

THE PROPHETS FALSIFIED¹

WILFRID HINDLE

THE prophets are falsified all round. Military experts who predicted that a victorious Italian Army would be in Addis Ababa by Christmas are preparing to eat their words. So are the other military experts who predicted immediate and irretrievable disaster for Italian arms in the deserts of the Ogaden. So are the foreign political experts who feared, and the other foreign political experts who hoped, that adventuring in Abyssinia would bring Signor Mussolini's Fascist State tumbling about his ears in Italy.

Only the home political experts hit on anything near the truth, and they might justly be confounded with their own caution. For none of them predicted for the British National Government such an immense majority as it has obtained in the general election of November. "Immense," of course, is a comparative term; the National Government's majority is nearly a hundred less than at the election of 1931. But it is a justifiable term, since all parties are agreed that the 1931 election was entirely exceptional; since the 1929 election, which is the nearest "normal" election available for comparison, brought a Labour Government into office; and since the Government's majority is still 240 odd in a House of Commons of just over 600 members.

It is difficult to see why it happened. Though everyone expected the Government to win, there was no reason, either in its own programme or in its opponents' programme, why it should have won so handsomely. Before the election campaign began, cynics at home were declaring that the Conservative Party was trying to win this home campaign at Geneva; while cynics abroad, even more unkind, accused Mr. Baldwin of jeopardising a precarious balance of power in Europe for the sake of party ends. That might at one time have been the intention. It was in fact privately declared—with a cynicism which would have been outrageous were it not so childishly mock-Machiavellian—to be such, by one of the Ministers chiefly responsible for the conduct of British policy at Geneva during the past six months. But the intention, if intention there were, was forgotten in the heat of the campaign. Government spokesmen talked, with some restraint and without too thorough specification, of the need for "filling the gaps in our defences." But they said much less than in the pre-election period

¹ The reader is reminded that this section of the Review was necessarily in the press early in December, before the development connected with the Hoare-Laval scheme.—EDITOR.

of that League of Nations which Mr. Baldwin had then called "the sheet-anchor of British policy" (and which Lady Houston, mixing the metaphors still further, called in her *Saturday Review* "the sheet-anchor with which Russia is trying to whitewash herself"); much more of "our" security and of the need for so re-equipping the British Army, Navy and Air Force that they might be able to repel any aggressor. Which was perhaps wise. Collective security implies the collective use of the collective forces of States members of the League—and not merely the collective use of British forces—to repel aggression. It could therefore not easily have been reconciled with unilateral increase of the forces of an individual member of the League.

* * * * *

The same restraint was to be observed in home as in foreign affairs. Here, too, the election campaign was accompanied by cynical rumours, and on the Labour side by a general expectation that political skeletons would be dragged out of the party cupboards to frighten the electorate on the eve of the poll. Remembering the Zinovieff Letter which was published on the eve of a general election in 1924, and the financial scare which preceded the general election of 1931, the Labour Party prepared for battle in advance by "exposing" day by day in the *Daily Herald* a series of skeletons which were never brought out. Or, if I might be permitted to follow the metaphorical examples of Mr. Baldwin and Lady Houston, the Labour Party spent much valuable time in endeavouring to scotch red herrings, which might have been real, but were certainly not dragged across the electorate's path.

It was, in fact, a dull election. Except for one brickbat, thrown at Mr. MacDonald's car in Seaham and magnified by a few of the less scrupulous newspapers into a mountain of Opposition violence, there was no physical excitement. And the only intellectual excitement was provided by Lord Snowden, who came out of semi-retirement to damn the National Government as heartily, and with the same admirable command of invective, as in 1931 he had damned the Labour Government.

The electorate, the newspapers said, was apathetic. That is to say that only seventy per cent. of it voted in 1935, as compared with 77 per cent. in the elections between 1922 and 1931, and 88 per cent. between 1906 and 1910. Whether it is exact to attribute to apathy at one particular election the continuance of a decline noted over a quarter of a century of elections is doubtful. It is especially doubtful when, in the Distressed Areas where the elector-

ate had something to vote about, it voted as much as 90 per cent.; especially doubtful, too, when the Labour vote, which might have been expected to show a decline, was, in fact, as great as in 1929, (and, of course, by the same token much greater than in 1931). It is doubtful, finally, whether an electorate can justly be called apathetic when it has only the choice between two candidates neither of whom it finds inspiring.

