

CHAPTER X

FROM LIBERAL TO LABOURITE.

In the middle of April 1920 or thereabouts, Colonel Wedgwood dramatically left the Party with which from the beginning of his Parliamentary career he had been connected—the Liberal Party—and enrolled himself as a Member of the Handley branch of the Labour Party. It is a tribute to his progressive tendencies and the confidence that he inspired in his constituency that in the Liberal landslide during the preceding year General Election he was one of the few Liberals who were fortunate in getting themselves returned. From a progressive Radical to a constitutional Labourite, the transition is not abrupt; and in Colonel Wedgwood's case, the transition which occurred was not surprising. The immediate cause for this "defection" on his part, as the Liberal Party must have felt it, was a speech of Mr. Asquith; but that was only the immediate cause, the last straw, as it were, that broke the camel's back. Deep down behind it there were several other causes,

some of them personal, but more the Liberal Party's bankruptcy in statesmanship suited to the times. It is perhaps well that we make a passing reference to these causes.

i

Although Wedgwood, as we saw, belonged to a middle class bourgeoisie, if not indeed a "capitalistic," family, he had imbibed the lessons of his grandfather who rose to the position of a captain of industry out of very humble beginnings. He knew by instinct, as it were, the difficulties, the merits and the weaknesses of artisans: he had an abundant amount of understanding sympathy for them. He was, further, by temperament and by his reading and study of economics and democratic politics, a Radical of Radicals; his connection, from the earliest period of his public life, with the Land Values Taxation League of which many Labour M. P's. were members, provided to him an opportunity to come in contact with and understand and sympathise with Labour politics. His experience of Africa, his holding a magistracy there, did not make him, as such experiences make Anglo-Indians, an arrogant Nawab.

In the recent War, he came in contact with men of many nationalities, the coloured Indians included; he fought shoulder to shoulder with them; and democrat that he was, his new experiences made him a super-democrat. While thus personal predilections were driving Wedgwood towards a more perfect democracy with a more just and equitable distribution of power and prosperity, his Party's failures and its rapid reduction to a moribund condition, due to the absence of the operation of the dynamic principle and consequent stagnation, only tended to goad him out of it.

Since the outbreak of the War, the Liberal Party has received more than one severe shock. Despite the democratic coating that it received in the days of Gladstone and Chamberlain, the Party had not really shed its whiggism altogether. Its leaders were the old "gentlemen" in a new garb, condescending to sacrifice their cultured leisure in the patriotic duty of taking to politics. Its methods were quiet considerateness, suavity of manners, classical correctness of conduct. It lacked

originality of conception, promptness of action, resoluteness of purpose; its vices were inaction which passed for caution, vacillation which passed for deliberation, lethargy which passed for steadiness. It was bankrupt in idea, in policy, in programme, in methods of speedy and effective execution. Fine phrases and flowery catch-words, the products of Oxford and Cambridge, had, however, had their days and had to yield place to rough and ready action, action which had even to refuse to count its cost. Asquith was no doubt a loveable peace Premier; and his fall was felt by many to be a tragic event. But, as it was inevitable, Mr. Lloyd George's ascendancy was received with acclamation and relief; for, people felt that a man of action with the necessary dash and driving power was what was required and not a scholarly, dignified, "gentleman" Premier who, if he gained respect, lacked the reputation for necessary resoluteness of purpose and for energetic action. Hence Mr. George's success.

ii

The "defection" of Mr. George from the Asquithian leadership was followed by the

defection of others; and the Liberal Party received the first shock since the War in the formation of the George Coalition. At first magnificently advertised by the *Times* and more magnificently received by the public, the Coalition's charms were, however, lost on the public at the close of the War when the country emerged with crushing burdens and with a militarist tendency in the Ministry which further increased those burdens. With a subservient Parliament at its back, the Coalition had its own autocratic way despite the immense volume, day by day gaining strength, of public opinion against it. Its strength lay, not so much in the personal followers of Mr. Lloyd George, the Coalition Liberals, but in the Unionist Party which had as a whole joined the Coalition and which in fact almost dominated British policy at many points. Under the influence of this clique of Unionists—the Carson-cum-Sir George Younger clique—Mr. Lloyd George adopted a foreign and a domestic policy which has turned out to be most unpopular. In regard to the domestic policy, under the Unionist-Capitalist ascendancy, you have a most extravagant financial policy which

is fast leading the country, as many believe, along the road to bankruptcy. By the same ascendancy, Labour feels that it is not impartially treated and the result is periodical strikes of a very widespread and disastrous character. The Government have no well-defined and principled Labour policy and it continues its precarious existence by a process of shameful higgling. The Carsonist ascendancy in the Cabinet of which the rebellious Ulsterite, Mr. F. E. Smith, now Lord Birkenhead, is Lord Chancellor, precludes the possibility of a satisfactory settlement of the Irish question which has now entered the phase of a treacherous guerilla warfare by Sinn Fein on the Royalists. In foreign policy, things are little better, if not worse. The foolish policy of wasting hundreds of men and million of pounds on the Russian reactionaries, antagonising Russia, the land-grabbing spirit which unjustly hunted after mandates over Mesopotamia, leading to Arab patriotic revolts, the attempted interference in the Polish War and other ventures of a like nature, have led the public believe that the Cabinet is impelled by arrogant and ambitious impertinence.

