

THE PROSPECT OF 1937¹

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THERE is one comforting certainty among the many apprehensions with which Britain looks forward to 1937. That is that, whatever happens, 1937 can be no worse than 1936. It may bring war and famine and pestilence; it will probably bring some form of regimentation. But it cannot conceivably bring any more humiliation. For in 1936 Britain domestically, internationally, politically, morally has touched the depths.

Above all, morally. A year ago there was related in this correspondence the story of a Cabinet Minister who had privately boasted that the British Government's only purpose in supporting the League of Nations was to win a general election. It was related as an incredible story, which, indeed, it seemed. Within a month, the general election having meantime been won, a Hoare-Laval plan for the partition of Abyssinia had proved the story true. A scapegoat was offered for sacrifice; and the country settled down to listen with uneasy appreciation, but with appreciation still, to the speech on collective security which its successive Foreign Secretaries have made at increasing intervals during the past two years. It had scarcely settled down when rumours of a Budget "scandal" were put about. A Cabinet Minister, it was said, had given Budget information to gamblers on the effect of the Budget. And again an incredible story proved true. Again a scapegoat was offered for sacrifice.

This time the country did not settle down so quickly. It was not that it considered Mr. J. H. Thomas's offence heinous. He had not bet himself; and in any case, betting in some form is the common pastime of a large majority of the inhabitants of these islands. Betting on a certainty, which is what Mr. J. H. Thomas's friends did, is not quite in line with the general practice. But there was no evidence that their bets had done any more harm than is done daily by speculators on the Stock Exchange. Therefore, when British newspapers unanimously condemned Budget gambling with the same moral indignation as they had expressed over the Hoare-Laval plan, there were many Englishmen who cocked a questioning eyebrow. They were not prepared to believe that this offence against the law of the land was of the same order as betrayal of a moral principle. What disturbed them was sus-

1. The MS. of this article was completed on Dec. 1, 1936—nine days before the abdication of Edward VIII. It seems best to publish it unrevised, as the record in its last section of the impressions of one keen observer at that time on the spot. *Editor.*

pcion of something much worse. If stories which had been privately circulating about members of parliament for years had been proved true, was it not reasonable to suppose that the privately circulated stories about much graver forms of corruption might also be true? The English law of libel, great safeguard of the individual and great danger to society, would have placed some restraint on would-be-publishers of these other stories. Even if it had not, the experience of this year is sufficient proof that the British Press would not in any case have touched upon them. For, soon after the Budget "scandal" had died down, another "scandal" was unearthed and another scapegoat offered on the altar of governmental moral indignation. Sir Christopher Bullock, Permanent Secretary of the Air Ministry, was discovered to have angled in a rather undignified fashion after a job with *Imperial Airways*. He was dismissed by no less a person than the Prime Minister, Mr. Stanley Baldwin, himself. And, when he was dismissed, there was the same sort of lofty moral attitudinizing and platitudinizing in the Press as there had been in the case of Budget gambling, although everyone in the Press, and a good many people outside, knew that, by comparison with the devious ways of some politicians, Sir Christopher Bullock's offence was trivial indeed.

This, however, is by the way. The case of Sir Christopher Bullock is cited only as an example, of which more later, of the moral squeamishness of British public opinion. It is of interest because, strange as that may seem, the lesser offence obscured the greater. Towards the end of the summer the British public was again convinced that, if all was not for the best in the best of all possible worlds, at least the fault did not lie with His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

