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The Importance of History

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WHEN the Labour Government took office a few weeks ago there was a triumphant satisfaction in the minds of its supporters that at last they had ceased to be a backwater, and were now flowing in the main river of history. The belief was only half true, for the fact was that the Labour movement had been in the main stream of history all along. Those political and economic and ethical desires of man, which all together make up the creed which the new Government represents, have been continually expressed in human affairs since anything worth calling civilisation began. The philosophy of Labour is a thing of venerable antiquity compared with, for example, the mushroom growth of Liberalism. Labour can trace a stately pedigree to the roots of history; the stories of Greece and Rome, the Middle Ages, are full of its struggling vigour. Whereas the Liberals can only go back to the nouveaux riches of the Industrial Revolution and its Reform Act of 1832; though they vainly attempt (the gods know why!) to give a more patrician strain to their blood by claiming descent from the Whig oligarchy of the earlier eighteenth century; or they even sometimes pretend (again with obscure advantage) that they trace to a militarist adventurer named Oliver Cromwell, who attempted to govern England by major-generals. He certainly seems the most unnatural of parents for the chapel-going gentlemen who now have the Liberal banners; but perhaps he is a more respectable parentage than the plutocratic sweaters and grinders whom history shows as the real founders of the Liberal faith.

Anyhow, compared with the Liberals, the Labour Party has all the stately qualities of the bluest aristocracy of human thought. It is the expression of the oldest social faith of man. By a piece of folly which the Roman Church describes by the technical term of "invincible ignorance," the Labour movement has recklessly thrown away this most valuable asset. Its speakers and writers have modestly claimed that they were only the vanguard of an entirely new and untried social experiment, and they hoped, by patient application, that they might eventually make out a good case for their beliefs. Whereas, had they but known it, they had at their disposal the unanswerable evidence of the history of the whole world to prove that, as against all other parties, the Labour case is right every time.

Of course, there are in the Labour ranks, as in all political bodies, a great number of cranks and faddists for whose wayward beliefs history will not hold itself responsible. But, in the main, in nine cases out of ten the evidence of history is on the side of Labour against Capitalists, if the struggle may be summed up in these clumsy and limited but convenient terms. At least, it can be put in this negative way; if history cannot always accept the whole official programme of Labour, at least its doubtful silence is better than the loud peals of mocking laughter with which it hears the statement of the plutocrats' case.

A systematic use of the history book strengthens the Labour case so materially that the Party might have reached office long ago. If it is necessary to reproach the Labor supporters for their neglect of history in their struggle for power, it is still more important to point out the urgent need that they

shall consult history now that the very future of British history has been placed officially in their care for a period. In no way can the Labor Party more easily prove its superiority to its opponents in the Houses of Parliament than by showing that it knows the facts of the historical past; and, further, that it respects the laws of history as carefully as a scientist respects the laws of evolution.

It is a common charge against the Labor philosophy of life that it is a reckless disregard of the laws of human growth. It would be child's play to prove that the Liberal and Tory creeds are, in the main, one long defiance of the evidence that history brings forward on every page.

Take the case for Imperialism. It is put forward as the plan of hard-headed business men and experienced administrators who profess to know the ways of the world. One has only to examine the history of the empires of the world to find that this belief in the advantages of Imperialism, and the possibilities of its success, is one of the most amazing pieces of sentimental hysteria that ever fitted through the brain of man. Go through history and find a people that did not bring themselves to ruin by empire building. Athens was a great city—until its statesmen began to blow the bubble of Imperialism and built a great fleet. Where is Alexander's empire? On the day Rome conquered the world she sealed her doom; with mad folly she created an army with which to govern—and she might as well have sharpened a sword to cut her own throat. There was once an empire of the Hapsburgs, an empire of Spain; then came the empire of Napoleon, of Russia, of Germany. How many careful brokers would buy their shares today?

They are one long tale of inevitable disaster. Yet with such a history behind them there are men who will rise in the Houses of Parliament today and (with all the cold insolence of ignorance) advise their fellow-countrymen to follow once more this reckless path to national ruin. Such people have the mental instability—or is it knavish cunning—of financial sharks who persuade widows to invest their "little all" in rotten companies.

Now there are many honourable men who believe in Imperialism, men who will frankly admit when the facts are against them. And it is the easiest thing in the world to put before them the evidence of history that ninety-nine hundredths of the Imperialism of all peoples has been little but the clever tricks of a few merchants and bankers who have been anxious to make rapid fortunes, and have been quite unconcerned if their fellow-countrymen have been put to the pain of war on behalf of a few company promoters. There is a very healthy spirit of adventure in sound men and women, that often leads them to wander in foreign lands. The imperial leagues need not worry lest this valuable human quality should deteriorate—it will still be flourishing when their leagues and empires are only dusty ruins.

Take another political creed which is having one of its epidemic periods today. A certain futile group of sentimentalists, usually covered by the term Communists, preach an incoherent doctrine which apparently means that the quickest way to give the world order and logical government is to cause as much

noise and confusion as possible. In general, we are told by these excitable children that the only method of government which has succeeded in history is Revolution; or, at least, that we do not succeed in making a better world because we will not rise and walk about under red banners and pay at soldiers behind street barricades. It is most significant that the apostles of this creed are peculiarly fascinated by the boyish sports of marching with flags and playing with arms. One uses the phrase "excitable children" with scientific precision.

Now the whole case for Revolution as a manner of social progress collapses under the cross-examination of history, as the proverbial pack of cards falls with a breath of air. There are weird mental freaks who have gathered messages of hope from the present (or would it be better to say late?) revolutionary regime in Russia. One would have thought that a primary schoolboy's knowledge of history would have made clear that this Russian revolution has almost followed the lines of the earlier French Revolution.

There are even stranger freaks who believe that the French Revolution of the eighteenth century was a step towards democracy and social reconstruction.

The present writer remembers hearing a member of the National Guilds League (who, by some unfortunate accident, had apparently mistaken that body for a Fascist company of black-shirts) explain to his audience, with warning finger—he was arguing for the beautiful weapon of democracy, the Dictatorship of the Proletariat—that "we might have lost the French Revolution if Carnot had not brought in compulsory military service." Now, one remembers vaguely to have read in the history books that it was not "we" (the Labor Party) that won the French Revolution after all—but Napoleon Bonaparte and a militarist empire.

The end of every revolution is usually the same place (or worse) where it started. It scarcely seems worth all the noise and bloodshed—merely to come back to where we began. Within a few years of all Robespierre's and Danton's rhetoric and executing, France was in the grip of a gang of adventuring army contractors and victorious generals. That was what gas and noise amounted to when they were added up in the cold columns of economic and social facts. History has repeated the same clear conclusion every time a revolution appears on its pages; and the people who still believe in revolution as a method of reform can only be ignoramuses.

But there is another valuable piece of evidence that history offers in this matter of political and social violence, namely, that a great many so-called risings of democracy have been deliberately inspired by interested persons on the other side. When the plutocrats are in a tight corner a bloody revolution is often their only chance of escape. Let the real democrats of today examine the history of revolutions very closely; they will find that a great number of them were fought for the salvation of the autocrats. Take the case of the Peasant Rising of 1381—the latest historical research by M. Petit-Dutaillis shows that in the City of London, at least, the innocent rustics were the tools of a small group of municipal plutocrats who wanted to get rid of their in-

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