into dangerous paths, suicidal alike to national honour and safety. The enthusiasm with which Mr. Asquith's election as Member for Paisley was hailed was due to the fact that by organising a vigorous Opposition, he would be able to keep the Coalition along the right road; but his frequent absence from the House and his unavailing handling of the questions as they arose, impaired the confidence in him: he signally failed to organise a telling Opposition. The Liberal Party itself, there is evidence, felt dissatisfied with this state of affairs: the Manchester revolt is the concrete expression of that dissatisfaction; but the revolt led to no satisfactory results.

iii

In this moribund condition of the Liberal Party, when the Party refused to put in practice its dynamic ideals of progress, such of the Liberals who had an active mind, with whom fine phrases did not pass muster for effective action, men who could not perpetually "wait and see," had to seek support and organisation elsewhere than in the Liberal Party. And the Party with which they

threw in their lot was the new, but rising, one of the Labour Party; and as the *Nation* stated once, the Labour Party was more and more becoming the best exponent of the greatest ideals of Liberalism. And this young Party attracted consequently many members of the Liberal Party, Wedgwood and Dr. Rutherford among others.

The Party had a clear-cut, well-principled, logical, liberal programme, ready to be carried out in action and existing not in words merely. The programme contained an intelligent scheme of foreign policy as well as a domestic one; and indeed, the latter not a little depended on the former. Its foreign policy was to be one of real peace, not by force, but by reconciliation; for, as it argued, reconciliation alone begets confidence and on confidence depends the possibilities of reducing military preparations on which again depends the growth of prosperity, commerce and peace. It would therefore ruthlessly remove all obstacles on the path of conciliation such as impossible reparation and indemnity clauses, would refuse intervention on behalf of

Reaction such as those on behalf of the Russian White leaders, would put into practice, "hands off democracy." It would extricate the country from the Irish tangle by bestowing the greatest possible amount of freedom to that unhappy country, by a policy of bold generosity where the Coalition got on with one of cowardly repression. It would conciliate the world by withdrawing itself from all capitalistic Imperialistic ambitions and by really and honestly accepting the principle of self-determination, not for gaining selfish ambitions, but for forwarding the cause of universal democratic and nationalistic civilisation so as to secure a nationalistic Internationalism, if the phrase is permissible.

In the purely domestic field, the programme disdained to forward sectional interests. It would have nothing to do with militaristic designs, would refuse to enforce conscription and all the rest of the militarist's methods. In the economic sphere, it naturally sought to bring about a more just and equitable distribution of the product of industry. It advocated land nationalisation for workers.

It had before it a plan for building a million good houses to palliate the sufferings caused by acute house shortage. In regard to industrial welfare and increased production, it was for the establishment of an industrial democracy on moderate lines. This active and understandable policy better appealed to the Radical temperament of Colonel Wedgwood than the milk-and-water methods of Independent or Coalition Liberalism, and Wedgwood joined the Labour Party.

iv

It is well to record here the views of Colonel Wedgwood on the economics of labour and production. In the course of the Debate on the Address to His Majesty, the Prime Minister stated that the industrial discontent in the country was due to high prices induced by high wages. Taking this opportunity to criticise the "unsound economics" of the Premier, Colonel Wedgwood said that while the Prime Minister "concentrated his attention on the high wages of labour," "he did not draw attention to the fact that this Government is at the present time

creating and stimulating these high prices by limiting importation into the country and continuing all the restrictions of war trade, so that prices are going higher and higher." "The Prime Minister dealt with the question of unemployment," he said, "and told us that shortening the hours of labour from eight to seven or seven to six would inevitably lead to unemployment. In the main, he was right, but not altogether, because a man may well do better work in seven hours than in eight hours. I am aware that after seven hours in this place, even when there are interesting Bills to oppose, one's powers flag, and that the work done in the last hour is often not so great as that done in the earlier hours of the day."

He referred then to one more unsound point in the Premier's arguments. "In connection with the question of unemployment," he said, "the Prime Minister urged that there should be a vast building programme, not entirely for the providing of houses, but in order to provide work; that there should be great railway enterprise to develop the agricultural areas of this country, but not so

much to get cheap produce to the market as to provide work. All well and good, but let us remember that any form of useless work in proportion to its uselessness is waste and creates as much unemployment as it tries to stop. If you take money out of my pocket for the purpose of paying a man to dig up a field instead of using ploughs, that is useless employment and bad economics. It is waste. It will not enable me to buy the coal, the kettle or other conveniences of life that I want, and that will mean that other people are thrown out of work as a result of the useless work created to deal with unemployment. You must increase, useful, productive work if you want to increase employment, and not try to deal with unemployment by creating work of the kind to which I have referred or by putting on protective tariffs. It is better to create here the goods which we know how to create most cheaply and to exchange them, say, for Tangerine oranges or other things which we can get elsewhere. No artificial form of employment created by taking money out of taxpayer's pockets or by putting on protective tariffs or limiting free importation

can solve the problem of unemployment, but it simply puts an additional burden upon the community, and creates unemployment instead of destroying unemployment."

After thus pointing out that it was the wrong way of doing things that the Premier had adopted, Wedgwood proceeded to point out the right way of doing things. "We must concentrate our attention upon creating useful employment. What is useful work?" he asked and continued: "Useful work is transforming raw materials into goods and we want them. Every creative work transforms raw materials into the finished article. The sort of work we want to stimulate in this country is the application of labour to land and raw materials. If you make our coal easier of access by preventing the owners of the coal from keeping the coal-fields idle; if you make it more difficult for the owner of building land to keep it idle instead of throwing it into the market; if you make it a little difficult for the owner of a large farm under grazing when it should be broken up for small cultivation—all this makes it easier for labour to apply itself to the land

and increases opportunities for employment. That is better than artificial stimulus by the State."*

* *Hansard*, 11th February, 1919.