Central Office, states that the Conservative Party has no intention of publishing its accounts; it is "superficially attractive" and would tell nothing about "alliances that surround the party." He concludes: "You don't send your opponent a copy of your order of battle."; Simon Haxey, *Tory M.P.* (London: 1939), pp. 30, 125-26, 157, 164, 193; Peter Shore, *The Real Nature of Conservatism*, Labour Party Educational Series, No. 3 (London: 1952), p. 33. When Viscount (then Lord) Woolton requested on October 3, 1947, £1,000,000, approximately £250,000 was received within twenty-four hours. Shore states that the party would have been happy to publish the names of the donor, or donors, if the money had been contributed by the rank and file; Sir Winston Churchill's condemnation of class support is dependent upon where he is campaigning. He told the electors of Woodford in 1950: "It is better for the strong to help the weak, than for the weak to hinder the strong." For entire speech, see *Conservatism, 1945-1950*, Conservative Political Centre (London: 1950), p. 169; Labour Party, *Report of the Forty-Ninth Annual Conference of the Labour Party, Margate, October 2 to October 6, 1950* (London: 1950), p. 5.

⁴¹Hearnshaw, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

rendering meaningless the true function of government and terminating in unfavorable conditions for countries by whom it is adopted.⁴² It creates cabinet instability and, among other things, an atmosphere conducive to the assumption of political power by non-parliamentary parties; it leads in many cases straight to totalitarianism.⁴³ Hypotheses that claim the maturity of iron laws are worthy of investigation.

First, a multi-party system can be precarious; however, it remains to be demonstrated that a multi-party system is always conducive to governmental instability. Second, even in a multi-party system cabinet change is not always synonymous with policy change. The French Third Republic produced many cabinets but also did exhibit surprising continuity in policy determination. Third, a multi-party system is not necessarily conducive to the assumption of power by non-parliamentary parties. This is an insidious thesis, for it ignores restraints against totalitarianism exercised by national theory and national temperament. It holds second to form all the important values which actually prevent a nation from adopting dictatorship. When a nation sinks into totalitarianism it is a phenomenon achieved by more than inadequacies in form and improper caution in guarding the parliamentary machinery. Profound changes have altered the substance of society and no longer is it considered necessary to abide by a doctrine of rationalism. It is a return to barbarism, thinly disguised by the trappings of the modern state. It has been experienced by two-party and multi-party states, and primarily because the degree of social cohesiveness has been unbearably weak. It has never satisfactorily been demonstrated that either form has over the other greater advantages when combating dictatorship on the make. Professor Hermens' hypothesis is based upon the idea that by molding the form the substance can be cast.

The parliamentary two-party system is achieved at the sacrifice of Liberal and other minority party representation, and it is not demonstrable that democracy is furthered when representation is decreased. Its very existence is dependent upon as broad a scale of representation as it is possible to achieve. Finally, the English

⁴²Ferdinand Hermens, *Democracy and Proportional Representation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1940), p. 12; Ferdinand Hermens, *Europe Between Democracy and Anarchy* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame, 1951). See pp. 3-25 for Professor Hermens' views on England.

⁴³Hermens, *Democracy and Proportional Representation, op. cit.*, p. 12.

two-party system has evolved into an inverted kind of parliamentarism, modifying the responsibility of ministers to Parliament by the introduction of a pair of gigantic machines that foster rigid party discipline. Events of recent years have shown the many ill effects derived from an excessively tight party authority. George Lansbury, Labour Party pioneer, in 1928 expressed fear that the tendency was producing results antithetical to parliamentary government: ". . . the House of Commons has now become not a deliberative assembly, but a machine to register decisions by the Government. Nobody is allowed to act independently on any big, vital political issue. . . . There is and can be no independent thought and action; everything works and moves with the regularity of a machine. Most of us are mere ciphers, voting machines."⁴⁴

IV. ORGANIZED GROUP LOYALTY

Major party propaganda has emphasized classlessness, but organized group loyalty has been influential in promoting major party success. Prominent in the Liberal decline has been the absence of that type of support; the Party has no well-defined class following, and of all the parties it is the least class-conscious.

The conflict between the major parties has become essentially one of interests, not of principles, and only parties deriving economic power from strong class interests have been able to stay on top. During the early days of the twentieth century the "absence of laissez-faire by associations of employers and employees created an economic and financial backbone both to the Left and to the Right of the Liberal party," leaving with it "persons too poor and professionally too unorganized to be able to back up a political party with funds."⁴⁵ A. L. Lowell observed in 1909 that the Liberals could command no social influence because of a lack of money.⁴⁶

⁴⁴George Lansbury, *My Life* (London: 1928), pp. 269, 272, 274-75, 277; *Tribune*, London (February 8, 1952), p. 10. See letter to editor: "Born a little Liberal, I have been a Fabian for years and I have given the Labour Party my support for the last twenty years but I have steadfastly refused to join it. . . . 'My party right or wrong' is not a slogan for anyone who tries to think things out."

