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The Debacle of the Fabians

By RUSSELL KIRK

The recent writing of the New Fabians gives ample proof of the final failure of British Socialism and shows up the Laborites as dispirited and devoid of serious thought.

Nearly two and a half years ago, the Attlee government gave way to the Conservatives. The British Socialists had seemed sick of office a good while before that, anxious enough to forget Aneurin Bevan's vaunt, before their postwar triumph over Mr. Churchill, that "we shall do such things that never again will there be a Tory government." The more reflective men among the Socialists, indeed, had anticipated the defeat of Labor in 1951 and begun to search their consciences. Much was said, in 1950 and 1951, about the necessity for reviewing socialist thought; something has been said on this topic since the Labor government fell; but remarkably little thinking has been done.

It must strike any close observer of Parliament how curiously ineffectual the Labor opposition has been since the return of Churchill. The fire is gone out of the Labor members, and they are a good deal more interested in squabbling among themselves than in attempting to criticize the Conservatives intelligently. Not that they have formed a truly loyal opposition. The eagerness of the left wing of the Labor leadership to encourage the impossible demand of the engineering unions for a pay increase of 15 per cent (which they knew could not be granted), and the embarrassment these same people recently caused Mr. Attlee when he supported the military appropriations of the government, are only the two most conspicuous examples of the irresponsibility of at least half the Labor members. But they have offered no real substitute for any Conservative measure, and they have shown neither the ability to win by-elections nor, indeed, any convincing wish to take office.

Their vague talk of returning to power once the blunders of the Tories have brought on a depression is no more than the grumbling, without real hope, of all broken factions. It is almost impossible to resist the inference that they have no idea what they would try to do if they should suddenly be asked to assume authority. Mr. Bevan, some months ago, hesitantly spoke up for nationalizing the land, confessing simultaneously that he had no idea of just how this could be accomplished; his proposal was so unmistakably old-fashioned that it met with an awkward silence from most of his personal adherents.

In the light of the present confusion of the

Socialists, it is of some interest to turn back to certain books which appeared during 1951 and 1952—the work of eminent radical thinkers concerned for the mind and heart of their party. Their prophecy of the intellectual bankruptcy of Labor has been amply fulfilled; and yet the various counsels of these well-wishers seem to have made next to no impression upon the men who control the Labor Party, or, indeed, upon the rank and file.

Mr. Carr's Perplexity

Among the earlier of these voices of foreboding was E. H. Carr's. Mr. Carr is not a member of the Fabian Society; it is difficult to say he is a member of any body, for he veers in his allegiance according to the fortunes of particular ideologies, constant only to *pleonexia*, the search after power. But Mr. Carr, historian of Soviet Russia, is a collectivist, unmistakably, and devoted to the total state. His little book, *The New Society* (1951), is significant of the present perplexity of British radicalism. The old motives to integrity and diligence, Mr. Carr confesses, are being destroyed by the Welfare State, or have already been destroyed; more and more, most men see no reason why they should work or even obey the established rules of society; therefore planners must find a new sanction to replace the old sanction of fear of want: "The donkey needs to see the stick as well as the carrot. . . I confess that I am less horror-struck than some people at the prospect, which seems to me unavoidable, of an ultimate power of what is called direction of labor resting in some arm of society, whether in an organ of state or of trade unions."

Here is the first step toward the forced labor camp. More significant still, perhaps, is Mr. Carr's confession that though he thinks "progress" the only goal of life, he cannot define progress: "Progress is just what it says, a moving on—a conscious moving on toward purposes which are felt to be worthy of human faith and human endeavour." If the early Socialists of England had been so vague as this, they would be as insignificant today as the American Socialist Party.

A book more truly in the Fabian tradition, *Restatement of Liberty* (1951), by P. C. Gordon

Walker, former Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations in the Attlee government, is no less startling. Mr. Gordon Walker, too, is aware that somehow thrift, honesty, and simple obedience to law have diminished alarmingly under the Welfare State; and his remedy is increased compulsion. "The new State will also directly augment authority and social pressure by new powers of punishment and compulsion. So far from withering away, as in theory both the individualist and the total State should, the new State, if it is to bring into being and serve the better society, must create new offenses and punish them."

Most Socialist writers are not so logical as Mr. Gordon Walker. A. J. P. Taylor, one of the most industrious of Socialist journalists and scholars, contents himself with denunciations of the upper classes—any upper classes, conservative or socialist—and threats against the farmers. Marx, Mr. Taylor observes, knew that the towns, in a socialist state, must crush the peasantry; and a good thing it would be, too: "He wanted to finish the struggle for good and all by liquidating the peasantry; but, failing this Utopian solution, the towns have to practice the doctrine which is the basis of all civilized life: 'We have the Maxim gun, and they have not.'" When such unprovoked ravings as this fill the columns of the *New Statesman and Nation*, surely the talents of the Socialists are at a low ebb; ranting is substituted for confident planning, the mark of a profound frustration.