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Then came the League Assembly. By the time of the Assembly's opening, the British public had been—as the politicians put it—"educated." It was no longer certain that Britain could, no longer so anxious that Britain should, play the part of universal policeman. Had any Minister then stepped forward and said:—"We are done with idealism. Our main concern henceforward will be the interests of Britain," he would have gained a large, though regretful, following. But to do that might have been to risk some slight reverse at the next by-election. A National Government with a majority counted in hundreds could not face such risks. Its servants went to Geneva to deny with their hands what

they said with their mouths. In public, Mr. Anthony Eden, Foreign Secretary, made again the famous speech on collective security to which reference has been made above. In private, France and Britain went to Geneva, hoping to prevent the admission of the Emperor Hailé Selassie to the Assembly session. The man in whose name Sir Samuel Hoare and Mr. Anthony Eden had resoundingly invoked the collective security of the League, the man for whose sake Europe had been brought to the brink of a League war—this man was to be barred from the League's councils. Legally, there was no doubt some excuse. It was Abyssinia, not a particular Abyssinian Emperor, that had been elected to League membership a dozen years before. Pragmatically there was some justification. Italy's friendship was desired by the principal League Powers, and Italy's friendship was not to be had while the ghost of Abyssinia haunted the shores of Lake Leman. But legal and pragmatic considerations cannot decently be urged in the same breath as high moral principle.

Yet even this descent into the depths of ignominy was excused. Even then the depths had not been plumbed. Within a few weeks of the League Assembly, Mr. Baldwin—the Prime Minister whose lips had been so disconcertingly “sealed” at the time of the Hoare-Laval plan, the Prime Minister who had dismissed a civil servant found guilty of a lapse in etiquette—Mr. Baldwin took it upon himself to speak with “appalling frankness” of his attitude in the general election the year before. For once, his description of his own words was exact. They were “appalling”. What Mr. Baldwin said, in effect, was that he had conducted an election campaign on peace, collective security, and the League of Nations in order that his government should be re-elected by a people which believed in peace, collective security, and the League of Nations; that he had done so because he believed there was an immense danger facing Britain, from which he was to save her by rearmament; and that he could not have done otherwise, because democracy would not face the facts. Of all incredible stories, Mr. Baldwin told the most incredible. He had, as it were, issued the prospectus of a company of humanitarian aim, and invited subscriptions to it. When all the subscriptions were in, he had converted the funds of the company to a purpose other than that for which they had been subscribed. The analogy is on Mr. Baldwin's own valuation of himself. It seems probable that the valuation was too high. In some of the commentaries on Mr. Baldwin's “appalling frankness” there was an implied belief that it was not Machiavellianism, but sheer unwillingness to think out a

policy for himself, that made him adopt his opponents' policy in the general election of 1935; sheer lack of energy which made him abandon it as soon as he was pressed. Either way, the man and his words reflect no great credit on Britain. Yet even this last humiliation might have been forgiven if Government spokesmen had not bobbed up a week or two later with the famous speech expressing the faith of his Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom in collective security and the League of Nations.

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There are, no doubt, many instances in history of Governments pursuing dual policies like the present Government of Britain. There can rarely have been a Government which ate so many words to the accomplishment of so few deeds. The new treaty with Egypt stands to the Government's credit in foreign affairs; a Tithe Act to its credit at home. For the rest, the record is of lamentable failures. In industry, in education, in unemployment, even in rearmament, Government measure after Government measure has been abandoned because it was so obviously unsatisfactory that the Government's supporters would not support it. A Coal Mines Reorganization Bill was scrapped, and another is to be brought forward in its place in the near future. An Education Bill, which was alleged to be in fulfilment of the Government's promise to raise the school age, and which in fact will raise the school age by about two months, only got through the House of Commons against intensive criticism. A Special Areas Development Act which has proved completely unworkable, was to have been blandly renewed in the present session, and would have been blandly renewed, had there not been an immense outcry against it. As for rearmament, which is the stock reply to any of the Government's critics and the particular stock-in-trade of Mr. Baldwin himself, some recent correspondence between Lord Nuffield (better known as Sir William Morris, of Morris motor-cars) and Lord Swinton (better known as Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister, the Air Minister) has not convinced the British public that it is being efficiently conducted. And in the meantime Mr. Duff Cooper, War Secretary, and a most redoubtable enemy of those bishops who do not believe in war, tells the country at regular intervals that he cannot obtain enough recruits for the Army.

