
The Decay of Liberalism

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The Decay of Liberalism

By FRANCIS NEILSON

SUMMARY: I: THE BACKGROUND OF LIBERALISM. II: THE EARLY RADICALS AND THEIR INFLUENCE. III: COBDEN, BEARER OF THE LIBERAL STANDARD. IV: THE EFFECT OF THE BOER WAR. V: THE RIOT OF SUPERFICIAL IDEAS. VI: INFILTRATION OF THE FABIANS. VII: EXPOSING THE FALLACY OF MARXISM. VIII: SENTIMENTAL REFORM AND LEGISLATIVE CHAOS. IX: FUNDAMENTAL REFORM—TOO LATE. X: A CONFUSION OF CHARITY WITH JUSTICE. XI: IMPERIALISM CRUSHES THE GREAT REVIVAL.

I CAN REMEMBER the time when it was possible in this country to meet Radicals and Liberals in nearly all the important centers of every State. There were societies where one could speak on Paine and Jefferson, with the certainty that the audience would not only be interested but would understand what these men meant to America. There are few Radicals and Liberals in the country now. Most of them are to be found among the Georgists who promulgate the gospel of "Progress and Poverty."

Nothing marks so clearly the disappearance of the Radical and the Liberal from the scene as the loose manner in which editors use these terms. Here is an instance of the confusion in the minds of the journalists which could not have occurred fifty years ago. An editorial in a midwestern paper of large circulation begins as follows:

In all the election post-mortems there is one thing everybody is agreed upon. It is that Mr. Roosevelt got the radical vote solid. Throughout

the country the Reds and the pinks, the Communists and the fellow travelers plumped for the President. . . .

I wonder if the editor knows anything about Radicals or Radicalism. Perhaps he has not taken the trouble to look into the history of the Radical movement to learn how it was merged into the Liberalism of Cobden's day. Would he know a Radical if he met one and conversed with him? I feel sure he would be amazed to find that such a one was a disciple of Paine and Jefferson. Neither Radicalism nor Liberalism has been an issue in party strife in this country since World War I. The Liberalism of Woodrow Wilson, as laid down in "The New Freedom,"¹ was the last to be preached by a politician, and many of his notions of what it was would not have been acceptable to the Liberals of Gladstone's day.

I

The Background of Liberalism

WHAT WAS LIBERALISM? Search as one may the works of the nineteenth century, the labor will be in vain if the purpose of the quest is to find a precise definition of the term, one that can be understood in the world of practical politics. I have looked through John Morley's "Life of William Ewart Gladstone"² again for a clear statement from either biographer or subject, and I fail to find it. There are pages and pages devoted to philosophical discussions, but not even a paragraph reveals Gladstone's notion of what Liberalism was. Perhaps early in his political career he realized it was impossible to devise the formula of a party creed that would satisfy the Radical element. He used to say that man was the least comprehensible of creatures; and of men the most incomprehensible were the politicians. If Gladstone did not take the trouble to tell us what he considered Liberalism was, I know of none of his associates who supplied a definition.

¹ New York, Doubleday Page & Co., 1913.

² Three volumes, London, Macmillan and Co., 1903.

Therefore, our search must go in another direction, and that points towards Richard Cobden. It is only in his speeches and writings, as edited by John Bright, Thorold Rogers, and John Morley,³ that I find the bedrock of Radicalism upon which the Liberalism of Gladstone's policy was built. Time has in no way aged the truth of the principles enunciated by that great international Englishman who bore the brunt of the battle against domestic and foreign tyranny during the nineteenth century. The principles of Cobden are principles that do not change. They remain impervious to all the political, diplomatic, industrial, and social evils that perplex the minds of clergymen, politicians, sociologists, and latter-day philosophers.

Professor Thorold Rogers, in his book, "Cobden and Modern Political Opinion,"⁴ unfolds the story of the conditions that prevailed in England when the Reform Bill was carried in 1832. This work is invaluable for a proper understanding of how the principles of the Whigs and Radicals were finally merged into the doctrine of Liberalism.

When Mrs. Grote wrote, for private circulation, her little brochure called "The Philosophical Radicals of 1832,"⁵ she told us of "the active and zealous efforts made by the Liberals, or, as they were then willing to be termed, the Radicals, of the City of London." This is of great interest because it is the earliest reference to the merging of the names Liberal and Radical.⁶

George Grote came in at the head of the poll in 1832 for

³ John Bright and James E. Thorold Rogers, "Speeches on Questions of Public Policy by Richard Cobden, M. P." (2 vols.), London, Macmillan and Co., 1870; John Morley, "The Life of Richard Cobden," Jubilee edition (2 vols.), London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1896; "The Political Writings of Richard Cobden," with a Preface by Lord Welby (2 vols.), London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1903.

⁴ London, Macmillan and Co., 1873.

⁵ London, Savill and Edwards, 1866.

⁶ About the year 1819 Harriet Martineau, in her "History of the Peace," wrote: "It is stated to have been now that the Reformers first assumed the name of Radicals" (Vol. I, p. 226).

the City of London. The author of "A History of Greece,"⁷ he was a rich banker. In this respect, it amuses me very much to find the absurd use to which the term Radical is put by uninformed editors and superficial politicians in the United States. Anything connected with Socialism or Communism is labelled by loose thinkers here as "Radical." It is only in recent years that it has been so abused by the thoughtless. It might aid some of our presumptuous writers if they were to take the trouble to look into the history of British politics since the rise of the Whig party so that they might learn who the Radicals were and what they stood for.

