

# THREE DOMINION ELECTIONS —SOME CONTRASTS

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**R**ARELY does it happen that three British Dominions are passing through the turmoil of a general election at the same time. So the three contests waged during October and early November in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand furnish interesting contrasts not merely of the tactics and machinery of electioneering, but also of the problems which are exercising the minds of three important parts of the British Commonwealth to-day.

There were many features common to all three campaigns. In each the woman voter was regarded as a normal phenomenon, and it is now difficult to recapture the frenzy of the days when women fought for the vote. In each the Government party painted roseate pictures of the prosperity directly caused by its beneficent statesmanship, while the Opposition wielded brushes dipped in black and ashy gray to depict ruin, starvation, and desolation—pictures in strange contrast to those contained in the “literature” distributed by immigration offices in London, and scarcely calculated to swell the tide of new settlement. In each Dominion there were the same appeals to hate or fear, the same complaints concerning the defective character of the electoral lists, the same imputations on the truthfulness or motives of opponents, the same confusion of *post* and *propter*, and the same indifference on the part of large sections of the public, who are either not interested in politics at all, or feel that the issues raised are unreal. But of such stuff are all election campaigns made.

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The New Zealand contest was the least important of the three, for no big issues were at stake, and there were no outstanding personalities or novelties of procedure. Economically, New Zealand is mutton, butter, and scenery. When refrigeration came in the eighties of last century, she was almost first in the field in building up a reputation in the European markets for frozen mutton and butter. The Government took steps to foster the settlement of the countryside with dairy, wheat, and “mixed farmers,” imposed strict tests of quality on goods offered for export, and made land

cheap by letting it on long or perpetual leases. For the townsmen a series of advanced social reforms and experiments in industrial regulation and public ownership was provided, taking the edge off working-class complaints, and thus preventing the rise of a strong political Labour Party. The industrial reforms failed to make New Zealand a "land without strikes," but did much nevertheless to give the workman a comfortable standard of life. Agrarian reforms succeeded beyond expectation, but the tenant farmers eventually demanded the right to buy their holdings, and the policy of retaining the land in perpetuity as crown property had therefore to be abandoned. For the rest, New Zealand has a genial climate, fertile soil, and its population is predominantly Scottish in origin. Such a land can have few problems, and politics are therefore humdrum matters of administration rather than legislation—except on one issue.

That issue is Defence, which being interpreted means the problem of imperial relationships. The northern hemisphere regards New Zealand as being part of the Australian continent, and talks about "Australasia." Nothing annoys the New Zealander more than that word. His land is not a satellite of Sydney; it is over three days' sail away by the fastest steamers; he is revolted by the class-consciousness and blatant nationalism which permeate Australian thought and politics, just as he is shocked by the apparent desire of Canada to break completely away from Downing Street. He produces and exports the same things as the Australian does; a free-trade policy would see his little manufactures crushed by those of Melbourne and Sydney. He wants to be completely independent of any compulsory tie with the land of droughts and kangaroos, and resents being thought of as the "as" in "Australasia."

But if New Zealand insists on emphasising its separation from its bigger neighbour, it is left in a queer and dangerous isolation, stowed away there in the southern seas, an easy prey to anyone who cares to annex it, *were it not for the British navy*. Australians know that probably they are in the same position, and that their famous political and economic experiments, their White Australia policy, their high standard of life, and their very independence rest in the last resort on British naval protection. But they do not like to admit it, and their determination before the War to build up their own navy—instead of contributing to the cost of the Imperial navy—rested in large measure on that dislike. The New Zealander is more frank in admitting his helplessness, and ready to acknowledge his dependence. Nay, he even glories in that fact, is more Imperialist than the Imperialists in Britain, thinks that

perhaps there is something in the ideas of the British Israelites, and has therefore been willing to "do his bit" towards the maintenance of the British navy instead of essaying the task of undertaking his own naval defence. The size of that "bit" is therefore one of the main issues of any New Zealand election, for the Labour Party attacks all such contributions towards British "imperialist capitalistic aggrandizement", without perhaps considering at how cheap a price New Zealand purchases its safety.

