

LIBERALISM AND SOCIALISM [ToC](#)

ST. ANDREW'S HALL, GLASGOW, *October 11, 1906*

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The first indispensable condition of democratic progress must be the maintenance of European peace. War is fatal to Liberalism. Liberalism is the world-wide antagonist of war. We have every reason to congratulate ourselves upon the general aspect of the European situation. The friendship which has grown up between Great Britain and France is a source of profound satisfaction to every serious and thinking man. The first duty of a nation is to make friends with its nearest neighbour. Six years ago France was agitated in the throes of the Dreyfus case, and Great Britain was plunged in the worst and most painful period of the South African war; and both nations—conscious as we are of one another's infirmities—were inclined to express their opinion about the conduct of the other in unmeasured terms, [68]and keen antagonism resulted. What a contrast to-day! Ever since the King, whose services in the cause of international peace are regarded with affection in every quarter of his dominions, ever since by an act of prescience and of courage his Majesty went to Paris, the relations between Great Britain and France have steadily and progressively improved, and to-day we witness the inspiring spectacle of these two great peoples, the two most genuinely Liberal nations in the whole world, locked together in a league of friendship under standards of dispassionate justice and international goodwill. But it is absurd to suppose that the friendship which we have established with France should be in any degree a menace to any other European Power, or to the great Power of Germany.

If the prospects on the European continent are bright and tranquil, I think we have reason to feel also contentment at the course of Colonial affairs. We have had unusual difficulties in the Colonies; but in spite of every effort to excite Colonial apprehension for Party purposes against a Liberal Ministry through the instrumentality of a powerful press, the great States of the Empire have felt, and with more assurance every day, that a Liberal [69]Administration in Downing Street will respect their rights and cherish their interests.

But I am drawn to South Africa by the memory that to-night, the 11th of October, is the anniversary of the declaration of war; and I think it is in South Africa that we have especial reason to be satisfied with the course which events have taken, since we have been in any degree responsible for their direction. One great advantage we have had—a good foundation to build on. We have had the Treaty of Vereeniging, by which peace was established between the Dutch and British races in South Africa upon terms honourable to both. We have had that treaty as our foundation—and what a mercy it is,

looking back on the past, to think that the nation followed Lord Rosebery's advice at Chesterfield to terminate the war by a regular peace and a regular settlement, and were not lured away, as Lord Milner would have advised them, when he said that the war in a certain sense would never be over, into a harsh policy of unconditional surrender and pitiless subjugation.

The work of giving these free Constitutions to the two Colonies in South Africa, so lately independent Republics, is in harmony with [70]the most sagacious instincts, and the most honoured traditions of the Liberal Party. But I notice that Lord Milner, who, as we remember, was once a Liberal candidate,—and who now appears before us sometimes in the guise of a silent and suffering public servant, sometimes in the aspect of an active, and even an acrid, political partisan, haranguing his supporters and attacking his Majesty's Ministers,—Lord Milner describes all this improving outlook as "the dreary days of reaction." Progress and reaction are no doubt relative terms. What one man calls progress another will call reaction. If you have been rapidly descending the road to ruin and you suddenly check yourself, stop, turn back, and retrace your steps, that is reaction, and no doubt your former guide will have every reason to reproach you with inconsistency. And it seems to me not at all unnatural that to one who regards three years' desolating civil war as a period of healthy and inspiring progress, a good deal of what his Majesty's Government have lately done in South Africa must appear very dreary and reactionary indeed.

But I would recommend you to leave this disconsolate proconsul alone. I do not agree with him when he says that South [71]Africa is passing through a time of trial. South Africa is emerging from her time of trial. The darkest period is behind her. Brighter prospects lie before her. The improvement upon which we are counting is not the hectic flush of a market boom, but the steady revival and accumulation of agricultural and industrial productiveness. Soberly and solemnly men of all parties and of both races in South Africa are joining together to revive and to develop the prosperity of their own country. Grave difficulties, many dangers, long exertions lie before them; but the star of South Africa is already in the ascendant, and I look confidently forward to the time when it will take its place, united, federated, free, beside Canada and Australia, in the shining constellation of the British Empire.

