

Parliament or Cabinet— Which?

By John A. McDonald

Editor's Note:—The following article is consequent upon the discussion on Parliament and Cabinet between Comrades Harrington, "R." and McDonald. See Western Clarion of September 1st and 16th. As stated Sept. 1st, Comrades Harrington and "R." are entitled to close the discussion and they may, if they wish to do so, follow up on this. We are a little concerned over space in this controversy, however, and enter a plea for brevity all round.

PARLIAMENT TODAY

PARLIAMENT, its nature and function, its possibilities, from a proletarian standpoint, as a means to emancipation are matters of much importance to the awakening working class. Many and varied are the opinions expressed, even in our own press, and on our own platform, as to the functions of the legislative institution, and the attitude which should be taken towards it by the different parties in the revolutionary movement.

We have extremists, on one hand, telling us that Parliament is today merely a name or a shadow, and so far as authority and privileges are concerned it has none, being in this respect "sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." At the other extreme we find those who continue to have sublime faith in the powers of Parliament and to this institution they look for a remedy to cure all the social ills of the age.

Somewhere between these two extremes we have the attitude taken by the Socialist Party of Canada as numerous articles, both pre-election and otherwise, in the "Western Clarion," since the date of its inception, will demonstrate. It is the purpose of this contribution to re-affirm this attitude and make plain the position for "Clarion" readers.

Those who contend that Parliament has no power, no privileges, or authority, and now lives merely on the prestige of its ancient traditions, with the plume plucked, and the pinion broken, are surely obtuse to the relationship existing between the legislative institution and the social system whose interests it reflects. Such outbursts are historically incorrect; and politically absurd.

The name—Parliament—while specially pertaining to the supreme legislature of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, can be applied to all analogous assemblies in other countries. The term may be used to cover the Houses of Lords, Commons, and Representatives, Senate, Reichstag, Chamber of Deputies, etc. In all modern capitalist nations this Parliament is the means through which the ruling class imposes its desires on society. Through its mandate the working class is coerced and capitalist property administered.

Should some pressing incentive necessitate the substitution of other means, such as Cabinet, Monarch, or President, to carry out the will of the dominant class, in all probability such could be accomplished or at least attempted. Up to the present, however, the urge in this direction has not been sufficiently emphasized to ensure such a result. Parliament is still capable of attending to the needs of our rulers, and in such cases as a weakness has been displayed the defect is remedied by a modification of Parliament itself.

Let us take a couple of concrete examples of modern Parliaments in order to see that they can and do function, and are at present the acknowledged centre of power.

In the United States we have a national legislature, consisting of a Senate, and House of Representatives, jointly called Congress; with the executive power vested in the President, and the judicial power in the Supreme Court. Whether or not this legislature, with the exception of the Supreme Court, is elected by the people depends upon the standpoint from which we start. Did we wish to quibble, we could pooh pooh the idea of the people having a will at all, as it is manufactured for them by various methods. By this same mode of reasoning (or lack of one) we could say that the horse has no stable because someone owns it, or I have no job because it is controlled by a boss. The alarm clock suffices to remind one that I have a job, and a hard one.

The people of the U. S. elect the President, the members of the Senate, and the House of Representatives. True, the method of election in regard to the President is somewhat roundabout, as he is nominally chosen by a system of double election through an electoral college. But it is nevertheless the recorded judgment of the people that ensures his election. The seven millions of a majority cast for Harding at the last election amply illustrates the fact that he was returned by a vote of the people.

All citizens of the U. S., we must grant, are not entitled to the franchise. The large migratory population is deprived of the privilege of voting. The negro element, through educational tests, and intimidation have their constitutional privilege in this respect curtailed. But, even allowing for these, and other exceptions, the huge majority of those voting at presidential elections are members of the working class.

That those workers are the creatures of their environment, and have their opinions moulded or fashioned through the institutions at the disposal of their masters, is a commonplace in Socialist circles and need not be specially stressed in this article. The people do the deed regardless of how or where they got their information.