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In the Australian election the issues at stake were, for the outside world, overshadowed by the interest in the experiment of compulsory voting. For a country accustomed to compulsory arbitration, compulsory enrolment, compulsory sale of land if the State wishes to buy, and a score of other compulsions, the new step scarcely seems inconsistent, though many Australians note with uneasiness the fact that the vote which was once demanded as a right has now to be imposed as an obligation.

It is perhaps in the nature of parliamentarians to believe that the votes which are not cast would come to their party if only they could be harvested. In that belief the State of Queensland inaugurated compulsory voting for its election of 1915. In the six preceding elections between 67 and 78 per cent of the electors had gone to the polls, but in view of the elaborate provisions made for postal voting and the casting of votes by those who are absent from their place of residence on polling day, the percentage was thought to be inadequate. Incidentally also, it was hoped that those who were compelled to come and vote would cast their weight against the growing strength of the Labour Party. In the 1915 election 88 per cent of those on the roll went to the polls, leaving about 30,000 electors still neglecting their duty; incidentally also, the increased vote either helped, or at least failed to stem, the Labour advance. Labour climbed into office, and has stayed there ever since. At subsequent polls the voting fell to 80, 80 and 82 per cent of the total enrolment, so it was quite evident that compulsion had brought little permanent improvement in the sense of civic obligation.

In the Federal field, when the Commonwealth parliament was established in 1901, popular interest was at first at a very low ebb, and only half the voters went to the polls in 1903. But it soon became evident that the universal manhood and womanhood franchise made it possible for the Labour Party to gain greater power in the new legislature than it could gain in the older State

parliaments, and so Labour set out to capture the Federal Houses. This brought a quickening of interest, fusion of the anti-Labour forces, and bitterly contested Federal elections. The percentage of votes cast climbed up to over seventy; in 1913, 77 per cent of the men enrolled used their votes, but the women as usual lagged behind, with only 69 per cent of their votes effective. Yet even in the terrific heat and stress of public feeling created by the two conscription referenda of 1916 and 1917, when life-long friendships were snapped, when incredible bitterness was roused on every hand, and when one thought that every eligible vote would be cast, 17 per cent of the electors failed to appear at the polling stations.

Since the fever heat of those days, interest in Federal politics has subsided, and at the 1922 election less than 60 per cent of the electors took trouble to go to the polls. All parties read in this figure a loss of support, and were therefore willing to make the experiment of last November. The final analysis of returns will probably show that nearly 90 per cent of the possible votes were cast, and this constitutes a new record for any election in any part of the world. Evidently the women voters, who have always been greater sinners than the men, were frightened by the threat of a ten-dollar fine, and deserted their kitchens, shopping, or picnics for an hour. In addition, it is probable that many young people, just over 21 years of age, who usually display little interest in political affairs, exercised their right to vote this time rather than get into trouble. Still, even then, ten out of every hundred were unmoved, and it will be interesting to see whether the Government will, out of gratitude for the great victory accorded it, disdain to prosecute the laggards.

Under the Australian Federal Constitution both Houses of parliament—the House of Representatives and the Senate—are elective, but those Canadians who wish to reform the Canadian Senate will find little that is constructively helpful in Australia's experience. The prime aim of the Australian Senate is to protect the rights of the individual States against any attempted encroachment by the Federal authority. And since it seemed probable that it would be the rights of the small States which would be attacked, all the States, large or small, were given the same representation, i.e., six members each, who were to be elected on a universal adult franchise by a constituency which consisted of the whole State. At first it seemed probable that the Senate would do the work it had been meant to do, check hasty or aggressive legislation, and be the watch-dog of State rights. But soon the party system invaded the Senate, and the line of cleavage became the same as in the other House. When that happened, it became difficult to see

any justification for the continued existence of the Senate. Its members voted for their party programme, not for their State, and since the Senate was regarded as the less important of the two Houses, the calibre of the Senate candidates declined. Further, the State was too big a constituency for effective campaigning, and it was impossible for candidates to visit all parts of their electorate; the Western Australian senators, for instance, have a constituency with an area of 976,000 square miles! This fact alone encouraged voting according to the party ticket, and since the Labour Party was definitely pledged to the extension of Federal power at the expense of State rights—it often referred to them as “State frights” and was even willing to urge unification of the whole continent under Federal control, with limited power left to State or district authorities—the Senate has lost almost completely its original complexion and purpose. The structure and power of a second chamber is everywhere admitted to be a difficult problem; Australian experience contributes little to its solution.