When we have dealt with subjects which lie outside our own island, let us concentrate our attention on what lies within it, because the gravest problems lie at home. I shall venture to-night to make a few general observations upon those larger trendings of events which govern the incidents and the accidents of the hour. The fortunes and the interests of Liberalism and Labour are inseparably interwoven; they rise by the same forces, [72]and in spite of similar obstacles, they face the same enemies, they are affected by the same dangers, and the history of the last thirty years shows quite clearly that their power of influencing public affairs and of commanding national attention fluctuate together. Together they are elevated, together they are depressed, and any Tory reaction

which swept the Liberal Party out of power would assuredly work at least proportionate havoc in the ranks of Labour. That may not be a very palatable truth, but it is a truth none the less.

Labour! It is a great word. It moves the world, it comprises the millions, it combines many men in many lands in the sympathy of a common burden. Who has the right to speak for Labour? A good many people arrogate to themselves the right to speak for Labour. How many political Flibbertigibbets are there not running up and down the land calling themselves the people of Great Britain, and the social democracy, and the masses of the nation! But I am inclined to think, so far as any body of organised opinion can claim the right to speak for this immense portion of the human race, it is the trade unions that more than any other organisation must be considered [73]the responsible and deputed representatives of Labour. They are the most highly organised part of Labour; they are the most responsible part; they are from day to day in contact with reality. They are not mere visionaries or dreamers weaving airy Utopias out of tobacco smoke. They are not political adventurers who are eager to remodel the world by rule-of-thumb, who are proposing to make the infinite complexities of scientific civilisation and the multitudinous phenomena of great cities conform to a few barbarous formulas which any moderately intelligent parrot could repeat in a fortnight.

The fortunes of the trade unions are interwoven with the industries they serve. The more highly organised trade unions are, the more clearly they recognise their responsibilities; the larger their membership, the greater their knowledge, the wider their outlook. Of course, trade unions will make mistakes, like everybody else, will do foolish things, and wrong things, and want more than they are likely to get, just like everybody else. But the fact remains that for thirty years trade unions have had a charter from Parliament which up to within a few years ago protected [74]their funds, and gave them effective power to conduct a strike; and no one can say that these thirty years were bad years of British industry, that during these thirty years it was impossible to develop great businesses and carry on large manufacturing operations, because, as everybody knows perfectly well, those were good and expanding years of British trade and national enrichment.

A few years ago a series of judicial decisions utterly changed the whole character of the law regarding trade unions. It became difficult and obscure. The most skilful lawyers were unable to define it. No counsel knew what advice to tender to those who sought his guidance. Meanwhile if, in the conduct of a strike, any act of an agent, however unauthorised, transgressed the shadowy and uncertain border-line between what was legal and what was not, an action for damages might be instituted against the trade union, and if the action was successful, trade union funds, accumulated penny by penny, year by year, with which were inseparably intermingled friendly and benefit moneys, might in a moment have been swept away. That was the state of the law when his Majesty's present [75]advisers were returned to power. We have determined to give

back that charter to the trade unions. The Bill is even now passing through the House of Commons.

We are often told that there can be no progress for democracy until the Liberal Party has been destroyed. Let us examine that. Labour in this country exercises a great influence upon the Government. That is not so everywhere. It is not so, for instance, in Germany, and yet in Germany there is no Liberal Party worth speaking of. Labour there is very highly organised, and the Liberal Party there has been destroyed. In Germany there exists exactly the condition of affairs, in a Party sense, that Mr. Keir Hardie and his friends are so anxious to introduce here. A great social democratic party on the one hand, are bluntly and squarely face to face with a capitalist and military confederation on the other. That is the issue, as it presents itself in Germany; that is the issue, as I devoutly hope it may never present itself here. And what is the result? In spite of the great numbers of the Socialist Party in Germany, in spite of the high ability of its leaders, it has hardly any influence whatever upon the course of public affairs. [76]It has to submit to food taxes and to conscription; and I observe that Herr Bebel, the distinguished leader of that Party, at Mannheim the other day was forced to admit, and admitted with great candour, that there was no other country in Europe so effectively organised as Germany to put down anything in the nature of a violent Socialist movement. That is rather a disquieting result to working men of having destroyed the Liberal Party.