The student should have no difficulty in tracing the descent of the political doctrines expressed by Fox and his party in opposition at the time of Pitt down to the period when Cobden entered the House of Commons. There is a literature, accessible to all, which deals vividly with the parliamentary vicissitudes from the time of the rise of the Whig party down to the close of Cobden's career. Some of the finest English essayists have given us volumes of fascinating studies of the men and the measures of that long period. We owe to Sir George Otto Trevelyan, in his works on Fox,⁸ an intellectual debt for his exhilarating pages that describe not only the events in the political arena but the conditions under which rich and poor lived in those days. His portraits of the men who ruled England as well as those who opposed Bute, North, Pitt, and the Georges are models of design, the strength of which time does not diminish.

When I hark back to this period, I fail to understand how the men of today have neglected to set before our people the story of the last great struggle for English liberty, in which the American colonies triumphed against George III. The

⁷ Twelve volumes, London, John Murray, 1851.

⁸ "The Early History of Charles James Fox," New York, Harper & Brothers, 1880; "George the Third and Charles Fox" (2 vols.), London and New York, Longmans, Green and Co., 1912.

debates in the House of Commons are now a revelation of the principles that animated the souls of English patriots. In looking once again over the scenes enacted in England and portrayed by Liberal historians and the great essayists, I regret how little has been done in these latter days to record the affinities that should have endured and which should have united us not only in speech but in economic and political principles. The history of the growth of Liberalism, as it can be gathered from the pages that I refer to, is one of the most thrilling historical developments to be found in the annals of any State. But now that we are conscious of having taken the wrong turning in our affairs, it seems rather late to repair the breach, for the decay which began to eat into the members of the body politic in the late eighties, both in England and in the United States, must be attributed to the willful neglect of using the past to interpret the present and to anticipate the future.

II

The Early Radicals and Their Influence

THERE WAS NO PERIOD in English history so rich in basic constitutional thought as that which extended from 1760 to 1850. In those ninety years giants of economic and political wisdom thronged the scene, and their activities in and out of Parliament saved the country from the disastrous rule of the Hanoverians and their disreputable supporters.

Thomas Paine was thirty years old in 1767, when he taught at Gardiner's School in London. It should not be overlooked that the letters of Junius, which have been attributed to Paine, also appeared in that year. For seven years before he sailed for America Paine had been at the very center of the Radical uprising in London, and the thought and style of "Common Sense" and "The Crisis" reveal the true source of their origin—the English Radical school revived by John Wilkes.

London, for four years before Paine taught school at Kensington, had been the hotbed of the Radical movement. John Wilkes and Charles Churchill, in the *North Briton*, by their scathing denunciations of the government, had roused the people to action. The *North Briton* was a sensational adventure which was heartily welcomed and soon its circulation increased and spread in all directions.

The Radicals who desired the British Constitution to be reaffirmed and reestablished soon revealed to the King and his sordid ministers that they made their appeal for reform in the name of the disfranchised people of England. Not for centuries had the true gospel of English political thought been expressed in clear terms. Wilkes reaffirmed the principle of lawful government:

. . . Government is a just execution of the laws which were instituted for the people for their preservation; but if the people's implements, to whom they have trusted the execution of those laws, or any power for their preservation, should convert such execution to their destruction, have they not a right to intermeddle? Nay, have they not a right to resume the power they have delegated, and to punish their servants who have abused it? If a King can do no wrong, his ministers may, and are accountable to the people for their conduct.⁹

Franklin was in London at that time, and no doubt he followed the political uprising of the city with deepening interest as it progressed, for his acute mind would quickly grasp its significance to the affairs of the colonies. Perhaps he sent most of the papers and pamphlets issued by the Radicals to his friends in America, for those in Pennsylvania and in Massachusetts, who were in revolt against the British Government, spoke and wrote the same political creed that the Radicals of England voiced and published. Paine met Franklin in London in the years when John Cartwright wrote his ten letters, which appeared later under the title "American Independence the Interest and Glory of Great Britain."

⁹ *North Briton*, Number 19.

Now that we have Dr. Harry Hayden Clark's admirable volume, "Thomas Paine,"¹⁰ it is not difficult to trace the influence of the English Radicals' thought and style upon the writings of the American champions of liberty. Jefferson said:

No writer has exceeded Paine in ease and familiarity of style, in perspicuity of expression, happiness of elucidation, and in simple and unassuming language. In this he may be compared with Dr. Franklin; and indeed his *Common Sense* was, for awhile, believed to have been written by Dr. Franklin, and published under the borrowed name of Paine. . . .¹¹

The most active of the early Radicals were John Cartwright, John Jebb, Richard Price, and Joseph Priestley.¹² Cartwright was born in 1740. When a youth he served in the navy on the Newfoundland Station, but he soon saw that there was no career for him there, and he resigned his commission. Perhaps among the great Radicals "there is no more pleasing figure than that of this genuine and sincere, this single-minded, simple-hearted man."¹³

In certain circles he enjoyed a great reputation as a writer on political affairs, and his pamphlet on American Independence, published in 1774, made a great impression upon the politicians. It was followed by "Take Your Choice," perhaps the earliest work on parliamentary reform.

Cartwright, of course, did not receive his due while he lived, though he was called the father of reform. It was not until long years after he died that anyone thought it worth while to look into his history for the purpose of discovering the contributions of the man. It was then found that he had left behind him innumerable sayings that had the stamp of high morality upon them. Indeed, many of them entered

¹⁰ New York, American Book Company, 1944.

¹¹ Jefferson's "Writings," Monticello edition, XV, p. 305.