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The greatest contrast between Dominion elections in Canada and Australia lies in the nature of the issues on which the campaign is waged. The Canadian contest was on the tariff, national unity, and appeal to the shades of Laurier and Macdonald. There was virtually no Labour Party or Labour issue. In the Australian election there was no tariff issue, no clash between regional sectionalism and national unity, no race problem, and no appeal to the great men of the past. All, or virtually all, was Labour *versus* Anti-Labour.

The tariff issue is dead “down under.” Twenty years ago revenue-tariff advocates and free-traders fought protectionists in the Federal arena, but eventually they sank their differences in a fusion against the “Socialist tiger.” The Labour Party has for a generation been in favour of high tariffs, and would go even further than its opponents in its desire to foster local manufacturers and keep out the “sweated” products of Europe or Asia or the mass-produced wares of North America. Likewise the Farmers’ Party, now nearly ten years old, wants lower duties on the tools of rural production, but demands prohibitive barriers against imported foodstuffs. The strident nationalism of some sections of thought demands that self-sufficiency be achieved by a complete prohibition of manufactured imports, and at least one Minister for Customs has given voice to the economic adage that every import involves the “sending of money out of the country.” Fiscal issues are

therefore dead; imperial preference is really a weapon for raising rates against non-British imports still higher; and though many Labour leaders will admit in private conversation that at heart they still cling to their first love—the single tax—in practice they are bound to follow their party's decree in supporting a tariff which is now one of the highest in the world.

Of race division there is none, of sectionalism very little. The Australian population is surprisingly homogeneous, for 84 per cent of the people are native-born Australians, and another 14 per cent are of British birth. Australia has always concentrated on Great Britain as the source of its supply of immigrants; at times a few Germans, Russians, and Italians came, but the determination to keep Australia not merely white but also British is so strong that a small increase in the flow of Italians early this year was promptly met by the imposition of severe restrictions on the entry of these people. Inhabitants of North America will realize easily how this homogeneity simplifies politics, education, the social outlook, and the linguistic qualifications of party leaders.

Australia is not free from the clash of sectional interests, but the struggle is not nearly so bitter as that which marks North American politics. Federation helps those who help themselves, and there is always a tendency for the larger States to dominate the political position and secure what seems more than a fair share of the economic plums. So Melbourne watches Sydney, fearful lest its own interests should be neglected. Housewives and confectioners ask why they should be expected to pay high prices for sugar in order to keep alive the pampered sugar-cane industry of tropical Queensland. Western Australia, the western extremity of the continent away across the great central desert, and Tasmania, the little island full of hills and valleys and tall timber, talk loudly of their disabilities, in language often like that used in the Canadian Maritime Provinces. They juggle with the word "secession," and pass violent resolutions. The grievances are there certainly, but the threats are only talk, bluff, like those of the Irishmen in George Birmingham's novels, who roar revolution but are willing to be silenced for a season with a new pier or a supply of seed potatoes. Secession would mean economic and political isolation, for there is no big near neighbour available to give a helping hand and market to the rebels.

The only vital issue, therefore, is between an industrially and politically strong Labour Party and an alliance of anti-Labour interests. One is puzzled to explain why in Australia, alone of all the new countries settled during the 19th century under somewhat

similar conditions, the Labour movement should have become so strong, stronger in every way than in Great Britain itself. Perhaps something is due to the fact that some of those who were transported to "Botany Bay" were economic or political rebels in the Old World; then later the large flood of people who went out during the gold rush and really moulded Australian life and outlook in the formative period came from a Europe charged with Chartism, trade-unionism, Owenism, Home Rule, and the other gospels of 1848. Then again, the stream of immigration was so small and of such an origin (all British) that it could easily be assimilated and absorbed by the early trade-unions.

But much of the real explanation spring from the fact that Australia has never really had a "free land" period, except in the early convict days. In North America the dissatisfied wage-earner could go west and get his quarter-section if he wished. But Australia had nothing comparable to the prairies as a haven for homesteaders. Its good well-watered lands near the coast had fallen by 1850 or 1860 into the hands of the squatters, i.e., the big pastoralists, and were thus in the grip of a land monopoly. Such land as was still crown property could be obtained, but only by purchase, at a price of usually about \$5 an acre; and since an ordinary wheat farm would need to be at least about 300 acres in area, the cost of purchasing such a large tract was beyond the means of most wage-earners. Finally, outback life, with its intense heat, its occasional drought, its isolation, its monotony, and its precarious financial returns held little attraction to men who had lived in or, on arriving, landed at the capital cities. Hence it has never been easy to get on to the land, and where it might be easy few really wished to go there.