⁴⁵Salvador de Madariaga, "The Crisis of Liberalism," *Liberal Magazine*, 54 (October-November, 1946), p. 451.

⁴⁶A. L. Lowell, *The Government of England* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909), Vol. I, p. 454.

Liberal membership is comprised of small entrepreneurs, lawyers, journalists, and civil employees — stockbrokers and miners are conspicuously lacking.⁴⁷ J. F. S. Ross very precisely concludes that the “most marked characteristic of the parliamentary Liberal party’s background is that it has no very marked characteristics.”⁴⁸

No economically powerful pressure group is willing to act as the patron of the party, and in the competition of interests the services of such an institution must be secured or a party will “languish in honest or ineffective poverty.”⁴⁹ Financial inadequacy has made impossible extensive advertising. No great national newspapers have taken up the Liberal cause. A fund of at least £100,000 a year must be maintained if a party is going to function on a national scale, and men and institutions of wealth are reluctant to contribute to the Liberal treasury.⁵⁰ Many elections have found numerous constituencies uncontested because of shortage of funds. A party must maintain in the constituencies a satisfactory and paid agency. There are few full-time Liberal agents, a phenomenon not of recent origin. During the first decade of the twentieth century, when the government was under Liberal domination, the funds of the Central Office were incapable of supporting a competent body of paid agents in the constituencies.⁵¹

V. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis presented in this paper sought to demonstrate that

⁴⁷J. F. S. Ross, “The Personnel of Parties,” in Bailey (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 174.

⁴⁸*Loc. cit.*

⁴⁹Philip Fothergill, “Political Party Funds,” *Parliamentary Affairs*, I (Autumn, 1948), p. 52; Beveridge, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

⁵⁰Fothergill, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52. Fothergill was then Chairman of the Executive of the Liberal Party Organization. He reports that in 1947 subscribers to the party treasury who contributed in excess of £100 constituted .001 per cent of the membership, in excess of £10 — .830 per cent, in excess of £1 — 4.300 per cent. Those who contributed £1, and less, formed 94.869 per cent. These statistics do not include the many but small subscriptions to constituent associations, Area Federations, and the Women’s and Young Liberal Organizations.

⁵¹Lowell, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 2; Labour Party, *Forty-Ninth Conference . . .*, p. 13; Wilfred Fienburgh, “The Tory Machine, II,” *New Statesman and Nation*, 43 (June 7, 1952), p. 667. Only a minority of the constituency Labour parties have been able to employ full-time agents. Approximately 340 agents were enlisted part-time during the last national election. The Conservatives have in the constituencies full-time agents and a large corps of workers.

there is a Liberal doctrine which forms a distinctive faith and which in itself is more than just a compromise between Labourism and Conservatism. It was also intended to investigate and clarify some of the many factors which contributed to the decline of one of the greatest of political parties.

Failures in leadership, intra-party conflict, the unrepresentative nature of the electoral system, and the absence of an organized group loyalty are distinctive aspects of one of the most important phenomena of the twentieth century. First, Gladstone, Asquith, and Lloyd George did much to reduce the stature of their party by their executive inadequacies and factional manipulations. Second, during the early years of the twentieth century important Liberals evolved arguments which helped direct criticism to many of the undesirable effects of property. Nevertheless, willingness to attack inequity and reluctance to accept its logical consequence — reformism — characterized Liberal leadership. Third, the electoral system was not the fundamental cause of the Liberal decline but it has furnished the major parties with a political "meat axe" with which to finish the job. It encourages among Liberals a wasted vote or a state of voluntary disfranchisement. The resultant two-party system is achieved at the cost of Liberal and other minority representation. This can be remedied by the abandonment of single-member districts and the adoption of proportional representation. Fourth, critics of proportional representation and the multi-party system to which it would give rise in England, argue that thereby would be produced a highly unstable, if not unworkable, régime. However, it cannot be demonstrated that a multi-party system is always conducive to governmental instability. Many of the "observations" concerning a multi-party system can be dismissed as exaggerated distortions. Fifth, we may note the insensitivity of various of these same critics to some of the unfavorable political conditions produced by the English electoral apparatus and two-party system. Legislative divisions now resemble military roll calls — the "armies" march in and out and Parliament has become a political "counting house." Adoption of proportional representation and the emergence of a multi-party system would undoubtedly induce Parliament to gravitate toward the status of a more authentically deliberative assembly. Finally, the absence of an organized group loyalty and the want of a powerful economic patron have been prominent in the Liberal decline.