¹² C. F. Roylance Kent, "The English Radicals, An Historical Sketch," London, New York and Bombay, Longmans, Green and Co., 1899, pp. 67 *et seq.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 68. See also "Life and Correspondence of Major Cartwright," edited by his niece, F. D. Cartwright, 1826.

into the current sayings of the people themselves. Here are some that became general during the awful periods that followed Waterloo: "the principles of politics are the principles of reason, morality and religion." He remarked that the requirements of a statesman are a knowledge of "a few of the plain maxims of the law of nature and the clearest doctrines of Christianity." One axiom that was used by many of the Radicals who followed him was: "the title to liberty is the immediate gift of God, and is not derived from mouldy parchments." Although he was ridiculed and considered something of a bore by many of the men who, deep in their hearts, felt that he was right, a generation later English laborers were speaking the same language Cartwright had used; and those who sympathized with the rebels in the counties during the struggles before the Reform Act of 1832 realized that Cartwright expressed the true Radical principle when he said: "Moderation in conduct is wisdom, but moderation in principle is dishonour, and moderation in justice is injustice."¹⁴

Jebb, in expressing the new philosophy, was considered an even more redoubtable foe of tyranny than Cartwright. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin, and at Cambridge. He distinguished himself as second wrangler. Later on he took a medical degree and practiced successfully as a physician. The Society for Constitutional Information owed its foundation largely to his energy and persistence. To him must be attributed the well-known statement: "Don't tell me of a moderate man, he is always a rascal."

But for our particular interest we must turn to Price and Priestley. Lord Shelburne (the Marquess of Lansdowne) himself thought highly of Price's essays on "Providence" and

¹⁴ For further details about the period, see Esmè Wingfield-Stratford, "The History of British Civilization," New York, Harcourt Brace and Company; London, George Routledge and Sons, 1928, Vol. II, pp. 805 and 911.

"The Junction of Virtuous Men in a Future State."¹⁵ His pamphlets on the American Revolutionary War were famous and found favor with Shelburne when he became Prime Minister. When Price's fame reached America, the United States Congress beseeched him to settle in this country and to give his assistance in the regulation of the finances of the newly founded State. As a political philosopher he is second to none of the period.

Joseph Priestley is the one of the four whose name is best known here. He was the first of the English Unitarians, a minister of the gospel, a scientist, and a political philosopher of great power, whose influence was felt in England and in this country long years after he passed away. Priestley's essays have lost none of their radiance.¹⁶ The principles enunciated in them are as sound today in this world of chaos as they were when they were delivered in a world that had fallen so low politically that many thought it could not survive.

It has often been said that the great school of Philosophical Radicals owed its foundation to Priestley. It is only necessary to name some of the members of that famous body formed by George Grote, James Mill, and Sir William Molesworth to recall to our minds the days when a thorough examination was made of the political state of England and when principles were formulated that guided the Liberals who gathered round Gladstone. There was no branch of statecraft, no political study in connection with the conduct of a statesman that the Philosophical Radicals did not explore. It may be said that they were the men who set England once again upon her political feet.¹⁷

¹⁵ See biographical note on Richard Price in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* and in the memoir by William Morgan.

¹⁶ His collected works, edited by J. T. Rutt, were published in 25 volumes.

¹⁷ For further references on this subject see Francis Neilson, "Prospects for a Revival of Political Radicalism," *AM. JOUR. ECON. SOCIO.*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (October, 1943), pp. 15-27.

So much has been written by authors who have not taken the trouble to study the Radical movement in England that I consider the whole period should be reviewed again because new material has been gathered in a disjointed way during the past twenty years. For example, the nonsense that was written about the Manchester School of economists will scarcely bear examination now. Moreover, it is possible today to see the Philosophical Radicals in a new light. Many of their prophecies have been fulfilled. They pointed out the dangers that have gathered about parliamentary institutions since the beginning of the century. Indeed, some of them were seers and realized that, once the people departed from the Radical road, there was no choice but to go in the direction of Socialism. It was not Toryism they feared so much as it was bureaucratic rule. And no one will deny that today bureaucratic rule is destroying the people everywhere.

Although a review of the debilitating periods through which we have passed since Cobden, Gladstone, and Lincoln laid down their work can be of use only to the student, it is certainly worth while to take soundings again for spiritual and intellectual reasons and to learn that the great promise of the cause of liberty was not destroyed by its implacable opponents but by alien forces from within, which used the organization of Liberal movements for socialistic purposes.

III

Cobden, Bearer of the Liberal Standard

WHAT DID COBDEN stand for, and how are we to recognize him as the standard-bearer of the principles enunciated by the men who opposed North and Pitt? In these days of reckless extravagance we scarcely know what is meant by the slogan on the banner of Liberalism: "Peace, Retrenchment and Reform." But the words sum up succinctly the economic and political principles of Richard Cobden. Thorold

Rogers tells us that he knew Cobden intimately from his youth. In the preface that he wrote to "Cobden and Modern Political Opinion," he says:

. . . They who had similar advantages will bear me out when I say that Cobden was ready to speak upon every topic of public interest, and that his knowledge of facts was as remarkable as the clearness with which he interpreted the moral or political significance of events. . . .¹⁸

Cobden acted with the Liberal party. But he was not a partisan. From the beginning of his career to its close, he declared himself willing to accept reforms from all hands. It is easy to see why he acted with the Liberal party, for the nation has obtained every improvement in law and finance, every development of civil and religious freedom, every concession to justice and equity from those administrations which have been brought into power by the Liberal party. It is true that in many cases these reforms have been granted slowly, grudgingly, and imperfectly. But there will not be, and cannot be, any reaction from a genuine Liberalism. It is only when a government which has been brought into power by liberal opinion, plays false with its principles, or declines to develop its policy, or makes ignoble alliances, or affronts the convictions of those who have made it what it is, that the progress of liberal opinion is arrested, and its vigour is paralysed.¹⁹

This was written in 1873. It is a prophetic note, for who will fail to recognize that, when Liberalism played false with its principles, decay was certain to set in?