Trade unionism therefore spread steadily over the whole wage-field, first among builders and skilled artisans in the cities, next among miners and seamen, then among the nomadic shearers who go from one sheep station to another at shearing time, and finally among the "black coat brigade" of clerks, teachers, civil servants, actors, bank clerks, and musicians. To-day over 700,000 people in a population of less than 6,000,000 are enrolled in trade unions, a percentage equalled in few other parts of the world, and certainly in no other "new" country.

Thirty-five years ago the unions, beaten in a long series of strikes and lockouts, and decimated by the economic depression of the early nineties, turned to political action in order to win the things they had failed to gain by industrial effort. In this way the Labour Party was born, and although its programme of demo-

cratic, educational, and general social reform has attracted the support of many who are not wage-earners, the Party has relied chiefly on the trade-unions for its funds, its leaders, and its ideas. Hence most Labour members have served an apprenticeship in a trade-union office, and although it is true that by this means many a good trade-union secretary has been turned into a poor politician, the results have been as a rule fairly satisfactory. The programmes have been moderate, involving chiefly the perfection of the machinery of democratic government, better wages, improved factory conditions, wider educational facilities, necessary land reforms in order to foster a race of "sturdy yeomen," and, in short, the justification of the claim that Australia is "the working man's paradise."

To such a programme most Australians of every party would to-day subscribe assent. But the Labour Party was first in the field with the proposals, and as the various "planks of the platform" received legislative adoption, the Party began to look further ahead to some sort of ultimate aim of widespread public ownership and enterprise. This aim was based on no definite social philosophy, and was rightly described by a French observer as "Socialism without doctrines." It owed nothing to Australian academic economists, for until recently economics was scarcely taught in any Australian university, and probably the only systematic economist ever read in Australia was John Stuart Mill. It drew nothing from Marx, for the Australian is too intensely British in mentality to understand Marx or even read more than a few pages of him. In so far as it owed anything to the printed word, it was a queer hotchpotch of Ruskin, Morris, Blatchford, Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, the *Fabian Essays* and Henry George.

Publicly-owned enterprise came to Australia long before the Labour Party, when the various State Governments decided to build and own the railroads, instead of giving money and land grants to private railway companies. To extend public ownership could therefore be pleaded as merely the following of a precedent, and such extension was to be made either by buying out some private venture or by setting up a State industry or service in competition with those already at work. Here and there it might be thought desirable to give the State a monopoly, as for example over workmen's industrial insurance or the note issue. Labour recognized, however, especially when in office, that the establishment of State industries is not as easy as it seems when one is on the hustings, that nationalization creates almost as many problems as it solves, and that failure lurks just round the corner. But in spite of all that, the rank and file cling to the faith, and Labour Governments are always willing to try some new collectivist scheme.

Cabled reports of strikes lead the outside world to assume that Australia is the home of "Red" ideas and is ever torn with industrial strife. But a land where about three-quarters of the people own the houses in which they live, and where nearly two-thirds of them have savings-bank accounts, is not a fruitful soil for propaganda from Moscow. In fact, in comparison with the commonly accepted ideas of, say, the British Labour Party, those of the average Australian Labour supporter would seem very pale pink, if not actually yellow or blue. He has an almost pathetic belief in the possibilities of parliamentary action, and a general willingness to leave his industrial conditions to be regulated by the wages boards and arbitration courts of the continent. Where he does go on strike, a careful examination of the causes of the dispute often shows that the wrong—or the right—is far from being entirely on his side, and that his employers are still thinking in terms and methods of the nineties.

