

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PREMIER'S POWER TO DISSOLVE

*"Government is not reason, it is not eloquence—it is force! Like fire, it is a dangerous servant and a fearful master."*

GEORGE WASHINGTON.

#### THE THREAT OF DISSOLUTION

IN one respect I doubt the excellence of our British Constitution. The power to dissolve Parliament before its five-year term expires is given to the Prime Minister.<sup>1</sup> The President of the United States has no such power over Congress. Hardly one British Parliament in the last hundred years has lived out its allotted time.<sup>2</sup> Each time the Prime Minister has decided to dissolve, ostensibly to secure a Parliament more ready to support his Government. He secures in effect a plebiscite on his policy and acquires disciplined supporters.

For, if it were left to Parliament itself when to dissolve, it would never dissolve before its term legally expired. At a dissolution most Members risk losing their seat and certainly lose much money. All dislike intensely re-election, and for obvious reasons. So long as the Prime Minister has the power to put Members to this unpleasant experience he can frighten the House into supporting him, he can stop revolt in his Party, he can deprive debate and argument of any untoward result in the division lobby. He has only to say "I shall treat the vote as one of confidence", and fear of a dissolution does the rest. We should not have got rid of

<sup>1</sup> Of course it is the King who dissolves Parliament and summons a fresh one. But since the revolution the King has never done so save on the advice of his Prime Minister.

<sup>2</sup> Five years since 1918, previously seven years.

our last Prime Minister in May 1940 had he retained his power to dissolve Parliament. As Parliament could not be dissolved during the war, it was safe to vote against him.

Independents on the Government side, who dare to vote against their Party leader, risk more by a dissolution than all other Members. They are called rebels. At the following election, if they have defeated the Government, they cannot expect to be renominated by their Party in their old constituency. If the Government is defeated by their votes their Parliamentary career is generally closed. They may vote against their own Party Government when it is 'safe', *i.e.* when there is no risk of defeating the Government. But on a close vote of confidence, this power of the Prime Minister to dissolve ties his Party to him with bonds of iron. His mantle is thrown over every incompetent Minister, over any indefensible act of every Department. When all the weight of argument, all the sense of the House, is on the opposition side and against some Government blunder, the Opposition beg and beg in vain, that the 'whips may be taken off', that there may be a 'free' vote. The whips are not taken off. The worse the argument, the more they are needed. The utmost one can hope for is that Government supporters who have listened to the debate will abstain from voting.

This rigidity of Party discipline is due to the power to dissolve Parliament, a power which might perhaps be exercised if the Government were defeated. Nine times out of ten a Government defeat would not be followed by a dissolution, but the decision, the power, the whip, is always in the hands of the Prime Minister.

#### BUT THIS GIVES STABILITY

This power is defended on the ground that it gives stability to British Government. "Look," they say, or used to say,

“at France! Four fresh Governments a year! You never know where you are with the French.” That is quite true. We may never know where we are with the ever-changing French Governments; but the French themselves do know quite well. They know that their Governments will accurately represent predominant feeling in the *Chambre* and country. French government might not be so stable, but it was more representative. Nor was it really unstable. The fresh Government changed a few Ministers, it moved slightly to the Right or Left, but any change of policy was gradual. True, there might be a new Foreign Minister, upsetting to our Foreign Office; but there was not a totally new administration with a totally new policy. A General Election in Britain may change a Conservative Government into a Socialist Government, or *vice versa*, with a sharp and sudden change of policy, far from representing average opinion. Were it not for the fundamental moderation of British politics such changes would be devastating to any stability. As it actually is, policy changes little; the bureaucracy see to that. Therefore I lay stress on the importance of correcting and educating the bureaucracy.

The French used to have a General Election every four years unless the Chamber and Senate decided for an earlier dissolution, which of course they never did. That necessarily involved frequent defeats of the Government, which in turn involved a coalition of Parties or groups in the Government to assure even a normal majority vote. For a moment the Popular Front gave a Government with a majority to the Parties of the Left, almost in British fashion. Immediately political feeling, accustomed to the aimless shuttle between Left Centre and Right Centre, burst into violent action which ended in the fall of France.