There was no shifting expedient in the composition of Cobden. The principles he cultivated were firmly held on all occasions. Rogers says:

. . . In public and private he denounced war as a barbarous and irrational expedient for removing a difficulty. He saw that it demoralised those who adopted it. He endorsed Bentham's definition of it, that it was "mischief on the largest scale." He saw that when the war fit is on a nation, there is no place left for reason and argument; that it was simple waste, unmixed evil. He believed that no war in the world's history was necessary, and therefore that none was capable of defence. . . .²⁰

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. v and vi.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

In his famous pamphlet entitled "Russia," which was published in 1836, he demanded: "As little intercourse as possible betwixt the *Governments*, as much connexion as possible between the *nations* of the world."²¹ The italics are Cobden's.

He never flinched. He was not known to hesitate to speak his mind firmly and clearly in the House of Commons and in the country. And now when we read the speeches and the pamphlets, we realize—alas, too late—what a singularly great political prophet he was.

As it so often happens with particular men, their contemporaries fail to estimate them at their true value. They are too near the protagonist, and the bitterness of the conflicts in parliamentary life cloud their vision. Years must pass before the mists that gather round a stalwart man pass from him and he stands out in a clear light for those of the generations to come to see him as he was and to appreciate his greatness. Yet, just after Cobden passed away, Gladstone wrote to his brother, Robertson:

What a sad, sad loss is this death of Cobden. I feel in miniature the truth of what Bright well said yesterday—ever since I really came to know him, I have held him in high esteem and regard as well as admiration; but till he died I did not know how high it was. I do not know that I have ever seen in public life a character more truly simple, noble, and unselfish. His death will make an echo through the world, which in its entirety he has served so well.²²

Later he wrote: "Cobden's name is great; it will be greater."²³

With Gladstone at the helm at that time, there seemed no reason why the principles enunciated by Richard Cobden should suffer from decay. Cobden had left to the Radicals of the Liberal party a special mission to be promulgated from their platforms, and that was to deal with the land question as he had dealt with protective tariffs. He counselled them to revalue the land of the country and to levy taxes upon it.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

²² John Morley, "The Life of William Ewart Gladstone," Vol. II, p. 143.

²³ *Loc. cit.*

Why was this not done? Many reasons have been given for the omission:

- (1) The legislative machine was burdened with highly controversial questions that did not affect the economic condition of the people.
- (2) Cobden left no upstanding heir as a missioner of influence.
- (3) The great increase in trade, after the abolition of the Corn Laws, and the remission of taxes in Gladstone's famous budgets, gave the masses a false sense of security. The fights for betterment had been so long and strenuous that the people had become tired and somewhat complacent.

Many other reasons have been given, but I think that there was no machinery of organization left in the country for such a mission after the Corn Law League was dissolved. Indeed, Gladstone himself lamented that the Liberal party was without organization and held that, if it could be organized in the constituencies, it would be irresistible. From the time of Cobden's death the Liberals held office for only about twelve years, and the Conservatives, under Disraeli, Salisbury, and Balfour, were in power for over twenty-five years before the great Liberal revival took place in 1906.

IV

The Effect of the Boer War

THE FIRST WORK to be written upon the principles of Liberalism came from the pen of Herbert Samuel, now Lord Samuel. "Liberalism, Its Principles and Proposals"²⁴ was published early in 1902, and Asquith wrote an introduction to it. The author told us that the purpose of it was to produce in a compact form the leading principles on which the action of the Liberal party was based. And he said: "A statement of this kind has not yet been attempted on behalf of Liberalism."

²⁴ London, Grant Richards, 1902.

In the introduction to this book, Asquith stated that liberty (in a political sense) was not only a negative but a positive conception. He then added: "To be really free, they [men] must be able to make the best use of faculty, opportunity, energy, life." He held that "in this fuller view of the true significance of Liberty we find the governing impulse in the later developments of Liberalism. . . ." Herbert Samuel, however, in the first chapter of his book, commits himself to the full Cobdenite doctrine. He says:

When we speak of Progress, we mean by progress the enlargement of this opportunity. When Liberals advocate Self-government, it is because Self-government is regarded as a means towards this end. When they raise the cry of Peace, Retrenchment and Reform, it is because peace, retrenchment and reform are held to be parts of the policy by which the State may fulfil this duty. . . .²⁵

We shall see to what extent the author of the introduction to the book held to these principles when he became Prime Minister and had full power to introduce basic economic reform.

What was the position of the party after the Boer War? It was estimated by official and unofficial committees investigating the conditions of the poor that one-third of the people were living on the poverty line. The slum conditions in the great towns were so shocking that the better-off middle class wondered at the patience of the dwellers in them. I know from direct experience what many districts in the East End of London were really like, but somehow there was an idea abroad that poverty was to be expected in that neighborhood. I was a member of a local committee in 1904, which investigated the conditions in some of the boroughs not far from the House of Commons and Westminster Abbey. One night we found eleven persons living in a small room in the cellar of a half-demolished house. In some of the areas that we visited,

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

overcrowding was the rule. But the most amazing thing we observed at that time was that the mothers were educating their children in the art of begging. However, this story has been told in many works, and it is unnecessary here to go through it all again. Nothing worth speaking about had been done to relieve the poor, and what was called social reform had scarcely advanced since the time of the great split over Home Rule in 1884.

Therefore, the first duty of Liberals was to consider the question of involuntary poverty and the economic causes of it. This was the imperative of Liberal policy. But the Radicals had lost heart. They were dismayed at the Boer War, and they felt after the Khaki Election of 1900 that nothing was to be expected from Balfour's Government. Indeed, the position in which the party was placed seemed hopeless in 1902. In my many meetings at Liberal headquarters, encountering Herbert Gladstone, Robert Hudson, and Frank Barker, all I could gather from them was that the party had to be organized in the country before any great change could take place. No one seemed to be particularly hopeful of the future. And it was not until Mr. Chamberlain launched his proposals of colonial preference (protection) that Liberal headquarters had an opportunity to see what could be done in the constituencies.

