

## LIBERALISM VERSUS LIBERTY

IN THESE days of social disillusion, when the alleged liberty and democracy of great modern states seems to have failed, we may expect, besides the facile drift to collectivism, some degree of objective curiosity in social questions. Those anxious to find an alternative to the drab prospect of regimentation which opens before us might be expected to show an unusual interest even in proposals which have not the advantage of great advertisement, especially in any proposal clearly distinguishable both from the usual "isms" and from a mere return to the past, and advocated with firm conviction. The Assembly of the Liberal Party, which met in London on the 4th September, might have attracted such curiosity, but it is doubtful if an impartial enquirer would have returned from the proceedings inspired by any new light on the problems of our time.

### Liberty or Opportunism ?

The keynote of the meeting was struck almost at the beginning when it was decided to delete from a resolution on "the Liberal Goal" the phrase, that it is "the proper function of the State to insist on the conditions necessary for the free development of individuals." Then, after discussion and compromise, the principles of the party were embodied in a 900-word resolution which might almost have stood for the good intentions of any political group anxious to enlist on its side the prevailing trend of mass opinion. Lady Bonham Carter, indeed, with a refreshing frankness, admitted "The goal to which we move must change its form with changing times." Perhaps M. Laval could understand this appeal better than some old fashioned people who conceive principles to be founded on truth, and truth to be eternal.

### From J. S. Mill to the Planners

If one sought the interpretation of Liberal principles by considering the resolutions on policy, which followed, there again appeared little to distinguish Liberal policy from the general drift of other democratic parties, or indeed of totalitarian parties. The questions of poverty, unemployment and attendant evils are to be solved by methods as familiar to our ears as the sounds of the radio. The State is to decree wages and in some cases prices; it would even borrow money to "provide work." Agriculture at least is to be protected, subsidized and controlled, and the other basic industries are to be planned and controlled to an undefined degree. It is agreed that monopoly is invincible and that Free Trade must wait not on our own laws but on those of other countries. The planners are to decree the use of our natural resources including man-power, and the task of the gauleiters will certainly be made easier because in addition to subsidizing child-production the scope of compulsory State education, insurance, etc., is to be extended, and the State is to supervise as well as subsidize the citizen's leisure. Some future historian would surely have difficulty in recognizing that the Liberalism of 1942 derived from that philosopher who gave such powerful

reasons for believing that "the worth of the State, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals comprising it," and "that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection."

### Shelving the Essential Question

It would be untrue, however, to suggest that Liberals adopted this programme of what used to be called Fabian Socialism either unanimously or with enthusiasm. The phrases employed to soften the meaning of the resolutions were often sufficient to allow loopholes to negative them; and a sturdy minority, led by Mr Elliott Dodds, continued to maintain the Party's former traditions. When Mr T. L. Horabin, M.P., frankly advocated a Ministry of National Planning in place of Freedom of Enterprise, it was found expedient, in order to avoid dissensions, to refer the question of economic Liberalism to a sub-committee.

That committee will no doubt try to offend nobody, and will produce a report as useful as such documents usually prove to be. The difficulty will not be solved by shelving it. It will remain and fester within the party just as the question of advancing poverty with advancing wealth has festered within the modern democracies despite the attempts to shelve it by the ever encroaching organization of State charity supported by taxation and public borrowing—a process which will surely have reached its limit after the war though this was entirely overlooked by the Liberals at their Assembly.

Miss Megan Lloyd George, M.P., put the prime difficulty of her party cogently when she pointed out that the restoration of "freedom of enterprise" after the last war had not brought prosperity, it had been followed by widespread unemployment. Where, she demanded, was Mr Dodd's alternative to State direction of economic activity?

### The Alternative

Perhaps, after the democratic peoples have had a longer experience of planning, when its catchwords become as hackneyed as its results are disappointing, they will one day ask themselves if their so called freedom of enterprise was ever indeed freedom. The Scottish Liberal Federation, in an amendment to "the Liberal Goal" resolution—an amendment which was, however, ruled out of order—moved that the Liberal Party "being firmly convinced that the equal rights with which all men are born can only be secured by free access to land, stands for the abolition of land monopoly by the rating and taxation of land values, and the gradual removal of all rates and taxes on the products of all labour and capital."

Here surely is the alternative, yet the Assembly seemed averse to discuss it. As true freedom of enterprise cannot exist where every citizen has not equal access to land our present economic ills cannot be shown to be due to freedom. If it were decided to give true economic liberty a trial before surrendering to collectivism the advocates of economic liberty need have no fear for the result. The experi-

ence of practice as well as the inference from theory lead unmistakably to this conclusion.

It is difficult to understand how the Liberal Party could gain any advantage by refusing the aid of a principle providing an answer to all those who feel that liberty has been tried and found wanting. It would be unreasonable to expect logical consistency in every proposal of a great political party, but to compromise with its essential principle and inspiration will in the long run prove fatal. The morale of a party must be preserved as much as that of an army.

### The Higher Expediency

Even from considerations of expediency it would appear unwise for the Liberal Party to embrace collectivism at the present time. There are not wanting signs to show that the pendulum is already coming to the end of its swing. For a Party whose very name echoes of liberty, it would be wiser to lead in a rising crusade for true economic liberty than to follow in a passing fashion of thought where other parties have long ago preceded it.

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## MR F. W. HIRST'S VIEWS

TOWARDS THE end of his new pamphlet *Pressing Problems and Fashionable Fallacies of Political Economy* (Cobden Club, 6d.) Mr Francis W. Hirst says: "The case of land especially in connection with towns and town planning and the rating of land values is sure to come up for consideration after the war." Mr Hirst reads a necessary lesson to those who think it is fashionable to decry *Laissez Faire*, altogether misconstruing and misrepresenting what it means. He says:

"In France towards the end of the seventeenth century under pressure of a costly war Colbert, the talented minister of Louis XIV, multiplied indirect taxes, and carried bureaucratic protectionism to extremes hoping to create new industries by raising prices.

"The consequences were disastrous, and bitter complaints came from all parts. Punishments for evading tolls and customs were enforced by State inspectors and police. A deputation from the Lyons Chamber of Commerce went to see the minister in Paris. Colbert recalled all the protection he had given them and asked what more he could do for them. Their spokesman replied: '*Laissez nous faire*'; i.e., please don't protect us any more, give us liberty from taxes and restraints, unwind your red tape, dismiss your officials, let us alone.

"This became a slogan of French reformers in a more complete form: *Laissez-faire, laissez-aller, laissez-passer*—which may be translated 'Give us freedom to work, to travel, and to sell or buy without having to pass through tolls and customs houses paying duties on our goods.' If Colbert and his successors had listened to these complaints and freed France from her oppressive economic burdens, as Turgot tried in vain to do, the French Revolution would probably have been avoided by timely reforms, and no Napoleon would have arisen to scourge Europe."