Even such an elder statesman of Fabianism as G. D. H. Cole is at sea. Dismayed at the inefficiency of nationalized industry and the general lack of drive in the Welfare State, he turns back to guild socialism and syndicalism, fumblingly, for remedies; and he says, ominously: "Socialism is an unworkable system without a new social drive such as the Communists have managed to give it." Familiar as even the Fabians now are with the sanctions and methods of the Soviets, few of Mr. Cole's colleagues ventured to applaud this candor.

Revisionism Redoubled

The most sober and interesting endeavor of the British Socialists to look into their own hearts appeared two years ago: *New Fabian Essays*, edited by Mr. R. H. S. Crossman, who contributes the most interesting essay. The authors of these articles are the young lions of the Fabian Society: C. A. R. Crosland¹, Roy Jenkins, Margaret Cole, Austen Albu, Ian Mikardo, Denis Healey, John Strachey—not all of them, perhaps, very young lions. Mr. Attlee has contributed a preface, but several of the authors are conspicuous among the devotees of Mr. Bevan. Now Mr. Bevan, the middle-aged *enfant terrible* of his party, is the most

1. I can advance no theory as to why Fabians manifest such an affection for three initials.

old-fashioned of all Laborites. His world of oratory and of polemic is the world of 1918, or 1926, and he rejoices in all the clichés of the radical agitator; he is still talking of class warfare and capital levies when every practical Socialist politician put such fancies out of his head years ago. On the face of things, then, it is surprising that these younger Fabians, full of revisionist schemes, should profess such an attachment to the most die-hard of old-school Labor leaders.

Whatever their principles of loyalty, most of the contributors to *New Fabian Essays* have turned their backs, or at least their shoulders, upon the original *Fabian Essays*, and their authors. This new book is revisionism redoubled. Not all these New Fabians are going in the same direction.

Mr. Crosland Defines "Statism"

Mr. Crosland almost justifies the *Spectator's* jocular reference to "Socialist Conservatism." The trouble with the socialist Welfare State, he says in substance, is that everything has been made so jolly that we don't know which way to turn next; we have accomplished everything, and find ourselves bewildered. Marx was wrong, Mr. Crosland observes, when he predicted the progressive impoverishment of the worker, ending in a proletarian revolution; instead, the working classes have grown steadily more prosperous, in spite of war and depression, so that their real income in Britain, by 1938, was three and a half times that of 1870. Capitalism is not going to be overthrown by revolution; instead, a post-capitalist society is taking shape, characterized by a diminished influence of individual property rights upon economic and social power, the transfer of economic management to a new class of administrative employees, a great increase in economic controls by the state, a high level of social services, a permanently high level of employment, a steady increase of production, a lessening of the class struggle by the growth of buffer intermediate classes between the top and the bottom strata of society, and the tendency to substitute "the virtues of cooperative action" for private initiative and competition. All this, Mr. Crosland says, constitutes "The Transition from Capitalism," the subject of his essay; and he calls the new society Statism.

What is the difference between this and Socialism? Chiefly, Mr. Crosland writes, in that the soul of Socialism is equality, and this new Statism is not really egalitarian. "The purpose of socialism is quite simply to eradicate this sense of class, and to create in its place a sense of common interest and equal status." To this task of creating greater equality of "living standards and opportunities," but even more, of "measures on the socio-psychological plane" for making men feel equal, Mr. Crosland advises sincere Fabians to address themselves henceforward. Correspondingly,

intelligent Socialists on "lines of policy which . . . as constituting the essential . . . These obsolete socialist . . . tinued extension of the . . . nationalization of whole . . . proliferation of control . . . tion of income by direct . . .

In short, Mr. Crosland . . . that nearly the whole . . . antiquated, and he im . . . positively dangerous if . . . the benefits of Statism . . . the consciousness of cla . . .

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One Town's Experience

If Mr. Crosland's general statement is true in particular cases, just what is the moral undermining of certain of the features of Statism? I happen to know, for instance, of what has occurred in the town of Huddersfield in the pattern of industry there. The mills have operated with great pride and efficiency, with excellent owners and their millhands, for twenty years, however, changing. The decay of the families of the millhands, the younger generation leaving the end, perhaps, of twenty years ago. Yet, after all, what have the millhands got? One or two deaths in the family, virtual confiscation because of the duties, and the mill workers are a company of outsiders, coming in from the country who all too often manufacture a bad reputation of English towns. The consequence, and so does the Statism, is that people lose their accustomed way of life.

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intelligent Socialists ought now to dismiss certain "lines of policy which are sometimes put forward as constituting the essence of good socialism." These obsolete socialistic objectives are the continued extension of free social services, more nationalization of whole industries, the continued proliferation of controls, and further redistribution of income by direct taxation.

