

The Split in the English Liberal Party

By John Pepper

THE process of split in the Liberal Party of Great Britain has now reached one of its last stages. The sessions of the parliamentary fraction of this party gave twenty votes to Lloyd George, ten votes to Asquith, with four abstentions. At the same time a severe resolution was adopted against Asquith. This session signified a victory for Lloyd George and a split within the Liberal Party.

These events are no more than the climax of the decline of the once so mighty Liberal Party, a decline that has been going on regularly for many years.

Great historical traditions were once embodied in the Liberal Party. Once it was the party of the progressive bourgeoisie. In the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries it was a model for the liberals of the whole world. Free trade and toleration, compromise and magnanimity of the British bourgeoisie, rich and wise (wise because rich)—such was the ideology of Liberalism. Manchesterism was its political-economic doctrine. Or in other words: a free road for the “efficient” capitalists, free starvation for the “inefficient” millions of workers; free trade on the broad seas that were “free” because they were protected by the English fleet.

The industrial revolution, the stormy development of capitalism, raised the Liberal Party to its greatness. In no country of the world did Liberalism develop so completely, so elaborately, in such purity. But the god Chronos devours his own children. The further development of capitalism has now destroyed the Liberal Party. The Liberal Party was a party of the bourgeoisie during the period of individual capitalists, of captains of industry, of independent industrialists, of proud commercial lords, in a word, of the world of free competition. But even in Great Britain free competition is no more. The period of monopoly has burst in, and with it the decline of Liberalism. Even in industrial England, slowly but certainly growing more backward, trusts and cartels arise. Finance capital becomes ever mightier; the last decade in particular has seen a stormy development of monopoly in banks, in shipping, in ship-building and in railroad transportation. The powerful new industrial and financial monopolies no longer look upon the Liberal Party with its antiquated free trade ideology, with its doctrines on toleration and compromise, as their own party.

With the development of the imperialist stage of British capitalism the Conservative Party became more and more the official Party of the great bourgeoisie. There was no end to the desertions of the representatives of the capitalists from the Liberal Party. The Liberal Party began to transform itself into a party of the petty bourgeoisie, of the broad strata of the technical and other intellectuals, and of many sections of the working

class. Simultaneously, the representatives of the big bourgeoisie seized the leadership of the Conservative Party. The “Die-hards,” the representatives of aristocratic landlordism, still play a large role in the Conservative Party, but the real leaders of this party in recent times have been the industrialists, Bonar Law and Baldwin.

The last decade was already marked by continuous crackings within the Liberal Party. Splits and reunions were on the order of the day as everyday events. Lloyd George split the party and formed the coalition cabinet with the Conservatives during the war while Asquith managed even in such hard times to hold aloft the banner of “free liberalism.” As soon as the Conservatives began to feel strong enough to take over the leadership without the petty bourgeois-demagogic Lloyd George, they expelled him from the cabinet and for a time two Liberal fractions dragged out a miserable existence. Then came the reunion of Lloyd George and Asquith. They embraced each other, but the gentlemanly Asquith held the dagger ready in his right hand and the plebian Lloyd George was ready with his knife. The collapse of the Liberal Party in the elections in 1924 let loose a period of endless fractional struggles and discussions. The discussion raged particularly about the “Coal Plan” of Lloyd George who—with demagogic phrases—began to assail the capitalists. Another center of discussion was Lloyd George’s land scheme which demanded the “nationalization” of the great estates. But every discussion came back to the fundamental question: What should be the attitude of the liberal Party in the question of private property and its relation to the labor movement?

Already earlier in the year the disintegration began. Sir Alfred Mond, an influential capitalist, left the Liberal Party and joined the Conservatives. In his letter to Lord Oxford he gave the basis for his resignation as follows: the only question of importance today is Socialism versus Individualism and the Conservative Party is the better instrument for the struggle against Socialism. The general strike greatly hastened the collapse of the Liberal Party. The petty bourgeois wing under the leadership of Lloyd George vacillated between the working class and the government. Lloyd George wrote:

“I see no possibility of agreeing with the declarations that condemn the general strike, because these declarations say nothing in criticism of the government which is as responsible if not more so.” (Re-translated)

The big bourgeois wing of the Party under the leadership of Lord Grey completely identified itself, during the general strike, with the Conservative government, with the introduction of the Emergency Powers Act, with the

persecution of the working class. Lord Oxford declared that the conduct of Lloyd George, particularly in regard to the fact that in the American press he described the course of the general strike as a great paralysis of entire British industry and transport, was unloyal and treasonable and could in no way be associated with the leading positions in the Liberal Party. Lloyd George accepted this declaration of war. In the sessions of the Party leadership, the so-called "Shadow Cabinet," Lloyd George remained in the minority. But the praliamentary fraction gave him a majority.

What will happen now? For a time of course, there will be two small Liberal fractions in parliament, but even these tiny remnants of the once so mighty English Liberalism, will hardly be able to maintain their existence. **The general strike split the Liberal Party and the sharper the class antagonisms become, the less room there is for the mediating and tolerance-preaching Liberalism.** More and more clearly do the two great basic classes of modern society face each other. To a greater and greater degree is the bourgeoisie represented through the Conservative Party and the proletariat through the Labor Party. Between the two of these millstones Liberalism is ground to pieces.

This situation is characterized most bluntly in a statement of Hilton Young who has left the Liberal Party and joined the Conservatives. He writes in a letter to Prime Minister Baldwin:

"I SEE ONLY ONE CHASM in our contemporary politics. On the one side is individual freedom and prosperity based on constitutional methods, on the other side is Socialism and rebellion that depend

more and more openly on unconstitutional methods. The general strike has convinced me that in the face of this situation the maintenance of petty political differences is no longer compatible with duty to society." (Retranslated)

Capitalism or Socialism—this is now the great question . . . and the "petty political differences" are beginning to vanish. Yesterday it was Sir Alfred Mond, today it is Hilton Young and tomorrow it will be Lord Grey and Lord Asquith who will be in the same dilemma. The development of great monopolies, the sharpening of class contradictions, the growth of political independence of the working class, the decline of British imperialism divide all England ever more clearly into two camps: into the camp of the bourgeoisie and into the camp of the proletariat. The more conscious bourgeois elements of the Liberal Party have already drawn the conclusion from the situation and have openly gone over to the Conservatives.

Lloyd George attempts to impede this great historical process and is now trying to form an alliance with the Labor Party just as during the war he made his alliance with the Conservatives. He fails, however, to take into consideration the great fact that not only are ever greater masses of workers leaving the old historical parties and joining the Labor Party, as the series of by-elections shows, but that within the Labor Party itself there is a growing differentiation between those who betray their class and those who fight for it. The collapse of the Liberal Party must of necessity come, and it is good that it should come. With the disappearance of Liberalism there disappears also one of the most important hindrances in the revolutionization of England.