

LESSONS OF THE PAST AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON FUTURE ACTIONS

SHALL THE SPELL BE BROKEN?

Following are notes from the Rectorial Address to Aberdeen University to be delivered by the Rt. Hon. Sir Stafford Cripps at Aberdeen at 3 p.m. on Saturday, February 6, 1943:-

At the beginning of the fourth year of the greatest war in history you have done me, a lawyer and a politician, the signal honour of electing me as the Rector of your University. Not only have you chosen a man from outside the fighting services to follow the distinguished Welsh Admiral, who has so fitly represented you in the past, but you have chosen an Englishman, surely a good omen for that broader international outlook which we all hope to see after the war.

In trying to assess your reasons, and therefore my responsibilities upon this occasion, it has occurred to me that some of my often expressed views as to the future of our civilisation may have weighed with you in your selection of myself. I propose, therefore, to devote this my rectorial address to some examination of certain lessons of the past which may I hope have a bearing upon your and my actions in the future.

I have noticed recently with some distress a growing tendency in our country to view the future with a certain degree of hopelessness and of almost sour disillusion.

The confident expectation which has been expressed very widely over the last three years that we should never return again to prewar conditions, that there would be fundamental change and marked progress, shows signs of weakening, just at the moment when the prospect of the war ending begins to materialise.

Doubts are creeping in, and signs are not wanting that privilege and selfish interests are busily preparing to cast the future in the mould of the past. Nor does this development in our political trends seem to bring any sharp reaction from those who were formerly so confident of future change.

Indeed it is almost commonplace in these days to hear the most confirmed advocates of change expressing the view that "They" will never really implement the promise of a New Britain or a new world.

Who are these mysterious people referred to as "They", who are apparently looked upon as the veriest broken reed of a hope for the future? "They" is not the language of democracy or even of the class-struggle! "They" is the language of dictatorship and defeatism of the common people.

We must put aside all such subservience within our democracy and speak instead of what "We" want and we will do, or insist upon being done. But in order that "We" may be effective to make "Them" do what we wish, we must understand not only the problems of the future but also the lessons of the past.

This is not, alas, the first great war that the world has witnessed, nor is it even the first war with a revolutionary character. Indeed, so far in our history, the inflexibility of our social structure, both nationally and internationally, has been so great that it has shown itself incapable of a sufficiently rapid adaptation to changing circumstances. We have thus been unable to obviate the exercise of violence in bringing about fundamental change.

In this sense, as all great wars are in fact dynamic movements of social and economic progression or retrogression, and since they are characterised by the exercise of force, they may truly be regarded as revolutionary.

During these periods of revolutionary struggle in the past we have seen the urgent desire for change emerging during the course of the war, and we have witnessed what has become of it after the war has ceased.

A study of this cycle of events in former wars may give us the clue to what we must do in the final stages of this war if we would see the hopes of change engendered by our common misfortunes transformed into realities of progress to the benefit of the masses of the common people of the world.

We must not be deluded by the professions of those who have much to lose by way of possessions or privilege. There is an old saying full of wisdom which is apposite, "The devil was sick, the devil a monk would be....."

Apparent agreement in the hour of peril when the whole man and woman power of a country is essential for its very salvation, does not at all necessarily imply that there will be that same agreement when the time of peril is past.

Let us then turn back the pages of history to learn, if we can, the lesson of how we should act now if we would realise a truly progressive peace.

One of our most brilliant British authors has given us a name by which to designate this breaking down of the universal comradeship of war into the struggle for sectional advantage in the peace. Mr. Winston Churchill called it after the last war the "Broken Spell".

The political reaction of peace has almost always been marked by a relapse from the idealism of common effort, engendered by the stress of war, to a renewal of the internal struggle between progress on the one hand and reaction on the other.

The danger of defeat and the compulsion of war once removed, the old differences between the classes or sections of the community have come back to destroy the unity of purpose of the people.