It was strange how, in 1902, Joseph Chamberlain revived the party he had helped to destroy in 1884. His scheme of preference to the colonies acted like magic upon the Liberals in the counties and towns and brought the Radicals back into the fold, determined to fight protective tariffs in any shape or form. Then a miracle took place. At the by-elections seats that had been held by the Tories for generations were won by free-trade candidates. In the two years after Chamberlain gave his proposals to the country, the whole electoral

outlook for Liberalism changed, and wherever one went there was hope at last that great things might be done. I do not think there is recorded in the annals of any political party anywhere such an amazing change from hopelessness to confidence. And strong it was!

Such was the view taken by the chiefs of the party after the unprecedented series of Liberal victories gained at the by-elections. A year before the General Election of 1906 even the Tories sometimes admitted that they would be swept out of power for at least twenty years.

V

The Riot of Superficial Ideas

HOWEVER, THERE IS another side to this matter, which must be exposed if one is to understand clearly how Liberalism began to decay and lose its vitality. When I entered active politics in the year 1902, I soon realized that my ideas of Liberalism were held by comparatively few members and candidates. At the by-elections, which were frequent, I met perfectly sincere men who expended their energies upon a single social problem, such as temperance reform, sweat-shop reform, housing reform, educational reform, prison reform, Garden City schemes, and many of the other problems aggravated by evil economic conditions. Very seldom did I meet a man who was inclined to listen to the cause of most of these distressing matters. Nevertheless, the dominant of all the controversies of that time was that of colonial preference, advocated by Joseph Chamberlain. Here there was no difference of opinion. All Liberals were agreed that protection had to be fought and free trade in Great Britain maintained.

I was singularly well placed at that time to get in touch with the men of the many movements then being formed to use the Liberal party for their own purposes. During the winter, when I was not busily engaged at the Royal Opera,

I went occasionally to afternoon teas, lectures, and those strange discussion parties held at the houses of well-intentioned individuals who were affected with Socialist notions. It did not take me long to suspect that I was regarded as a curiosity—an old-fashioned one—because I had not moved with the times. Was I conscious of the sea of woe in the towns, the factories, and the slums? Questions about social problems were put to me by men who would run a mile rather than face the denizens of poverty they imagined they would assist. When some of these people learned that I had been through all of woeland, both in England and in America, they regarded me as something of a wet blanket. I noticed the ardor they had formerly put into their speeches and chats pale away, and in discussions some of the speakers would watch me with furtive eyes, anxious about the moment when I would challenge a statement.

If anybody who thinks he is a Liberal today wishes to know something of the chaos of thought that reigned in the Liberal, Fabian, and Socialist circles of that time, he cannot do better than read Philip Mairet's memoir on Orage,²⁶ the literary Prometheus of the period. For he, as editor of the *New Age*, was the magnet that drew around him the chief men of these movements to which I refer, and was by far the most fascinating figure in all the political strife that preceded the war.

Alfred Orage—a shackled genius himself—represented the intellectual turmoil. One night I asked him if he had found his direction. "Neilson," he replied, "I don't think I ever shall." How was it possible for him to discover himself in those days? Think of the men who contributed to the *New Age*! To mention only a few in the galaxy of writers, there were Shaw, Chesterton, Belloc, Wells, Havelock Ellis, Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy; then there were also the Nietzscheans—J. M. Kennedy, Dr. Oscar Levy, and A. M. Ludovici.

²⁶ London, J. M. Dent and Sons, 1936.

Mairet says that Orage at that time remained Fabian on the whole. Yet, he was a profound student of Nietzsche.²⁷

After the sad experience of his association with Gurdjieff,²⁸ I saw him many times, and, whenever we spoke of the early days of the *New Age*, he seemed to believe that most of the strivings had been of no avail. But Orage found his direction at last. In a fine passage Mairet discloses the end of the quest:

Credo quia impossibile may sometimes be as much the saving grace of the intellectual as the mortal danger of the fool. "It would be saying too much to affirm," said Orage later, "that I resigned from the *New Age* and from active participation in social reform in order to find God. I only wish that my motives could be as clearly conscious as that would imply." But how could they, when his head had gone in search of his soul, like Orpheus for Eurydice, that both might be whole? It was at least a sure instinct of the spirit, for if wholeness be not God Himself, through wholeness alone can we know Him.²⁹

VI

Infiltration of the Fabians

WHAT, THEN, was to be expected of a party—if it were elected to office—whose reconception was conceived in such a turmoil of superficial ideas?

In the brief space allotted to an essay it is not possible to go deeply into the ramifications of the political thought of that time. However, there are several books—some of them memoirs—which supply the information that may be used in an extended work on the subject. The influence of Sidney and Beatrice Webb and their satellites undoubtedly was responsible for a great change in what was called "Liberal thought," and explains why it was that so many Fabians stood as Liberal candidates in the election of 1906. Not that these

²⁷ Two of his works were: "Nietzsche in Outline and Aphorism," London, T. N. Foulis; and "Nietzsche, The Dionysian Spirit of the Age," London, T. N. Foulis.

²⁸ For an interesting account of this extraordinary man, see "More Lives Than One," by Claude Bragdon, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1938, p. 321 *et seq.*

²⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 90.

people understood the radical differences between the two creeds!

When these men were asked why they did not join the Independent Labor party headed by MacDonald and Snowden, they protested that they were Liberals but that a dash of Fabianism was required to deal with the immediate social problems. And although the free trade principles of Richard Cobden were enunciated from all Liberal platforms, I had "ma doots" about the sincerity of many candidates who were inclined to sneer at Cobden as a man of but a single idea.