The President appoints a cabinet, or council, of several secretaries who preside over the various administrative departments. This Cabinet has practically no power, as the final decision on all matters of import rests with the President, who is alone responsible to the electors. Still, the members of the different departments hold positions of importance and the fact that a Secretary of Commerce like Hoover, who was opposed to the administration, yet was included in the Cabinet would show that particular interests demand representation that cannot very well be refused.

While the President dominates the Cabinet, his power is regulated by Congress. Let us revert to the case of Wilson and the League of Nations. The President took up a firm stand in support of the League. While some claim that by so doing he was sacrificing the interests of American capitalists, the fact that other figures of national importance, including ex-President Taft, favored the League, with certain minor reservations, is sufficient proof that Wilson's policy coincided with that of one section of the American ruling class.

When we consider the conflict of interests today apparent between national and international capitalists there is no mystery attached to the matter. Though the President could dismiss his cabinet with impunity, he found that he could not override the power of Parliament, and in his decision to become "Aut Caesar aut Nullus," he became the latter.

Turning to the British Parliament, we find that it consists of the King and the Houses of Lords and

Commons. The power of the King, in matters of legislation, is "non est." About a decade ago the power of the Lords was curtailed and the Commons became supreme. The members of this House are elected by the people. Whether it is the knowledge or the ignorance of the people that sends them there is another matter.

The victorious Party at the general elections takes over the reins of government. A Prime Minister is selected. This leader, far from occupying an obsequious position, has for the past seventeen years held precedence next after the Archbishop of York. The Premier selects the Cabinet, taking members both from the Commons and Lords if so decided. The Prime Minister and Cabinet cannot long hold office without possessing the confidence of the House of Commons. This House has full power to dismiss the Cabinet should occasion demand it. The fact that this has seldom been done demonstrates the further fact that the Cabinet has kept its place. It has not made it necessary for its master to take such drastic action.

Naturally, in case of a conflict between Commons and Cabinet either a compromise would be effected or the Cabinet must recede. To introduce the action of the Labor Party in voting against its own measure to avoid political disaster has no more to do with the matter than a Bach fugue or Handel sonata. Labor Party members are elected, not independently, but in conjunction with Liberals, as a glance at any compendium of world events will show. Their existence depends on their obedience to Liberal dictates. To gull their working class constituents they must occasionally display a fighting spirit, but when their bosses, in whose workshop they are employed at odd jobs, find it essential to show them the rod they never hesitate.

The necessity for a change in governmental methods because of the intrusion of "Labor" members is remote. The late Lord Northcliffe stated in Sydney some months ago, that capital was in no way endangered by the election of a sane Labor Government, but had much to gain by such a result. The support given by Viscount Haldane, and others, to the British Labor Party shows that they have no fear of property or property rights in case of an election of a Labor government.

Still, authorities will differ on the matter, and the recent legislation to strengthen the House of Lords, after a decade of impotency, reveals the fear of one section of the British ruling class at a Labor victory. It was not the Cabinet, but the Upper House which attracted their attention.

In a future article I will try to make plain the revolutionary value of participation in Parliamentary elections.

EDUCATION.

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in conjunction with the constant abrogation of social reforms, necessitated by class interests, with the continual transformation of political institutions, required by progressive business; with the necessary unmasking of Imperialist ambitions, consequent of Imperialist aggression; and with the consequent—continually more conscious—gathering together of the social mass, bound by a common interest of need, inspired with a common principle of life, and cognisant of a common aim of social advantage. That is education as we understand it—the changing of the mind of man and mass under the compelling impulse of social fact.

Our much speaking, and boring from within or without, is but a feeble and puny effort in the panorama of enlightenment—negligible in the mighty clamor of capitalist antagonisms. But as every rill and streamlet that trickles from the everlasting hills helps to swell the eventual river, so every influence embodies itself in ultimate social percept and action. And although society, amidst a tragic circumstance of misery, clings—like MacTeague to his canary—with a solicitous tenderness to its airy idols of yesterday, and is apparently impervious alike to changeling fact and class appeal; nevertheless, in due time, the ruthless hammering of experience shall fashion the consciousness of man in accordance with and inspired by the intimate kinship of reality.

R.