In short, Mr. Crosland is so bold as to declare that nearly the whole of the socialist program is antiquated, and he implies that it is becoming positively dangerous if Britain wants to retain the benefits of Statism. His only strong ambition is to realize "a society which is not bedeviled by the consciousness of class."

This is moderation; but it is also smugness. Mr. Crosland's complacency with the present insipidity of British life would have driven idealistic Socialists like William Morris into a Viking rage. In some sense, Mr. Crosland's England is simply the triumph of that lower-middle-class life which Morris and Ruskin detested. Except for his appetite for a psychological equality, Mr. Crosland's interests seem to be wholly utilitarian, and he rejoices in the increasing mechanization of everything in life, on Benthamite principles. What attracted great numbers of people to socialism at the turn of the century was its promise to wipe away the grubby industrial world and substitute something beautiful. The Socialist Party is come down, instead, to Mr. Crosland's world, which is very like a rather shabby imitation of *Looking Backward*.

One Town's Experience

If Mr. Crosland's generalities are reduced to particular cases, just how much good has this moral undermining of old classes, together with certain of the features of Statism, done the English people? I happen to know something, for instance, of what has occurred in the old weaving town of Huddersfield in Yorkshire. The established pattern of industry there was the family business, operated with great pride of workmanship and high efficiency, with excellent relations between the owners and their mill-hands. During the past twenty years, however, most of this has been changing. The decay of the old certitudes among the families of the mill owners has made many of the younger generation reckless and profligate—the end, perhaps, of two centuries of integrity. Yet, after all, what have they to look forward to? One or two deaths in the family will result in virtual confiscation because of the enormous death duties, and the mill will have to be sold to a company of outsiders, commonly absentee owners, who all too often manufacture shoddy goods. The reputation of English textiles declines in consequence, and so does true efficiency; the working people lose their accustomed pride and reliability;

and the class which furnished the leadership for the town sinks into apathy. How long can this particular aspect of Statism continue? Not more than a generation, at most, I think; and then will come, not the placid psychological equality that is Mr. Crosland's dream, but the grim stick to replace the carrot, the authoritarian state—unless there is a restoration of the old motives to integrity.

Advice from Mr. Crossman

When we turn to Mr. R. H. S. Crossman's essay, we find that interesting mixture of sound sense and doctrinaire egalitarianism which occurs in the whole body of Mr. Crossman's writings. Like Mr. Crosland, Mr. Crossman is willing to concede that most of the Socialist program is obsolete; what is more, he confesses that from the first the Fabians went wrong on a great many philosophical postulates. The present dreary intellectual state of the Labor Party alarms him: "Our socialism may degenerate into Laborism. If this happens, politics will become a matter of 'ins' and 'outs.' Soon there will be no deep difference between the two parties, and the dynamic of social change will be taken over by new and dangerous political movements." The Fabians must repudiate many of their most cherished fancies, if they are to survive, he continues. They must realize that the notion of automatic progress is a delusion, for "the evolutionary and the revolutionary philosophies of progress have both proved false." They must face the fact that the managerial state, as beheld in Soviet Russia, destroys the true equality and respect for individual personality which Socialists desire. Fabians must admit that mere democracy, applied abstractly to Asia or Africa, does not bring either freedom or equality—it simply gives the old dominant classes, or new oligarchs, a new instrument of power. Fabians should abjure ideology, indeed, and crusading ideals, adopting instead a policy of urbane criticism.

At home, intelligent Socialists ought to turn their attention to three problems: the surviving concentration of capital in private hands, despite the redistribution of income through taxation; the surviving influence of laissez-faire concepts in the allocation of profits, wages, and salaries; and the survival, despite nationalization, of "effective power . . . in the hands of a small managerial and Civil Service elite."

Mr. Crossman decidedly has thrown overboard the swaggering optimism of the earlier Fabians:

In these conditions it is self-deception to believe that the living standards and security enjoyed by the British people after 1945 were a stable achievement of socialism. Living in an age not of steady progress towards a world welfare capitalism, but of world revolution, it is folly for us to assume that the Socialist's task is to assist in the gradual improvement of the material lot of the human race

By VICTOR RI

and the gradual enlargement of the area of human freedom. The forces of history are all pressing towards totalitarianism: in the Russian bloc, owing to the conscious policy of the Kremlin; in the free world, owing to the growth of the managerial society, the effects of total rearmament, and the repressing of colonial aspirations. The task of socialism is neither to accelerate this Political Revolution, nor to oppose it (this would be as futile as opposition to the Industrial Revolution a hundred years ago), but to civilize it.