So dishonest did the action of these Fabians appear to the real Radicals that in many constituencies men of the old school decided to abstain from voting. An estimate was made in 1905 of the number of Radicals standing for the General Election, and all that could be counted as reliable candidates were fifty-odd. For the one-reform men, such as town-planners, profit-sharers, total-abstainers, education- and slum-reformers, were not looked upon as safe for forcing the government to deal with the full Cobdenite policy of thorough economic reform.

Another strange change that had taken place and was most noticeable was that of the young parliamentary aspirants in the party who regarded *social* reform as something of a panacea for involuntary poverty. I spoke in many of the constituencies where these men stood as candidates; and from the local Liberals, in nearly every case, I heard complaints that their man was not a Radical. After a meeting one night, a blacksmith, pointing the finger of scorn at his candidate, said: "All he can offer is sops for saps, and we don't want sops!" Among all those young men I do not remember one who knew the full Cobdenite gospel. When I quoted Cobden's famous Derby speech, in which he demanded the taxation of land values³⁰ for revenue to enable the government

³⁰ Dec. 10, 1841.

to abolish the breakfast-table duties, the candidate after the meeting said to me, "I say, Neilson, that's a bit strong, isn't it?"

Still, it is only fair to say that from my experience, these young Liberal candidates were not a whit less superficial than the Fabians themselves. And, since during the past twelve years we have had the experience of seeing what can happen to a great party through the infiltration of Fabian ideas, it should be of interest to learn something of the intellectual caliber of the men who attempted to take possession of the Liberal party and in many ways undermined its power; for what happened in England then has happened here now. I do not think it possible to give a clearer account of the loose thinking and the indeterminate notions disseminated by the separate schools operating within the ambit of the Fabian society than that presented by Philip Mairet.³¹ His work is invaluable for a proper understanding of the riot in ideas that raged among the Fabians, the guild men, the Socialists—Christian and atheistic—and the sentimental Liberals.

VII

Exposing the Fallacy of Marxism

WHEN, IN 1904, I told Herbert Gladstone that the only way the party could survive would be by initiating a campaign against Socialism, he scorned the idea. At that time there were ten or a dozen Radicals standing as prospective candidates, who agreed with me. But the heads of the party, having little or no knowledge of what was taking place in Fabian circles, laughed at the notion that there was anything to fear from the Socialists.

When I became acquainted with Robert Leonard Outhwaite,³² who fought Joseph Chamberlain in West Birming-

³¹ *Op. cit.*

³² He became the Liberal member for Hanley in 1912.

ham in the General Election in 1906, I found a man who was fully qualified to assist me in looking deeply into the problem of how Fabianism (or Socialism) would effect a revival of Liberalism. Outhwaite had just returned from South Africa, after the war, and he had brought with him an abundance of literary by-products of Max Hirsch. He and Hirsch had worked together in Australia. These writings were largely examinations of the Fabian tracts. But what really served as the most destructive piece of criticism of the proposals and conceptions of Socialism (Fabianism) was Hirsch's work, "Democracy versus Socialism."³³ After mastering the analysis of Max Hirsch, I began the series of debates with Socialists that I carried on for about ten years. Not once in all that time did I meet a Socialist or a Fabian who gave me the impression that he had read *Das Kapital*.³⁴ "The Communist Manifesto"³⁵ and the Fabian tracts were about as far as any of my opponents had gone in the literature of Communism or Socialism.

The extraordinary thing about all this is that Outhwaite and I came to the conclusion that Marx, when he set to work on *Das Kapital*, did not know his subject. He certainly knew what was wrong, but he did not have the faintest conception of why it was wrong until he reached the chapter on "The Modern Theory of Colonization." Even then—after 841 pages—he did not realize that his first findings were false and that the early chapters were only worth burning. When he discovered that "the expropriation of the mass of the people from the soil forms the basis of the capitalist mode of production,"³⁶ he destroyed at a blow the fallacious theories with which he began his work. Moreover, Marx learned as he proceeded with his task, and in the third volume there are many

³³ London, Macmillan and Co.; New York, The Macmillan Company, 1901.

³⁴ Three volumes, Chicago, Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1932.

³⁵ By Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Chicago, Charles H. Kerr & Company, no date.

³⁶ *Das Kapital*, Vol. I, p. 841.

references to the land question and the necessity of taking what he calls ground rent.

How strange it is that the world should be turned upside down by people who have been actuated in economics and politics by a man who did not realize what utter nonsense he had written in the early chapters of his book, even when he destroyed his own thesis and theory in the later portions of it!

VIII

Sentimental Reform and Legislative Chaos

WHAT CHANCE was there to formulate a policy for the Liberal party that would carry on the full Cobdenite tradition? And how is it to be explained that although the burning question of the hour was to fight protective tariffs, the men who called themselves free traders took no trouble to learn the fundamental of free trade as laid down by Cobden himself? In his last public speech he said:

If I were five-and-twenty or thirty instead of, unhappily, twice that number of years, I would take Adam Smith in hand . . . and I would have a League for Free Trade in Land, just as we had a League for Free Trade in Corn. . . . The men who will do that will have done for England probably more than we have been able to do by making Free Trade in Corn.³⁷

On another occasion he stated:

I warn [the landlords] against ripping up the subject of taxation. If they want another League at the death of this one [the Anti-Corn Law League], then let them force the middle and industrious classes to understand how they have been cheated, robbed and bamboozled upon the subject of taxation.³⁸

There was no doubt about the value of the mission handed on by Cobden to the Liberal forces of the country, but the Radicals were the only ones who knew it.