If the Popular Front Government had been able to go to the country on their policy in 1936, and had obtained backing for the Popular Front from the French people, two rival, responsible and comprehensive Parties would have been established. But they could *not* go to the country for approval. Therefore they did *not* frame a policy to win general approval; but attempted to get the approval of each section of their own supporters. The Forty-Hours Week was the disastrous result of not having to face a General Electorate, but only a Party meeting.

The German system was in line with ours. The Chancellor could dissolve the Reichstag, just as the Prime Minister can here. He took, as it were, a series of plebiscites on Nazi-ism; considering mainly the interests of his own Party in coming to his decision. The American system of partial elections every two years is completely independent of the President's will. But then Congress is purely a legislature without executive functions. Finally, local government everywhere is carried on with elections at fixed periods, and any idea of giving the chairman of a county council the power to dissolve his council would be greeted with hilarity.

#### DEMOCRACY *v.* AUTHORITY

Great Britain stands with defunct Germany and Spain in leaving the date and power of dissolution in the hands of the Prime Minister. This power our First Lord of the Treasury inherited from the Crown. The dissolution of 1783 was the last occasion on which the Crown dissolved Parliament against the wishes of the leaders of the majority of the House of Commons, and even then it was with the approval of the actual First Lord, William Pitt.

Let us all agree that this power does give the Prime Minister immense dictatorial power over Members of Parlia-

ment, that it checks the formation of small Parties and the independence of Members, that it replaces reason by force, that it is undemocratic. *Pro tanto*, the Prime Minister is not responsible to Parliament, but Parliament is responsible to him. He gets in this way for his Government a security of tenure, limited only by the legal date of dissolution.

Ministers say that a homogeneous Government, with a definite constructive policy, needs such security of tenure. It has not worked badly. Ministers have time to learn their job. It has not destroyed independence in Parliament. We do not want a number of small Parties. The alternative French system has ended disastrously. Government may not be so representative of opinion or so democratic as in other countries; but, with our immense responsibilities all over the world, ours is the happy mean between rash democracy and steady efficiency.

I contest all these points. I never knew a government with a definite constructive policy. They all live from hand to mouth guided by the expediency of the moment and often seeking means of avoiding the fulfilment of their election pledges. It has worked badly, especially since the diminution of Liberalism. The policy of deflation, so far as it was definite and constructive, nearly ruined the country. Our continuity of pro-French anti-Weimar foreign policy—followed, after 1933, by continuity of appeasement—has left us fighting for our bare lives. Many Ministers will agree with me that one is more efficient as a Minister when shifting from one Department to another than when getting stale among one lot of specialists. Ministers should be directors and not specialists, and able direction comes best from experience of many offices.

As for the effect on independence of Members, one need only enquire of any Member of long standing whither the

last quarter of a century of Conservative and Labour Party discipline is taking us. On what else but the power of the Party machines does that discipline depend? Is it creating 'yes-men'? True, independence never vanished under Liberal governments or the old Party machines; that was because they were instinctively democratic, and really believed in the power of reason as against force and intimidation.

Nor do I see any objection to a number of Parties, representing a number of opinions. There is nothing sacred in a two-Party system or a one-Party Government. There is something ridiculous about 615 rational beings queuing behind two inspired *credos* (though I am content to queue up behind one, so long as the Nazis are trying to cut my throat). When the Germans, French, Dutch, Danes, Norsemen were free they could choose their own political Party pen. But Britons, where non-conformity is in the blood, are to be told "you must be for or against Mr. Blank's government. Otherwise you are unfit for politics", our 'immense responsibilities all over the world' require independent thought, not the continuity of Mr. Blank in the Colonial Office.

Actually I see no advantage in leaving this weapon in the hands of Prime Ministers. They are powerful enough already, and power breeds abuse. The power of the Cabinet has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished. There is no other way, save this, to diminish that power.

