

Timid Whigs

By RAYMOND HANCOCK

Prospective Liberal Candidate for Nantwich

"LET US be real Radicals and not Timid Whigs." A speaker at the Llandudno Assembly who used this phrase evoked a sympathetic response. Most modern Liberals are keen that we should be a Radical party, certainly not a party of rather mild Conservatives. Too often, however, the word Radical is misused, and narrowed to mean those who advocate a particular economic policy. I sometimes suspect that a Liberal could advocate the abolition of the Monarchy, the destruction of the House of Lords and an immediate tax of 100 per cent on Land Values, but because he also opposed a high level of taxation, particularly indirect taxation, be labelled a "Timid Whig."

As one who for many years has delighted in shocking from time to time the older stalwarts of Liberalism with my radical views, it is something of a shock to find myself on the extreme right wing of the party! To find that instead of being a radical in the spirit of Charles James Fox, that all the time I have been a disciple of Lord Rosebery. It is disconcerting! I shall have to start being polite to Conservatives soon!

During recent years there has been a tendency on the part of one group of Liberals to push particular policies, such as Free Trade, Lower Taxation and so on, to the exclusion of some other policies. To be honest, that kind of action has probably done more harm than good to the policies that were pushed. It is natural that there should now be a reaction. But it would be disastrous to the long term prospects of our party, if, in an effort to show that we are not pale blue Conservatives, we become pale pink Socialists.

A true Radical must, I think, believe not just in Social Reform, but in Liberty and Social Reform. He should also be prepared to undertake drastic changes in the nature of society and existing institutions. It is therefore just as Radical to advocate shifting the basis of our taxation system from indirect taxation to a more just system as it is to propose juggling about with existing forms of present taxes. I can think of nothing less radical than the suggestion that the recently imposed confectionery tax should be 12½ per cent. instead of 15 per cent. Necessary perhaps, or more workable, but radical? Never.

I may be wrong, but I have the feeling that the nearer we get to victory at the polls the less radical we are becoming. It is necessary for serious politicians to compromise at times; it is natural that as our electoral support widens then so will the basis and the policies of the party, but I miss the spirit of revolution. We are, I think, becoming a little orthodox. Too often we sound just like the other two parties.

Certain policies also seem to have been abandoned, not officially by a resolution of the Assembly, but quietly, by the leadership simply never mentioning them. As recently as 1958, for example, the party re-affirmed its belief in the Taxation of Land Values, but despite many occasions when the party's policy on this could have been pointed out with advantage to the electorate, I can remember no occasion when Mr. Grimond, Mr. Bonham Carter or any of our leaders have even mentioned the subject. In 1961 we passed a resolution urging support for the Common Market, *as a step to world free trade*. But in all the speeches on the subject made by the leadership, this aspect of the issue has been pushed into the background.

Young people who have joined the party since 1958 — and there have been many — could quite easily, if they listened just to the speeches of our national leaders, be unaware that the Liberals officially supported any such policy as the Taxation of Land Values. These people will take office in Divisional Associations and persuade others to join the party. It is quite likely that in the course of a few years certain policies could be dropped officially at an Assembly, and opposition dismissed as "timid Whigs"!

Yet during the years in the wilderness these "timid Whigs" have been remarkably true to the Liberal Party, they stayed on when many others split off to the left and the right. They were active in the party, moreover, when many of the present leadership, and people now moving to the front rank of the party, were not even Liberals, or, at least, did not do much publicly for the party. We should welcome them and be grateful that as a party we have attracted people capable of leading us, but they should not forget that there is still a large body of opinion in the Liberal Party that holds such policies as Free Trade, Land Value Taxation and the Liberty of the Individual as of great — but not greater — importance than other more recent policies.

Nor should it be supposed that, because many of us still have an attachment to these older principles, we are unaware of the need for new policies to meet new needs. We are equally as Radical and up-to-date as those that attack us.

And whether called Radicals or Timid Whigs, there are still many of us, young as well as old, who will not be shaken from our beliefs, either by those that ignore us or those that dismiss us with *clichés*.

— Reprinted from *The Liberal Forward*,
Cumberland, December 1962.