Let me summarise this danger in the warning words of one of our young war poets, Jock Curle,

And we would hope that something should be altered
In the cruel careless fundamental law,
But we must beware or the moment will escape us;
It has done so before.
And we must see that out of the practical slaughter
Rise no mere vapoury dreams,
But a world where the poor are fed, the tyrants humbled,
And men know what life means.

The spell has been broken in the past partly because the spell itself was so potent. The very horrors of war themselves create the need for some compensating idealism, some hopefulness to offset the bitter destruction of young life. Rather than overwhelm our minds with the blood and sweat and toil of the present we escape into the dreamland of the future, and there are few who, in the hour of urgent danger, can be found to dash our hopes to the ground. Those who desire and work for great changes are inspired to press forward while even those who would resist feel compelled to pay lip-service to the dreams of progress.

So it was that during the last great war distinguished leaders added the weight of their advocacy to the common feeling of the need for fundamental change. In September 1914 Mr. Lloyd George spoke these words in the Queen's Hall in London :-

The people will gain more by this struggle in all lands than they comprehend at the present moment. It is true they will be free of the greatest menace to their freedom. That is not all. There is something infinitely greater and more enduring which is emerging already out of this great conflict, a new patriotism, richer nobler and more exalted than the old. I see amongst all classes, high and low, shedding themselves of selfishness, a new recognition that the honour of the country does not depend merely on the maintenance of its glory in the stricken field, but also in protecting its homes from distress. It is bringing a new outlook for all classes. The great flood of luxury and sloth which had submerged the land is receding, and a new Britain is appearing.

This was at the very outset of the war, but as time passed and the dangers grew more intense and with them the need for a greater and greater effort by the people, the spell became even deeper. It reached its climax just after the Armistice of 1918 in a speech that has often since been bitterly remembered. On November 25, 1918 at Wolverhampton our then Prime Minister drew this brilliant picture of the dreamland:

The country realises in a way it never did before how much it owes to the citizens who dwell in its humblest homes....Had it not been for these millions of men, who came from humble homes to lay their lives on the altar of their country, the British Empire might have been swept away, and at this moment we might have been cowering - cowering at the feet of the most arrogant masters that ever bullied the world.....What is our task? To make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in.....There is no time to lose. I want to take advantage of the new spirit.

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What Mr. Lloyd George failed to see was that the opportunity had already been lost, the time had already passed and the new spirit of common sacrifice was already at that very moment being strangled by the old forces of internal difference which rapidly reared their heads once the danger was past.

President Wilson in America was stressing the same need for a fresh start. In January 1918 he had already announced that "the day of conquest and aggrandisement is gone by". Later in the same year he made his contribution to the spell, speaking in London:

I believe that men are beginning to see, not perhaps the golden age, but an age which, at any rate, is brightening from decade to decade, and will lead us some time to an elevation from which we can see the things for which the heart of mankind is longing.

On the morning of the armistice he thus summed up the situation,

Everything for which America fought has been accomplished. It will not be our fortunate duty, to assist by example, by sober friendly counsel, and by material/in the establishment of just democracy throughout the world.

These were not in any sense the words of hypocrisy, but represented a genuine idealism which failed to appreciate the strength of those reactionary forces which had, for a time, been stilled by the agonies of war. The warning voice of Senator Lodge was soon heard expressing the view of reactionary isolationism. "We would not have our country's vigour exhausted or her moral force abated by everlasting muddling and meddling in every quarrel great and small which afflicts the world".

Before we come to any assessment of how far if at all the dreams of progress were realised nationally in our own country or internationally, it is instructive to examine the very different circumstances of the Napoleonic Wars.

The French revolution had stirred every autocrat and every ruling class in Europe with the fear of what might befall them. The Napoleonic victories had looked like carrying the teachings of that revolution throughout Europe. H.A.L. Fisher in his history of Europe thus summarises the views of the conquerors in 1815. "They came to a common resolve that there must be no more French revolution and that every germ of liberal opinion must be promptly killed lest it might develop into the malignant revolutionary fever." There might indeed have been a different outlook and a different sequel had Stalin filled the place of Tsar Alexander at the Congress of Vienna!