Inefficient government may be excused. When inefficiency is allied with—shall we say?—an occasional lack of frankness, excuses become difficult to find. Perhaps that is why the new "authoritarianism" (which is the old "tyranny" writ large) has

made some converts in Britain during the past two years. There are not many Communists, but there are more than there were; there are not many Fascists, but there are more than there were. They have both been behaving in the same manner as their prototypes on the Continent. They reached the climax of their achievement when during a riot in the East End of London youths shouting Fascist slogans hurled a small girl through a shop window. The incident, which was generally reported, horrified everyone who read of it. Englishmen are not yet accustomed to see political philosophies pursued by the maltreatment of children. It horrified them the more because at that moment Spaniards were occupied in exterminating each other in the name of these rival "authoritarian" creeds.

By some miracle the tragedy of civil war in Spain has not developed into the tragedy of international war in Europe. But the Spanish civil war has shown very clearly that Europe can be as dangerously divided by creed to-day as she was at the time of the Wars of Religion. It is not only that German Nazi leaders and Russian Communist leaders hurl gutter abuse at each other across the frontiers. It is also that Fascists and Communists actively intervene in any country where there is civil strife; that the conditions of civil strife favour their rival extremes.

Hitherto neither extreme had made much progress in Britain. The anti-capitalist slogan of the one has little appeal for a nation of capitalists. The operatic posturings of the other neglected to take account of the English sense of humour. Neither had nor has a leader of any consequence. Mr. Harry Pollitt, leader of the Communist Party of Great Britain, may be a good trade union organiser and a clever director of strikes, but is nothing more. Sir Oswald Mosley, self-appointed leader and self-styled "Leader" of the British Union of Fascists and National Socialists, has turned his political coat so often that any consistent admirers he may have had must be colour-blind by now. Communism until 1936 was dying of inanition in Britain. Fascism could not properly be said ever to have been alive. According to the evidence of its own supporters, it had been born a new St. George to deliver England from the dragon of Communism. But often as he had been called to the footlights, the dragon had failed to appear even in the wings. For that reason, Englishmen were as little concerned by the demonstrations of the Communists as by the fancy-dress uniforms of the Fascists. "It may be true" they said in effect, "that these people have imported their beliefs, their political shirts, their appeal to force, into a land which despises such things.

It may even be true that they have received more than moral aid from various foreign Powers. It may be true that they fight each other with crude weapons. But what matter? Their stupidities provide a foil to truth. So long as two apostles of force fight only each other, each may thereby learn a salutary lesson. Moreover, although they do not believe in free speech (in fact, they continually talk about *their* right to free speech, *vide* Sir Oswald Mosley, October 11, 1936: 'We are faced with a highly organized attempt by Socialists and Communists to prevent *our* rights of free speech'); we do. Alien as they may be, we are not anxious to curtail their expression of *their* ideas, lest that entail curtailment of the expression of *our* ideas."

The argument was sound enough. The promises unfortunately had in the meantime ceased to be true. Sir Oswald Mosley, who in 1933 declared that "racial and religious persecution are alien to the British character," had tacked "and National Socialists" on to the name of his British Union of Fascists. Having failed to attract anything but humorous attention by other means, he had followed the lead of his German homonyms by attacking the Jews. His own anti-Semitic statements were guarded enough. But there can be no doubt what their consequences were. Intensive Fascist propaganda in the East End of London provoked anti-Jewish feeling. Anti-Jewish feeling led to the kind of political thuggery of which an example is given above. In self-defence many Jews turned to the Communist Party as the only organization which definitely offered them protection against Fascism. Between Fascist provocation and Communist retaliation, amid the street brawling which soon took the place of Fascist and Communist arguments, the ordinary citizen began to find his ordinary life seriously disturbed.