But we are told to wait a bit; the Socialist Party in Germany is only three millions. How many will there be in ten years' time? That is a fair argument. I should like to say this. A great many men can jump four feet, but very few can jump six feet. After a certain distance the difficulty increases progressively. It is so with the horse-power required to drive great ships across the ocean; it is so with the lifting power required to raise balloons in the air. A balloon goes up quite easily for a certain distance, but after a certain distance it refuses to go up any farther, because the air is too rarefied to float it and sustain it. And, therefore, I would say let us examine the concrete facts.

In France, before the Revolution, property [77]was divided among a very few people. A few thousand nobles and priests and merchants had all the wealth in the country; twenty-five million peasants had nothing. But in modern States, such as we see around us in the world to-day, property is very widely divided. I do not say it is evenly divided. I do not say it is fairly divided, but it is very widely divided. Especially is that true in Great Britain. Nowhere else in the world, except, perhaps, in France and the United States, are there such vast numbers of persons who are holders of interest-bearing, profit-bearing, rent-earning property, and the whole tendency of civilisation and of free institutions is to an ever-increasing volume of production and an increasingly wide diffusion of profit. And therein lies the essential stability of modern States. There are millions of persons who would certainly lose by anything like a general overturn, and they are everywhere the strongest and best organised millions. And I have no hesitation

in saying that any violent movement would infallibly encounter an overwhelming resistance, and that any movement which was inspired by mere class prejudice, or by a desire to gain a selfish advantage, would encounter from the selfish power of the "haves" an effective [78]resistance which would bring it to sterility and to destruction.

And here is the conclusion to which I lead you. Something more is needed if we are to get forward. There lies the function of the Liberal Party. Liberalism supplies at once the higher impulse and the practicable path; it appeals to persons by sentiments of generosity and humanity; it proceeds by courses of moderation. By gradual steps, by steady effort from day to day, from year to year, Liberalism enlists hundreds of thousands upon the side of progress and popular democratic reform whom militant Socialism would drive into violent Tory reaction. That is why the Tory Party hate us. That is why they, too, direct their attacks upon the great organisation of the Liberal Party, because they know it is through the agency of Liberalism that society will be able in the course of time to slide forward, almost painlessly—for the world is changing very fast—on to a more even and a more equal foundation. That is the mission that lies before Liberalism. The cause of the Liberal Party is the cause of the left-out millions; and because we believe that there is in all the world no other instrument of equal potency and efficacy [79]available at the present time for the purposes of social amelioration, we are bound in duty and in honour to guard it from all attacks, whether they arise from violence or from reaction.

There is no necessity to-night to plunge into a discussion of the philosophical divergencies between Socialism and Liberalism. It is not possible to draw a hard-and-fast line between individualism and collectivism. You cannot draw it either in theory or in practice. That is where the Socialist makes a mistake. Let us not imitate that mistake. No man can be a collectivist alone or an individualist alone. He must be both an individualist and a collectivist. The nature of man is a dual nature. The character of the organisation of human society is dual. Man is at once a unique being and a gregarious animal. For some purposes he must be collectivist, for others he is, and he will for all time remain, an individualist. Collectively we have an Army and a Navy and a Civil Service; collectively we have a Post Office, and a police, and a Government; collectively we light our streets and supply ourselves with water; collectively we indulge increasingly in all the necessities of [80]communication. But we do not make love collectively, and the ladies do not marry us collectively, and we do not eat collectively, and we do not die collectively, and it is not collectively that we face the sorrows and the hopes, the winnings and the losings of this world of accident and storm.