But even in those days of comparative unenlightenment of the common people it was necessary to cast the spell. Von Gentz the Secretary of the Congress of Vienna tells us "the grand phrases of 'reconstruction of the Social order', 'regeneration of the political system of Europe', 'a lasting peace founded upon a just division of strength' were uttered to tranquilize the people - The real purpose of the congress was to divide among the conquerors the spoils taken from the vanquished."

Metternich once wrote that the happiest result was that there was to be no change in the existing order of things, though in this relation we must not forget his own private views of what that order was. "I came into the world" he says "too late. I feel good for nothing. Earlier I should have had my share of the pleasures of the period! later I should have helped in reconstruction. Now I pass my life in propping up worm-eaten buildings! "

It was the object of the Congress of Vienna to prop up those worm-eaten buildings, and yet because of the power of the French revolution which had apparently suffered defeat, they could not arrest progress altogether.

Neither

Neither in Europe nor in England itself were the hopes of the reactionaries realised. For a few years it looked as if progress would be held down by repressive measures. The Annual Register of 1816 tells us somewhat naively "that the first year after the restoration of general peace should have been characterised in this country, as that of a more widely extended distress than its annals can for a long period exhibit, must doubtless have occasioned as much surprise as disappointment."

The attempt to give new life to the old system broke down. As a prominent historian has stated:

There had been too much bloodshed, too many new ideas, too many exhibitions of the inefficiency of the old system, for it ever to return. The French revolutionary programme, the abolition of feudalism, equality before the law and Napoleon's appeal to nationality remained permanent factors of the new world which had arisen.

In our own country, where for years the leaders had been obsessed by the spectre of a triumph of the Jacobin principles Castlereagh for a time deferred to Eldon's desire to enjoy the blessings of the old order and of peace, and little advance was made during the first years after the war had ended. But by 1832 the old traditions and institutions had been criticised, shaken and remoulded and a profound constitutional change was accomplished in the teeth of the remonstrances of those who still clung to the principles of the old order. These changes were in part the outcome of European events but even more the results of the industrial revolution.

We thus see that the immediate political consequences of the peace of 1815 were the triumph of reaction in the name of peace and order. To quote once more from the Annual Register of 1815 "It must be culpable discontent to be insensible of the meliorated condition of our country, when nothing is probably wanting to restore the enjoyment of the advantages so largely bestowed upon it except patience, prudence and economy."

But this triumph of reaction was shortlived for the forces making for progress, especially those arising out of the industrial revolution, were too strong to be permanently held back.

In passing from the Napoleonic wars and their sequel and coming to more recent times it is significant that in these present years of strife, as indeed during and after the last war, Abraham Lincoln has been one of the most admired and often quoted figures of history.

He spoke with the voice of the idealist in the American war of North and South. Let me quote from his second inaugural address -

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nations wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

The history of the following years shows how far short the result fell of the hope. Reconstruction became a word hateful to the South. Progress was hindered by the reaction of a small group of men eager for money and power and unscrupulous of the rights of their fellow citizens.

The bitterness of the civil war was carried through into the peace and the hopes of the people and the soldiers for that better and more just society pictured by Lincoln were disappointed.

And yet here again despite all the forces of reaction and bitterness something real and vital came out of the war.

The disunity of the war threw down a challenge to American Statesmanship to knit the nation more closely together. The national character was deepened and became more mature. The foundations were indeed laid for the United States of America. that is now our ally.

Let me now return to the war of 1914-18 and the uneasy peace which followed. I have already described to you the spell of hope that was cast upon the people. let me give you in Mr. Winston Churchill's words the opportunity which offered to the statesmen.

On that November evening the three men at the head of Great Britain, the United States and France seemed to be masters of the world There was nothing wise right and necessary which they could not in unity agree ... (but) jealousies, factions revenges long pent up now advanced on every side A vast fatigue dominated collective action.