A word must be said here about the deleterious influence of what were called "the sentimental Liberals." They seemed

³⁷ At Rochdale, Nov. 23, 1864.

³⁸ In London, Dec. 17, 1845.

to be the lineal descendants of the Christian Socialists of Kingsley and Maurice. In some respects they were a more curious body within the party than the Fabians. There was not a man among them who was not perfectly sincere, but they were all utterly devoid of economic knowledge. They seemed to be guided by the notion that the woe was so deep and wide that nothing could be done but to try to ease it by giving doles. They were all for milk for the children, medicines for the sick, better dwellings for the slummers, Garden Cities for thrifty working men. Indeed, there seemed to be no end to the list of measures they could invent for alleviating—only alleviating—the distress. That they were indignant and shocked at the evil condition no one could doubt, but they completely lost sight of the cause of the troubles and did nothing to help the Radicals get to the root of the problem. They added to the transitory burdens of legislation by introducing measures which, when put into practice, made things worse.

Those of us who saw Liberalism decay in the last four years before World War I realize how it was all brought about, and the results of the great efforts which made the revival in 1906 one of the finest achievements that had ever taken place in British politics were dissipated before our eyes. Only one conclusion could be arrived at: Liberalism was destroyed from within itself by alien forces that had used it only for their own purposes.

How strange that the great revival after the Boer War should peter out so soon! A brief ten or twelve years covered the whole of that period. It is true, however, that, when Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman was swept into power in 1906 with the greatest majority a Liberal Prime Minister had ever received, the election had been fought upon an issue of defense. The attack of the protectionists had failed, and free

trade was to be maintained. But Liberalism in nearly all its essentials was a creed of defiance. Its purpose was to attack the abuses the people suffered and to demand that the old law should be reaffirmed and reestablished.

The program which was placed before the country by Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman certainly called for the amelioration of many wrongs. But these pledges were of secondary importance in the struggle to save the untaxed loaf for the people. Yet, the multifarious reforms in the program, after the election, suddenly became the burning parliamentary questions of the sessions. The Irish Party, led by John Redmond, was there to obtain Home Rule for Ireland. The temperance reformers of various schools were there to force the government to bring in legislation against the licensing laws. The town-planners came into the arena with their blueprints of Utopian schemes. The daylight-savers hoped to add an hour of sunlight to the lives of the workers. The municipal reformers, armed with many bills which aimed to correct the abuses from which the urban dweller suffered, clamored for time to introduce them. John Burns said on one occasion, when as head of the Local Government Board he was pressed by a deputation of urban town councillors to deal with some local matter, that he did not think he could obtain time from the government to introduce such a measure because each Liberal member had a pet project of his own. No better commentary could be made upon the chaos of superficial reform into which the House plunged after the death of Sir Henry.

It was not long after Asquith became Prime Minister that Lloyd George was taken by Charles Henry for a motor ride through Germany. He returned with the German model of insurance against sickness and, although it has been claimed that Winston Churchill was the author of the Labor Bureau

legislation, I know for a fact that Mr. Lloyd George had learned of that scheme while he was away on his motor trip. Therefore, it must be understood that most of the parliamentary time, for the six years under Asquith (before the war began), was spent on measures which in no way dealt with the fundamental problems that Liberalism, in the years past, had determined to attack. Here it should be mentioned that in the short two years of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman's tenure as Prime Minister, the question of the Union of South Africa absorbed much time and that the Scottish Land Values Bill was the only important measure of economic reform Parliament dealt with in that period. Of course, the usual bills for finance and the services, which came up every session, always took a great slice of parliamentary time. All this deeply aggravated the impatience of those men for whose pet schemes the government could give little or no attention. And this impatience became most noticeable in the country after Asquith became Prime Minister.

At the by-elections majorities were reduced and seats were lost. One reason for the great dissatisfaction that was spreading was the Licensing Bill, which was introduced in 1908. This seemed to overshadow every other problem. Fighting a by-election in the spring of that year, I was amazed to discover that fairly large sections of my audiences did not desire to hear about any other legislative matter except the question of whether their pots of beer would be forthcoming.

The introduction of the Licensing Bill was one of the greatest mistakes of the Asquith Government. One of the Whips told me that a canvas taken by them showed not more than forty members in the party who were keen about the bill.

IX

Fundamental Reform—Too Late

THE FOREGOING SKETCH of the legislative chaos is necessary for the purpose of showing how an overloaded program can

go far towards defeating a great parliamentary majority. And it must be observed that the Liberal party had had no such experience as this in its history. Neither Gladstone nor Rosebery had been hampered in that way. A good story is told about John Morley taking the Newcastle program to Gladstone. In handing it to the Prime Minister, he said, "This, sir, is the list of the questions for you to consider." Gladstone did not trouble to put his glasses on. He unfolded the scroll, ran his eye from top to bottom, and noted the number of different reforms on the list, then sighed and said to Morley, "Is this all, John?" At that time long lists of reforms were made up and deputations presented them to Prime Ministers and cabinet members, but the reformers must have had a better sense of parliamentary time than their heirs, for no grave dissatisfaction was expressed if the legislative suggestions were overlooked or challenged.

The opposition was never bothered with programs. Its cabinet, or its chief, when in opposition, did the thinking for the party. The docility of its back-benchers was in strange contrast to the impatience of those who sat behind the Liberal Treasury Bench.

How any party could survive the avalanche of superficial notions of reform that struck Liberalism in those years puzzled me mightily! After the General Election of 1906, it soon became evident that the chief business of the party was to remain in power, each member hoping his pet measure would some time be fathered by the government. Within two or three years the members who were associated with the Labor Representation Committee began to shed their Liberal garments and assume the cassock of Marx.