No view of society can possibly be complete which does not comprise within its scope both collective organisation and individual incentive. The whole tendency of civilisation is, however, towards the multiplication of the collective functions of society. The ever-growing complications of civilisation create for us new services which have to be undertaken by the State, and create for us an expansion of the existing

services. There is a growing feeling, which I entirely share, against allowing those services which are in the nature of monopolies to pass into private hands. There is a pretty steady determination, which I am convinced will become effective in the present Parliament, to intercept all future unearned increment which may arise from the increase in the speculative value of the land. There will be an ever-widening area of municipal enterprise. I go farther; I should like to see the State embark on various novel and [81]adventurous experiments, I am delighted to see that Mr. Burns is now interesting himself in afforestation. I am of opinion that the State should increasingly assume the position of the reserve employer of labour. I am very sorry we have not got the railways of this country in our hands. We may do something better with the canals, and we are all agreed, every one in this hall who belongs to the Progressive Party, that the State must increasingly and earnestly concern itself with the care of the sick and the aged, and, above all, of the children.

I look forward to the universal establishment of minimum standards of life and labour, and their progressive elevation as the increasing energies of production may permit. I do not think that Liberalism in any circumstances can cut itself off from this fertile field of social effort, and I would recommend you not to be scared in discussing any of these proposals, just because some old woman comes along and tells you they are Socialistic. If you take my advice, you will judge each case on its merits. Where you find that State enterprise is likely to be ineffective, then utilise private enterprises, and do not grudge them their profits.

[82]The existing organisation of society is driven by one mainspring—competitive selection. It may be a very imperfect organisation of society, but it is all we have got between us and barbarism. It is all we have been able to create through unnumbered centuries of effort and sacrifice. It is the whole treasure which past generations have been able to secure, and which they have been able to bequeath; and great and numerous as are the evils of the existing condition of society in this country, the advantages and achievements of the social system are greater still. Moreover, that system is one which offers an almost indefinite capacity for improvement. We may progressively eliminate the evils; we may progressively augment the goods which it contains. I do not want to see impaired the vigour of competition, but we can do much to mitigate the consequences of failure. We want to draw a line below which we will not allow persons to live and labour, yet above which they may compete with all the strength of their manhood. We want to have free competition upwards; we decline to allow free competition to run downwards. We do not want to pull down the structures of science and civilisation: [83]but to spread a net over the abyss; and I am sure that if the vision of a fair Utopia which cheers the hearts and lights the imagination of the toiling multitudes, should ever break into reality, it will be by developments through, and modifications in, and by improvements out of, the existing competitive organisation of society; and I

believe that Liberalism mobilised, and active as it is to-day, will be a principal and indispensable factor in that noble evolution.

I have been for nearly six years, in rather a short life, trained as a soldier, and I will use a military metaphor. There is no operation in war more dangerous or more important than the conduct of a rear-guard action and the extrication of a rear-guard from difficult and broken ground. In the long war which humanity wages with the elements of nature the main body of the army has won its victory. It has moved out into the open plain, into a pleasant camping ground by the water springs and in the sunshine, amid fair cities and fertile fields. But the rear-guard is entangled in the defiles, the rear-guard is still struggling in mountainous country, attacked and assailed on every side by the onslaughts of a pitiless enemy. The rear-guard is [84]encumbered with wounded, obstructed by all the broken vehicles that have fallen back from the main line of the march, with all the stragglers and weaklings that have fallen by the way and can struggle forward no farther. It is to the rear-guard of the army that attention should be directed. There is the place for the bravest soldiers and the most trusted generals. It is there that all the resources of military science and its heaviest artillery should be employed to extricate the rear-guard—not to bring the main army back from good positions which it occupies, not to throw away the victory which it has won over the brute forces of nature—but to bring the rear-guard in, to bring them into the level plain, so that they too may dwell in a land of peace and plenty.

That is the aim of the Liberal Party, and if we work together we will do something for its definite accomplishment.