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In the United States war weariness, a renewed suspicion of Europe, a sense of disillusionment and party bitterness soon engulfed the whole country.

Mr. Lloyd George's assertion on the day after the Armistice in an address to his Liberal colleagues that the peace must be based on the fundamental principles of righteousness without base, sordid, squalid ideas of vengeance or of avarice, was overridden by the telegram from 370 members of the new Parliament which stated:-

Our constituents have always expected and still expect that the first action of the peace delegates would be as you repeatedly stated in your election speeches to present the bill in full, to make Germany acknowledge the debt and then to discuss ways and means of obtaining payment.

The old plea for peace and inaction was heard again. "We have been moved already beyond endurance and need rest" wrote a distinguished Britisher.

Tranquillity was the slogan with which Mr. Bonar Law won the 1922 Election and President Harding echoed the same sentiment in his Presidential election campaign on the other side of the Atlantic. "America's present need is not heroics, but healing; not nostrums, but normalcy; not revolution but restoration". And now we have learnt to what a pass rest, healing normalcy and restoration have brought the world in 20 short years.

But although a great opportunity was missed, though the spell was broken and shattered it would be a mistake to overlook the fact that there have been some items on the credit side, items that would never have been there but for the war.

A great nation was reborn in Russia and another in China. There was an enormous acceleration in scientific advance. The social tempo was quickened. In our own country a great advance was made in education, in the administration of health services, in the care of the unemployed and the women of our country gained their emancipation. New experiments in international administration were attempted and advances were made in colonial and Indian administration.

But all these items added up were not sufficient to offset the losses or to pay for that world of hope which had been pictured to us during the war.

Before many months discontent and disillusionment were rife and we settled down once again to the class struggle, to the wavering and uncertain foreign policy which was the external manifestation of our internal doubts and hesitations, until at last we found ourselves swept, unprepared, into a new and greater world war.

We now approach once again one of those critical periods of hope which occur in every great war, as the prospect of ultimate victory begins to loom on the horizon.

The emotions of the people are hypersensitive, they are possessed of a great longing that something better and happier shall emerge from the horrors of war, that the price of suffering which the world is paying shall secure some fundamental and dramatic change in the lot of the common man and woman.

So men and women have wished and hoped in the past, but very largely those hopes have miscarried and those wishes have not materialised. You who stand now at the threshold of your lives will of necessity have a large part to play in the progress of our country in the coming years. And I would beg of you to observe objectively the problem with which you and your generation are faced.

Do not allow others to lead you astray by facile explanations dealing with the deceitfulness of politicians or the trickery of the ruling class. The problem is not so simple as that.

Many of those who cast the spell in former times were absolutely sincere in their hopes and desires, but, at the critical moment when they sought to implement those desires in action the opposing forces were too strong.

This, I believe, was for two main reasons. The progressive forces failed to strike while the iron was hot. During the time of war when the feeling of co-operation is still strong, is the moment to concert common action for the period after the war. To wait until hostilities have ceased, till the binding force of the common danger is no longer present is to miss the chance of common agreement. And, second, they underestimated the support they would win from the people - the common men and women of the country - for a bold programme of change. This support was neither clamant nor well defined in its objectives. There was a real sense of past wrongs and an urgent desire to see them righted, but how this was to be done remained shrouded in the fog of uncertainty.

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There were too many voices crying out the specifics which would cure the disease, like the rival hucksters at a country fair. Progressive leadership suffered as it always suffers from its diversity. Each section and group was more devoted to its own particular nostrum than to the cause of progress as a whole.

It was vital that all the progressive forces should come together on a common platform to defeat reaction, but their differences in theory kept them from a common practice in action. They underestimated too - until it was too late - the strength of the opposition they would meet. The fact that such opposition goes underground while the war is in progress is apt to lead to the belief that it has disappeared altogether. It was not, I believe that the spell-binders were deceivers so much as that they missed their time and their opportunity.