This gave me the opportunity I had been looking for of presenting the case of radical economic reform as an alternative to Socialism. For years I carried on the campaign in the

constituencies, and in the early days of it, to my amazement I found that the drift from Liberalism was far beyond what I anticipated. For example, the young men in the miners' lodges were going over to Socialism by the scores. In the towns, the Leagues of Young Liberals checked for a time the spread of socialistic nostrums. But in the great mill districts of Yorkshire and Lancashire, Marx was winning adherents at every by-election. Then, in the summer of 1907, in a three-cornered fight, Victor Grayson was elected as an avowed Socialist. The effect upon the Liberal leaders in London was so shocking that it forced the cabinet and the Whips to consider schemes for checking the rot. Hence, the introduction of sickness insurance, old-age pensions, and many such superficial ameliorative measures.

But when it was too late—in 1909—the Land Values Budget was introduced as a corrective of the blunders that had been made since the death of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. Had the Land Values Bill for England and Wales been introduced immediately after the House of Lords rejected the Scottish Land Values Bill, something positive might have been done. To show what the débâcle meant, it is only necessary to quote the figures of the majorities. In 1906 Campbell-Bannerman had been returned with a Liberal-Labor majority of 354. In 1910 that majority had sunk to 124. (The figures include the Irish Nationalist Party.) Here it is necessary to point out that, when the Liberal-Imperialists set up the inner cabinet, after Asquith became Prime Minister, there was never the same confidence in the constituencies that was manifest when Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman was leader. Asquith, Grey, and Haldane were always suspected by the old Radicals who had stood firm during the Boer War. The split then brought about by Rosebery in forming the Liberal League was never healed, and only such

a grave question as that of maintaining free trade against Chamberlain's policy of protection brought about a temporary tolerance of the Liberal Leaguers. This breach went deeper than any of the Whips knew.

I remember dining with the Master of Elibank one night when he was Chief Whip. We had met to discuss a campaign on land values. He did not see his way to persuade the government to participate in it, but he gave it his personal blessing and hoped for the best. Just as I was leaving him, he said to me very gravely, "Neilson, this is the first time I have been conscious that Liberalism cannot exist without the Radicals."

X

A Confusion of Charity with Justice

THERE WERE TWO WORDS linked together—*social justice*—which I consider did more to vitiate the principles of Liberalism expounded by Cobden than any others in the vocabulary of party politics. The use to which they were put became the abracadabra of Fabian-Liberal platforms. The comic part of this was that the Socialists and the Fabians within the party relied upon them for the chief feature of their perorations. When it was pointed out that there was no justice in the principles and conceptions of Socialism, that they had to be abandoned because of the distributive proposals, the Fabians and the superficial Liberals were grieved beyond measure. They looked as if they had been deprived of some precious keepsake. When, further, it was found that there was no justice in many of the recommendations they made, that everything was in the nature of charity, and not justice, they looked upon their opponents as brutal iconoclasts who had smashed a holy image.

Therefore, in the Land Values Campaign that began in the winter of 1907, these two words "*social justice*" became a text

for speakers from hundreds of platforms. They were shown to mean nothing in the way of justice. Every reform suggested by those who would merely ameliorate the sufferings of the poor was nothing more than a modicum of charity and, if carried into effect, would perhaps make things worse than they were before. It was just an aggravation of the old system maintained in many of the villages by the squire and his lady—the promise of a yard or two of red flannel for a petticoat and a bit of tobacco for the old man's pipe or, as Victor Hugo would say, an attempt to buy a penn'orth of heaven. The people themselves, when it was put frankly before them, saw the trick and realized it was just a sop to them and a conscience-soothing sedative for the giver.

The amazing rapidity with which the old forces in the constituencies gathered in that Land Values Campaign, when everything was against the Liberal record, proved to the Whips that the time had come when Asquith and Lloyd George dared no longer put off economic reform. The resolutions from the meetings, urging the government to tax land values in the Budget of 1909, poured in to such an extent that the people at Downing Street admitted they could not possibly deal with the quantity. This campaign saved the government from defeat the following year. However, to the dismay of the men who had toiled to create this revival, the bill was mangled in the House of Commons, and Lloyd George proved incompetent to carry it as it was introduced. Then the House of Lords threw the puny measure out, and this blunder was responsible for the introduction of the Parliament Bill the following year.

XI

Imperialism Crushes the Great Revival

THE STORY of the next four years is well known. The great revival was crushed by the load of disappointment, for the

Land Values Bill became a thing of shreds and patches, twisted and tangled out of all shape, unrecognizable, abortive, and disowned by its creators.

Liberalism was not destroyed by an attack delivered from its old opponents. I cannot remember an argument of the Tories, or even a challenge of the Conservative protectionists, that it was not at all times ready to meet with confidence and vigor.

It had weathered the storms of the eighties when the split over Home Rule seemed to shatter the party, and it survived the bitter years from 1895 to 1905 during which the Conservatives held power and the struggle with the Boers in South Africa brought about another split in the party. The shocks suffered for the greater part of twenty years were sufficient to paralyze the aspirations of any democratic force, but there was in it the principles of a long tradition which maintained it in all periods of distress. The blow that destroyed it was struck from within.

Moreover, when in 1911, after the Agadir crisis, the government was committed to a war policy, another destructive blow fell upon the party. The Radicals accused the Liberal Leaguers—Asquith, Grey, and Haldane—of playing the game of the war-like Tories. The prospect of war brought disunion, and the genuine Liberals protested in vain against the foreign policy of the imperialists.

After the declaration of war in 1914, I was called to the office of the Chief Liberal Whip, Percy Illingworth. I found him in tears. He was so shaken that for a minute he could not find speech. Then he muttered, "Liberalism is dead."

Requiescat in pace!

Chicago