Essentially, however, the newspapers were right. It *was* an apathetic electorate over a great part of the country, and especially in London, where Sir Samuel Hoare made an important declaration of British policy in Egypt to an audience of exactly nineteen, including reporters. The words "No Change", coming with distressing frequency over the wireless as the results were broadcast on the night of the poll, set the keynote and gave a fair forecast of the final result.

The Labour Party has since attempted to explain away that final result by the fact that its total poll in 1935 was at least as great as, possibly greater than (depending on how votes are estimated in the uncontested constituencies) in 1929. The explanation has truth, but is irrelevant while the British parliament is based on the present electoral system. It will continue to be irrelevant so long as the big political parties refuse to consider the alternative of proportional representation. Proportional representation was proposed to the Labour Party by Mr. Lloyd George in (I think) 1929. They refused it then. Their refusal may stand them in good stead at the next election, since a swing-over of a comparatively small proportion of the electorate may serve, as in 1931, completely to change political preponderance in parliament.

That, however, will not be—or at any rate need not be—until 1940. In the meantime parliament will be a livelier place than it has been for the presence of three times as many Labour members. The liveliness, however, seems likely to come not so much from the Labour members' own volition as from the numerically small, psychologically great, leaven of extremism that one Communist and four Independent Labour Party members will introduce into the Labour mass. The Communist, Mr. Gallacher, was a surprise. Everyone had thought that Communism and Fascism were both dead. About Fascism, apparently, everyone was right; there were some 36,000 votes for Fascism in 1931, and not even a single Fascist candidate in 1935. About Communism, apparently, everyone was wrong. Mr. Harry Pollit increased his poll by 2,000 in South Wales, and Mr. Gallacher won West Fife with a poll

of 13,000. West Fife is a coal-mining district, peopled largely by imported Polish Labour. There are vast settlements of Polish immigrants elsewhere in Scotland, of Jews in Leeds and Manchester, and of Irishmen in Glasgow and Liverpool. If these immigrants were to break away from the general lines of British political tradition, as they have sometimes seemed to want to do, and as Mr. Gallacher's election suggests they might be able to do, they would introduce a new factor into parliamentary life.

* * * * *

If the party interest of the general election was negligible, the personal interest was high. It centred in Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, leader of the movement towards National Government in 1931, Prime Minister until May of this year; and in his son Malcolm, recently made Secretary of State for the Colonies at an age unusually early by twentieth century British standards. Both were National Labour candidates in their old constituencies, respectively Seaham Harbour and Bassetlaw. Mr. MacDonald, looking frail, but denying then and denying still that he is, was offered the alternative of a peerage or a safer seat than Seaham. It is an open secret that he declined the first because his own family would not countenance such a betrayal of earlier principles; another open secret that he declined the second because he was confident of his own power to overcome the opposition of miners who believed that the National Government had betrayed every promise he made to them in 1931. His confidence proved misplaced, for he was defeated by a 20,000 majority; and there, for another man in another land, a political career might have ended in the honourable last ditch.

But they order these things differently in England. Mr. Baldwin is anxious to have Mr. MacDonald back in the House of Commons; and Mr. Baldwin's power is now so great, Mr. MacDonald's name still of such magic in some parts, that we are promised the sorry spectacle of this once great fighter, fighter against such iniquities as he very recently considered University representation to be, standing for a vacant University seat.

A similarly sorry spectacle is promised in the case of Mr. Malcolm MacDonald, in whose favour it has been suggested that various holders of safe seats should stand aside. There were many charges of nepotism when Mr. Malcolm MacDonald was brought into the Cabinet. They were unjustified charges, because his ability is well above that of the average parliamentarian, and they

were easily refuted. They will not be so easily refuted again, should Mr. Malcolm MacDonald get into parliament and the Cabinet now, by what the most indulgent can call only the back stairs.

* * * * *

The Lloyd George family has been more lucky than the MacDonald family. It has returned to the House of Commons in full force—Mr. Lloyd George; his son, Major Lloyd George; his daughter, Miss Megan Lloyd George; and his son-in-law, Major Goronwy Owen. The head of the family has returned in all his old impishness. During the election campaign he persuaded—trapped, some say—a great many candidates of all parties into support for the Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction, by means of which he planned, or said he planned, to introduce in Britain a “new deal” similar to the “new deals” promised respectively to Canada and the United States by Mr. Bennett and President Roosevelt. Now that the election is over, he himself safely elected, and the “new deal” electorally rejected, he is going to Tangier for a long holiday and to write his memoirs.