But Labour has its extreme left, just as Capital has its extreme right, small in numbers, but noisy, persistent, active, and sometimes able to snatch power, exploit a petty grievance and make far-reaching trouble. The left wing finds its greatest strength in two industries—mining and shipping—which by the nature of the work and the unsatisfactory conditions of home life are fertile fields for discontent. Hence more than half the industrial disputes occur in the mining industry, and some of the largest have been among the seamen. Here it is that talk of direct action, sabotage, job control, bourgeoisie, surplus value, irritation strikes, is most often heard; here reprints of the Communist Manifesto, Lenin's speeches, or I. W. W. constitutions get their greatest sale; and from these fields are launched the most bitter and powerful attacks on other unions and on the political leaders, attacks often more heavily charged with hate than are those made against the wicked capitalist himself.

Needless to say, the general body of Labour dislikes this left wing, though a sense of class loyalty prevents it from giving vent adequately to its feelings. But a very slight acquaintance with the inner circles of the Labour movement suffices to reveal how little general sympathy there is with the wrecking tactics of the Red Flaggers. If shipping is held up or coal not forthcoming, all Australian industries feel the pinch of unemployment in consequence; the cause of arbitration is injured, and arguments are supplied to those who would scrap the whole system of State regulation of wages; while the inconvenience and annoyance caused to the general community alienates the sympathy of that big "floating

vote" which decides the result at every election. Labour therefore secretly prays to be delivered from its turbulent left, but has usually lacked the courage to follow up its prayers by appropriate action, with consequences fatal to it in the recent election. For Labour's opponents read aright the signs of the times, and exploited the indignation roused by two shipping hold-ups in one year. A nation occupying the long fringe of a continent and relying on an export market cannot have its ships lying idle; a nation so democratically constituted as Australia resents dictatorships, whether economic or political; and a people so comfortably circumstanced has little patience with slogans and war-cries hatched in the tyrannies of old Russia or the swamps of sweated early Victorian Europe.

Hence Labour has been pushed back into the political wilderness, there to repent and purge itself. That result was unexpected in the middle of last year, for at that time it seemed probable that Labour would easily win the day. Long before the war Labour Governments were in power, and in 1915 they controlled six out of the seven parliaments. But the war issues, and especially the conscription question, tore the party in twain, and sent most of its leaders who favoured conscription out of the party they had spent twenty years in building up. The war fevers eventually disappeared, and the party, under new leaders but with the old programme, began to recuperate. Gradually the errors of its opponents and the swing of the pendulum restored it to favour; elections were won, and by mid-1925 five out of the six States had Labour Ministries. Most political students would have agreed that the next election would see Labour on the Federal Treasury benches, and they would probably have been right in their prediction, had not the seamen's leaders given the anti-Labour forces such a golden opportunity as is seldom vouchsafed to political mortals.

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In two important respects the Canadian and Australian elections were alike. Both saw a subsidence of that wave of political activity in the farming community which had marked the preceding ten years. A Farmers' Party is even more sectional in interest and appeal than a Labour Party; had Australian Labour made a purely wage-earning appeal it would have done little, and one secret of its success was its ability to face national needs, such as education, land policy, and defence, as well as purely class interests. It may be questioned whether the farmers' organizations had any deep interest in matters beyond their own economic wellbeing; the Australian farmer was willing to abandon important manu-

facturing industries to the force of foreign competition, if thereby he got cheaper implements and other requirements, and he refused to see that his profitable home market in the Australian industrial and commercial cities was in large measure dependent on the retention of the very industries he was attacking. He also grumbled about the burden of taxation, forgetting that he probably received greater benefit from taxes than the townsman, who in addition often paid higher charges for metropolitan transit in order to make up the deficiencies on the working of rural railroads. In short, he had no vision of the State as the political instrument of a many-sided community; and the community therefore rejected him. In so far as this induces him to solve economic problems with economic devices, such a result is all to the good.

Finally, the student of imperial relations will search in vain through the campaign for any solution, or even discussion, of those problems which concern the future relations between the different parts of the British Commonwealth of Nations. A Canadian candidate urged the elimination of the British preference from the Canadian tariff, while another attacked the reciprocal preference arranged between Australia and Canada. Australian electors were asked to approve the action of their Government in increasing the tariff rates against some British goods and in seriously limiting the value of the preferences granted to the mother country. But of those wider issues of Dominion status, consultation, representation, etc., virtually nothing was said. One wonders why. Are all parties so agreed on the general lines of policy that there is no issue between them? Or do our leaders feel that the best way to solve imperial problems is not to talk about them, but to let them solve themselves?