In normal times what one East End magistrate called "this Fascist buffoonery" could have been safely left to die of the contempt with which most Englishmen regard it. Political uniforms are a childish, but not necessarily very harmful, amusement for the politically adolescent. Sir Oswald Mosley may soon abandon Fascism, as he has abandoned almost every other political creed in turn. But these are not normal times. A war of ideas is sweeping the Continent. There is evidence that the propagators of those ideas, hard as they may be put to it to feed their own people, are more than willing to spend money on introducing the war into Britain. In such times a private "army", which is a child's toy in the hands of Sir Oswald Mosley, might be a public danger in the hands of someone of more consistent aim.

In consequence, all parties in the House of Commons passed, with remarkable speed and all but unanimity, a Bill forbidding political uniforms. The Bill was modelled on Swedish legislation to the same general effect. It may be expected to curb the public nuisance that uniformed parades had become, just as the nuisance has been curbed in Sweden. But it may prove an unfortunate consequence of legislation restricting political parties who disturb the peace, that the legislation will also restrict political parties who have no desire to disturb the peace. If that should be so, there may be some bitter consolation for the liberal-minded in the thought that restriction was in any case already on the way. Events at home and abroad are forcing it upon us.

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Abroad, there is the menace, real or imaginary—but, as most Englishmen think, very real—of war. The inevitable answer to the menace of war is conscription, of which there have already been hints in the speeches of some Ministers. It is unlikely that conscription would ever be accepted in peace-time in its crude form. But it seems likely to come in some form, and will most probably come first in the form of compulsory and general physical training. The Government has announced its intention of devoting more money to physical education in the coming year. In that the Government has the support of many men, neither military-minded nor of dictatorial inclination, who are distressed by the comparative physical appearance of the German and the British citizen. Nor can it be denied that some improvement in the physical condition of the British nation is needed. But the improvement will inevitably be linked with compulsion, which is another name for restriction, or “authoritarianism”.

At home the condition of the depressed areas, (euphemistically called “special areas”) is forcing restriction in another form. The depressed areas are in South Wales, Tyneside, West Cumberland and Scotland. For years they have suffered from unemployment to a greater degree than any other part of Britain. In them boys have grown from youth to manhood amid derelict factories without hope of occupation. “It will always remain a puzzle,” a foreigner wrote recently of these areas, “how it is possible that, in what is admittedly the richest country in the world, conditions unworthy of a civilized country prevail. England has money, possesses raw materials, and has colonies capable of development at her disposal. These resources could enable all the unemployed capable of work to be completely absorbed.” We are not, as a people, very tolerant

of criticism from abroad. But this is a criticism all Englishmen would echo. In an attempt to solve the puzzle to which it draws attention, the Government two years ago passed a Special Areas (Development) Act empowering Commissioners to take "unorthodox measures" to restore the depressed areas to their one time prosperity. The Commissioner for the Depressed Areas of England and Wales found that in practice the Act allowed him to do nothing. He could not compel new industries to establish themselves in the depressed areas. He could not make grants for constructive schemes until the schemes had first been subjected to an elaborate parliamentary review. The doctrine of liberty made compulsion of industry impossible. The practice of democracy made "unorthodox measures" impossible. The Commissioner, in whose goodwill all had faith, resigned. Since his resignation, there has been such an outcry that really "unorthodox" measures will at last have to be taken. The King has visited South Wales and promised that "something will be done." Conservative members of parliament have threatened to overturn the predominantly conservative Government if something is not done.

There can be no doubt that "something will", in fact, "be done." There can be no doubt, to anyone who has seen the bleak misery of Maryport or Jarrow or South Wales, that something must be done. But in the doing of it, either the Government or another Commissioner will have to be given special powers. Industrialists will have to be compelled to do what they will not do of their own free will. A little more liberty will have gone. We shall have taken one more step along the road towards that State regulation which the social conscience and the intricate organisation of industrialised society seem to many Englishmen to make inevitable.