#### RESIGNATION OR RECONSTRUCTION

Observe what would happen if the Prime Minister could not dissolve Parliament. The Whips might still be put on, but Ministers of Parliament, dissatisfied, say, over sending Jewish refugees back to Hitler in the *Struma*, could safely vote against the Colonial Secretary knowing that Mr.

Churchill would remain Prime Minister. True, he might resign; but no one else could form a Government. Therefore he would form a new Government, changing at least his Colonial Minister. It would give him the excuse he might want for changing some others. That would be better democracy, and produce greater efficiency, as well as remove the slur on British history and traditions. Something similar might have happened over non-intervention in Spain, and over the fall of Prague. Even if the Government had not been defeated on these issues, it would have framed its policy more in accord with public opinion so as to avoid the risk of defeat. Our whole foreign policy since 1922 would have been different if the House of Commons had had any hand in it at all. As it was, the House idly debated and registered approval under Government compulsion.

Note the wise words of George Washington with which I head this chapter: "Government is not reason, it is not eloquence—it is force! Like fire, it is a dangerous servant and a fearful master." Ever since 1914 this Master has been growing more fearful to a House of Commons which has failed in its primary function, that of controlling the Executive. The fault lies not with any one man, but with the power given to one man. Moreover, that one man is, by the very possession of this power, deprived of knowing the feelings and wishes of the House. All the House can do is to tell the Chief Whip in private, and the Prime Minister has to rely more and more on what the Whips pass on to him. That is not democracy, but the Police State.

Annual Parliaments, as advocated by the Chartists—the only one of their seven points not already enacted—would have little advantage from this point of view, and many grave disadvantages. General Elections are fought on general issues, and Annual ones would not be fought at all in most

of the constituencies. In any case no Members of Parliament would ever enact such a curse to themselves. Plebiscites or the Referendum would hamper government, confuse any issue, and be a costly irrelevancy. The Gallup Polls are a far better means of discovering public opinion, and have the merit of registering those who think they understand 'Yes' and 'No' in a separate category from those who admit they 'don't know'. A plebiscite leaves 'Don't-knows' to the most vigorous and best financed canvassers.

#### THE PRESS TO THE RESCUE

The Gallup Polls bring one naturally to the influence and position of the Press. The eclipse of Parliamentary influence over policy has left the criticism of Government policy ever more in the hands of the fourth estate. The very fact that broadcasting is now a Government monopoly, and completely colourless, has sharpened the critical faculties of all newspaper men. They note that publicity is left to them alone. Parliament in bondage, the air tainted, only the Press remains, and, on the whole, the newspapers have done their duty well. Newspaper editors have stood up to their proprietors much better than have Members of Parliament to their Government.

In the days of the old Liberal-Conservative shuttle, newspapers were Party propaganda organs. They did not need to think for themselves; they took the Party line as supplied by the high priests of their Party. Now, under 'stable' or one-party rule, adulation bores their readers and criticism has to be supplied. The Liberal Party may be dead, but no one can say that Liberalism is dead while the *Manchester Guardian* and *News Chronicle* survive. The *Evening Standard* is owned by Lord Beaverbrook; but its cartoons and leading articles are more influential than fifty Members of



Parliament, and the presence of their proprietor in or out of the Government hardly appears to deflect the pen of David Low, Frank Owen or Michael Foot.

Indeed, the newspapers today, instead of attacking each other, have united in defending the freedom of one and all. As it were, they have found a new enemy and unite in attacking the bureaucracy. They usurp the duties of Parliament dropped by nervous hands. Redress of grievances has fallen into their columns. I cannot resent that they should be doing the work of Parliament; but we must all regret that they should have to do so. If one must choose between a free Press and a free Parliament, we may, on merits, prefer a free Press. But I see no reason why we should not have a free Parliament also, and remove from Members the fear of dissolution and the threats of Government Whips. Parliament must function if democracy is not to languish.