This, too, certainly is moderation. True, Mr. Crossman retains some vestige of tenderness for the Soviet experiment, so that he does not really inquire whether Soviet totalitarianism is simply the consequence of having Bad Men in the Kremlin, or whether it may possibly be the consequence of abolishing the traditional motives to integrity, and so having to rule by force. True, he still turns up his nose at "capitalism," going so far as to try to convince himself that the divorce of ownership and management in certain great American corporations (a problem which disturbs many American industrialists even more than it disturbs Mr. Crossman) is a kind of counterpart to Soviet totalitarianism. But he has come a great way toward confessing that the traditional ends and methods of Western society are worth preserving.

For what, according to Mr. Crossman, is the object of socialism? Why, human freedom. Not democracy, not equality, not a planned economy, not even prosperity, but freedom. Mr. Crossman is vague about his definition of freedom, which sometimes he seems to blend indistinguishably with equality; but it is reasonably clear that he likes old-fashioned liberty, private liberty, and not the sophisticated new definitions of freedom as "opportunity for creative activity" or "an activity, an arduous pursuit of a goal that is never reached" offered by Mr. Carr and Mr. Gordon Walker. It will be interesting to see whether Mr. Crossman, holding his present opinions, can continue to be any sort of Socialist, or can continue to make himself think that socialism is the way to freedom.

A Note of Disillusion

There are other interesting contributions to *New Fabian Essays*. Through them all, however, runs a note of disillusion and baffled hope. The world, these people have discovered, is not governed by little pamphlets, or much altered by tidy little plans. They dread the future, where their predecessors rejoiced in the day that was dawning; they are mightily anxious to consolidate the present gains of socialism, rather than to experiment; they suffer, indeed, from that ancient malady called the conservatism of fear. And they have good reason for alarm. Their party and principles have so weakened the old order of things, deliberately boring from within, injuring the hearts and minds

of the old governing classes, that the moral and material capital of traditional British society is perilously close to exhaustion. Yet they shudder at the thought of proceeding onward to a regime of compulsion and the total state, the only logical alternative to a conservative order and a free economy.

They are beginning to realize that their own moral convictions were derived from traditional British society, but that they have been consuming the vigor of that traditional system, a parasitic sect. They are beginning to realize also that the socialist economy, similarly, may have been no more than a parasite upon the free economy it detested. And now, it occurs to some of them, they are close to the peril of an existence not merely parasitic, but saprophytic.

Fabianism Now Rootless

Two years ago, then, the New Fabians exhorted British Socialists to rethink their program. There is very little evidence in Parliament or in the Labor Party organizations that any such rethinking has occurred. And no wonder, for the New Fabians' manifesto was a tissue of negations, not of affirmations; they offered no guidance. British socialism, as a moral and intellectual movement, developed from two sources: the utilitarian principles of Bentham (as Mr. Crossman reminds us) and the equalitarian "social gospel" of the Non-conformists, reinforced by certain Anglican churchmen. As Mr. Crossman himself candidly points out, the great grim events of our time have exposed as so many fallacies the Benthamite assumptions upon which the Webbs, Laski, H. G. Wells, and their friends founded their socialism; and when such people turned to Marxism for a refuge, they embraced a bear. "Christian" Socialism, on the other hand, has tended to disintegrate since the First World War, declining into a mere secular moralism, at best, or giving up the ghost as the true character of socialist states became clear. With both its roots hacked through, how long can British socialism hope to keep clear of the pit into which British Liberalism has fallen?

Fabianism, I am inclined to believe, has fought its last campaign. If the Fabian Society survives as an influence in British politics and the affairs of the mind, it will survive only in a metamorphosed state, with new principles, if not new methods. The old Fabians were strong in irony, statistical learning, and pure rationality. What they lacked was the higher imagination, that faculty which conservatives like Burke and Disraeli possessed so conspicuously. Men do not want to be equal, really, or efficient, or completely rational, or the recipients of a planned happiness. What men want is to be simply themselves. This the Fabians refused to confess; and so they are come to the end of their tether.

Much has been said about the domination of some about the crippling effects that result from blame for these costly part upon the rank and file truth is that most dues 75,000 local unions are a few hours each month at which their economic

A union having, say, books may be run by men who are interested in meetings. It is estimated 16,000,000 union members vote or monitor their officials and political policies.

As a result of this ap become captives of the Communists. There is, for pro-Soviet labor union called Smelter Workers. It was in 1949 after a jury of its it as a follower of Soviet been accused before con being part of the Soviet Its national counsel, Na Fifth Amendment and re ship in a specific Com federal government. With member of the same cell

This union controls copper, nickel, and uranium smelter plants heavy-water plant at The pro-Communist lead 100,000 members endange nation. It can paralyze the needed for weapons that bomb. Yet a survey of in northern Canada to south often only thirty to five regional headquarters me policy is decided upon by In an election held on one bothered to run against candidate for president, a of the members took the t