Mr. Lloyd George’s impending departure is the most significant comment that has been made on the election. He is a natural fighter, the most formidable opponent Mr. Baldwin has had since the day in 1922 when Mr. Baldwin adroitly turned him out of leadership of the Coalition, and an excellent political strategist. But he is not the man to waste his strength in a hopeless fight. His departure is a sign that he believes Mr. Baldwin for the moment invincible.

Such, indeed, Mr. Baldwin is. The election was his, and his alone. He chose the time, against the known advice of highly skilled political advisers who would have preferred an election in the New Year. He chose the issue. He, above all other men, has profited by the result. He, above all other men, makes his fellow-Englishmen wonder what he is going to do with that result now that he has got it.

* * * * *

Mr. Baldwin made men wonder when he came out of the obscurity of a back bench in the House of Commons at fifty, and some twenty years ago. At seventy he makes them wonder still. In some ways he is the sort of caricature of an Englishman that the Englishman rather likes. He is plain of face, foursquare of figure. He has done no man wrong, and many men right. He has a strong moral sense, and a deep patriotism. Yet in other characteristics

of the John Littlejohn, who was "staunch and strong", he is conspicuously lacking. No man in public office of recent years has been less "upright and downright". Few Prime Ministers of recent years can have had so few close political friends in his own party.

Perhaps this last trait is what gives Mr. Baldwin strength. Perhaps the fact that he is alone, the fact that he is as much Mr. Baldwin as the leader of the Conservative Party, will be sufficient to maintain the national character of what must eventually be a Conservative Government.

For the moment the Government remains national, thereby confounding the post-election along with the pre-election prophets. The news of the resounding Government victory in the election was immediately followed by wholesale attempts, political, journalistic and amateur, at Cabinet-remaking. It was taken for granted that Mr. Winston Churchill would be brought back to one of the War Departments; that Mr. Anthony Eden, Minister for League Affairs, would go out. (Mr. Eden's departure was regarded as a certainty even inside the Foreign Office, which is usually better informed of its own domestic than of foreign affairs). As a high official cynically expressed it to me:—"They won't play *him* again after the election." In the event Mr. Winston Churchill has not—yet—come in. Mr. Eden, far from going out, has been put in sole charge of the Foreign Office now that Sir Samuel Hoare has been ordered to rest. The only new member of the Cabinet is Mr. Duff-Cooper as Secretary of State for War. And the only departure from it has been that of Lord Londonderry.

Lord Londonderry maintained in public office the tradition of the private politician who exerts as much influence by a dinner party as by a speech in parliament; on the eve of the parliamentary session every year, Lady Londonderry gave a reception which was a political event; Lord Londonderry's presence in former Cabinets was, it was said, due in part at least to his wife's influence. His departure from the Cabinet was the kind of incident that a hundred years ago would have been the piquant talk of the newspapers and of the town, particularly as it was immediately followed by an announcement that the customary eve-of-the-session reception at Londonderry House would not be held. In a more decorous 1935—oddly decorous in this, though not entirely squeamish in other, respects—the news was given in its barest form; which was like reciting one of the wittiest of Voltaire's jokes to a public ignorant of French.

Many explanations have been put forward for Lord Londonderry's departure. The commonest is that his notorious complac-

ency over air bombing was an embarrassment to a Government still mindful of the Peace Ballot. That explanation fits with other of Mr. Baldwin's actions since he took office for the third time. It fits with his failure to include Mr. Churchill in the Cabinet—inaction had the virtue of action here, for the Diehards with whom Mr. Churchill was arraigned have returned in full force to the present parliament; and it fits with the retention of Mr. Eden at the Foreign Office. Taken together, those two actions and that one inaction may mean that Mr. Baldwin intends to maintain an actively pro-League policy. There is no certainty in that, however. Mr. Baldwin is a comparatively recent convert to the international collective order, in so far as that order means police action as well as judicial decision. It would cause no great surprise if, now that the prophets have been successfully confounded, Mr. Baldwin were entirely to remodel his Cabinet at home and almost entirely to alter his policy abroad.