Since the last war, however, our democracy has made great progress. All classes have become more politically conscious and they are not now so easily misled by empty slogans. Education is the great defence of democracy and education has taken strides forward in recent years.

But one factor is liable to militate against the control by the people of the post-war development. This war more than any of its predecessors has drawn in almost every man and woman in the country. There has been no normalcy, no rest for any. The whole population will be vastly wearied when the end comes and it will be harder than ever before to stir the people to a realisation of how easily their democratic power may be used for what may seem plausible, but will turn out to be disastrous, purposes.

Our own native vigour of mind and body alone will be able to save us from the soothing call to rest and restoration. It is for this reason that the Youth of our country will have so important a part to play in our survival.

The atmosphere of the battle, the driving force of self-sacrifice will have gone, the note of urgency and endeavour will have passed. Let me remind you in one quotation of what Field Marshal Smuts has said about the quality of peace:

If war in future is to be rendered impossible we must see to it that its function, so far as it has been beneficent in the past, be discharged by some other means. Peace must be dynamic; it must keep the door open to reform and to freedom and must not become an incubus on human progress. The springs of reform, of progress and of freedom must not be frozen under a deadly peace.

The beneficence of war of which the Field Marshal speaks is its power to change intolerable situations, that is its revolutionary power. We must make peace too capable of revolutionary change if we are to rid ourselves of war.

We, as a people have chosen, and chosen deliberately, the way of democratic change, which has its drawbacks and its delays, but which we believe, since we are democrats, can be used to work the will of the people.

We approach now one of those rare and great testing times of the power of our democracy. Can it prevent the spell from being broken, can it mobilise the longings, the hopes, the desires of the mass of the people to be effective against the interests of reaction and the apathy of war-weariness?

We do not want to repeat once again the experience after others wars. We can see that action taken earlier and a greater effort by the people might have changed the whole history of our country and perhaps of the world.

This time, at least, we are forewarned of the dangers of apathy, we may easily fail not only in our progress, but to preserve our democracy itself. Defeated totalitarianism may, like the French revolution, impress its forms and ideas upon the victorious nations unless we are awake to the danger and determined in the action that we shall take.

The war has developed for us many mechanisms for political and economic co-operation, many controls and much machinery of planning. These we have created because the call for efficiency has been held to over-ride every special interest. This same spirit, this same stress upon the supreme priority of the common weal we must carry through the armistice and into the peace. Much that we have built up for purposes of war we can adapt quickly and easily to the needs of peace.

Those needs are many; a closer knit and more soundly planned co-operation between the United Nations; a world economy based, not on scarcity and starvation, but upon plenty and happiness, and a means of giving the world a degree of effective security in which we can exercise the arts of peace rather than those of war.

But over and above all these is the need for higher standards and better living conditions for the common people in every country of the world. Our business is to secure this, first and foremost for our own people. It can be done. We have the productive capacity if we like to use it, but we must decide in whose interest that power of production is to be used when the war is over.

That is a decision which must be taken by the electors of our democracy. It is a simple and a fundamental decision, which, once taken, the experts and the technicians must be instructed to implement. The time to agree upon that basic principle of priorities is now while we still co-operate for the purpose of victory. By so doing we can make certain that our victory will not be barren and will stretch out and through the years of peace as well as those of war.

I have pictured to you the difficulties; I have pointed the prospect. I throw you a challenge to your spirit of adventure and of patriotism. The meaning of that challenge has nowhere been better expressed than by a son, a very distinguished son, of this University of Aberdeen. Do you remember the words that Eric Linklater in one of his plays puts into the mouth of Beethoven? Let me end by reading them to you:

"Do not think peace to be a shallow or a placid thing. It is deep and rich. It is full of movement and joy, of work and laughter, and the reaching out of your hands to God. That is the peace of a living soul. Have nothing to do with any thin or idle peace, mere rest from toil and relapse from war. That is the peace of dying."

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