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The end of the road is not yet in sight. If it should ever be reached, it is improbable that it will prove the same end as that of Continental Fascism or Russian Communism. Britain still retains something of her traditional love of compromise. But there are not wanting counsellors who advise that Fascism is the end to be chosen. There are even some among these counsellors who would make the King a dictator. The King's visit to South Wales, his (unauthorized) promises to the unemployed there, were unfavourably compared in the *Daily Mail* with the inaction of the King's Ministers. The inference, promptly drawn and as promptly condemned, was that a King using full powers could do more for the country than the King's Ministry.

Absolutism in Britain to-day is inconceivable. Absolutism by way of the monarchy is even more inconceivable. Yet a curious concatenation of public and private events is bringing the inconceivable, not indeed within range of realization, but within range of contemplation. The social changes consequent on the accession of Edward VIII, to which reference has been made in this correspondence before, may have political consequences. The consequences would not be the less serious because their cause is unknown to the great majority of the British people.

For some time now¹, American newspapers have paid much attention to Mrs. Simpson, an American friend of King Edward VIII. Lately, they have been speculating whether the King intends to marry Mrs. Simpson before his Coronation next May. Their speculations have not been reflected in the British Press. What Americans call unofficial British censorship—and what is in fact official British delicacy, prudery, squeamishness, what you will—has worked to such effect that almost the only occasion on which Mrs. Simpson's name appeared in the news columns was the occasion of her divorcing her husband. And then the only reason for publishing the news, which was that Mrs. Simpson had become known as a friend of the King, was not even mentioned in a footnote. Nevertheless, the stories which are circulated publicly in America are circulated privately in London (which is, however, not England). The comment that goes with them varies according to class. Fashionable society, which otherwise is hardly a model of rectitude, is severely critical of any suggestion that the King might marry a woman who has divorced two previous husbands. Some ecclesiastical leaders are indignant. The general public is indifferent. The Cabinet is said to be adamant. The Cabinet's attitude matters most because, if rumour speaks truth, the Cabinet is prepared to resign in protest, should the King insist on marrying Mrs. Simpson. In that event, there might be a constitutional crisis of first-class importance, and Britain might learn that an unwritten constitution permits a country to stray into some curious byways. For the King can dissolve Parliament, and need not, by constitutional practice, summon it again for three years. The King, by constitutional precedent, asks the advice of the outgoing Prime Minister as to that Prime Minister's successor, but there is no written law compelling him to take the advice tendered.

"Suppose, then," it is being asked in London now, "Mr. Baldwin should resign. What is there to prevent the King dissolving Parliament and summoning his own friends to carry on the Government? Or suppose that the King should remember Mr.

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Bernard Shaw's play about a King who upset "The Apple Cart." Suppose he were to offer himself for election to supreme office as the alternative to Mr. Baldwin. It is by no means certain that the vote would go against him. The King has many admirers on the political Left. Mr. Baldwin has few admirers anywhere. The King responded to the feeling of the whole country when he visited South Wales. Divorce is no longer a matter of such prejudice in Britain, witness the support given to Mr. A. P. Herbert's Bill to extend the grounds for it. "It can't happen here" as a general maxim is true. But "It happens differently here" would be truer.

All this, of course, is speculation, resting on assumptions. It is assumed, for example, that the King wants to marry Mrs. Simpson. It is assumed that the Cabinet would in some circumstances have the courage to resign. It is assumed that the loopholes in our constitutional practice have not, unbeknown to most men, been blocked already. It is assumed that a diversion from the spirit, if not from the letter, of the Constitution would be tolerated. Any or all of these assumptions may be proved false. Whether false or true, they are unlikely to result in the conclusion foreseen by speculation. These, however, are the things that men, some men, are saying. They are such astonishing things for anyone to say in the twentieth century that they must be reported. Britain, as she enters 1937, is, in practice, far from dictatorship. But she is not, in spirit, as close as she was to democracy.

London, Dec. 1, 1936.