* * * * *

There are many of his countrymen who wish he would, though few who see how he can. British prestige has been engaged with that of the League, and however much Englishmen may seek to limit that engagement to the immediate crisis, the Continent has already interpreted it as a solemn and irrevocable promise of marriage. France now looks to Britain to prevent any militarization of the Rhineland zone, which was demilitarized by the Treaty of Versailles; Lithuania looks to Britain to guarantee her control of Memel, taken from Germany *via* the Allies in 1923, against any attack from Germany; the States of the Little Entente, through their spokesman Dr. Benesh, have flatly declared that they now depend on Britain for the defence of their frontiers.

Nor need the engagement stop at Europe. When Chinese territory was invaded by Japan in 1931, nothing was done, because none of the Great Powers members of the League was willing to put Article Sixteen, the "Sanctions" Article and the "teeth" of the Covenant, into effect. Now Article Sixteen has been put into effect, and Japan is on the point of invading China again. What would happen if China were to insist on diverting the attention of the League from the amateur imperialist, Signor Mussolini, to the skilled professional imperialist, Major-General Doihara?

Some Englishmen are already beginning to ask that question. The British Press, as a whole, does not. The British Press, in fact, has been earning, during the election and since, a not very enviable reputation for complete subservience to the Government. There

is, of course, no official censorship in Britain. But in its place there is, or seems to be, a strong unofficial and semi-official pressure from three sides. There is, first, pressure from advertisers, and from the City of London, which controls many of them. There is, next, pressure from the Law Courts, where any blackmailer who professes to have been libelled is fairly certain of doing considerable financial damage to a newspaper. There is, last, least tangible, most constant, and most injurious, pressure from Ministers and permanent officials in Whitehall. It may have been pure accident, or it may have been a combination of the first and last of these pressures. Whichever it was that was the cause, it is a singular fact that, for the three months preceding the election, newspapers which had been among the most vigorous critics of the Peace Ballot were among the most vigorous supporters of the British pro-League policy, which was the Peace Ballot policy; that since the election the same newspapers have either allowed the Italian-Abyssinian war to fade somewhat into the background, or, as in the case of one famous Sunday journalist, have come round to the conclusion that it would be as bad for Abyssinia to win as for Italy to win; and that newspapers of all kinds have passed by, as comparatively unimportant news, a Japanese policy in China beside which Signor Mussolini's war on Abyssinia is child's play.

There is a suspicion in some quarters that this change of front in the Press is preliminary to a change of front in the Cabinet; that there are under consideration proposals so to reform the League as to remove the "teeth" of the Covenant. If the suspicion be well founded, then Mr. Baldwin may find in this League reform a temporary solution of the dilemma that Britain is committed to support of the League and that support of the League may involve an unending series of British interventions in European affairs. He will not find in it any means of escape from a British promise, several times reiterated, during the Italian-Abyssinian dispute, that an enquiry shall be held to suggest a fairer division of the world's "raw materials", otherwise "colonies". Nor will he find any comparably easy solution of the home problems which are likely to occupy his Government's attention for the year to come.

* * * * *

First of these problems is the future of the mining industry. A bigger majority of the miners than ever before has just voted for a strike, if necessary, to raise wages above the present average of 44s a week. The miners' unions are strong again. Continental

methods, such as the "stay-below" strike, are being adopted in South Wales. Public sympathy is with the miners rather than with mineowners, whose pleas of poverty fail to carry conviction while they themselves live on rather more than the miners' 44s a week.

The Government half-promised during the election to step in and control the mining industry. That half-promise is no more binding on Mr. Baldwin than the many other half-promises made during the election, particularly as it was made through the mouth of Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, whom the Durham miners rejected. But if he fulfils it, or in some other way brings a just peace to the minefields, he will have done the greatest work of his career. If he fails to bring peace to the minefields, it is a tolerable certainty that a new period of industrial strife will come in Britain. The unions are stronger now than at any time since the general strike of 1926, and do not lack cause of complaint.

Mr. Baldwin's policy in the general strike, and in the miners' strike which preceded the general strike, brings no great confidence. It was a policy compounded of futile Danegeld (in the form of a subsidy to the mining industry) and of excessive show of strength when the strike became general. But the Mr. Baldwin of to-day is ten years older, and, his friends say, some years wiser. He has a power such as no Prime Minister has had since Mr. Lloyd George resigned office. And he is, again it is his friends who say it, in a mood of religious ecstasy.

If the mood lasts, the combination of religious ecstasy and great power should provide some interest to the student of British politics in the immediate future.