

# Parliament or Cabinet—Which?

By John A. McDonald

IN two issues of the "Clarion" which have recently reached me, there are two articles dealing with the question of Parliament from the pens of Comrades Harrington and "R." These contributions are both useful and timely so far as they demonstrate the necessity for a re-statement of the case.

Says Comrade "R" in his article, "The Will of the People," "Clarion" No. 853, "Parliament . . . is no more than a name. It lives on the prestige of its ancient traditions. It is stripped of all real authority; it has been shorn of its privileges; its functions have passed into the higher control of the modern cabinet, and its powers are but the mockery of 'sanctioning' what the cabinet decrees."

Comrade Harrington, "Clarion" No. 847, has it: "Parliament as we knew it a decade ago has changed. Today it appears as a formal body giving legality to the will of a select committee known as the cabinet. Members of parliament have repeatedly deplored the subordinate, if not obsequious nature of their office." (\*)

Parliament is, indeed, a superfluous institution. By the same mode of reasoning could we not go a step further and say that cabinets cease to function as they are generally dominated by the will of one individual? A story is told of President Lincoln who, at a meeting of his cabinet in 1864 was opposed by all his ministers on a certain issue. Lincoln called for a vote and announced: "One aye and seven nays; the ayes have it." In the American cabinet the President dominates. The secretaries of the various departments are his appointees, and are not dependent on the will of the people for their positions. When an estrangement takes place between president and secretary the latter is easily disposed of. The case of President Wilson and his two Secretaries of State, Bryan and Lansing, adequately portrays the manner of disposal. In the English cabinet, while the various ministers are elected by the people, or chosen from the upper house, the Premier is the dominant character. I have heard it stated by four different premiers, in as many houses of parliament, that a vote is seldom called for at cabinet meetings. One strong man rules, and cabinet decisions are largely the reflex of his opinions.

But, in regard to Parliament itself I am not satisfied with the position outlined by our two comrades. During the past twelve years I have given careful attention to the deliberations of many Parliaments in the five chief English-speaking countries of the world. I have heard no members, excepting those in opposition, deplore the subordinate nature of their office, and opposition members have made such declarations for a much longer period than ten years. Comrade Harrington tells us that the statement: "Parliament has ceased to function," is correct, "if we view the institution as functioning in the interest of all." When did Parliament function in the interest of all? Since its inception it appears to have been a class weapon, serving the interests of but one section of society. As such, it is surely nothing new to learn that it has ceased to function in the interests of all.

Comrade "R," after declaring that Parliament is the result of a long evolutionary process, seems to forget that there are decisive points or revolutions in the course of this process. The modern Parliament is no more the logical and natural development from the hundred moot, and the shire moot, than that trades unions are the natural outcome of the craft guilds. Social and industrial revolutions make necessary new institutions which are not accorded the privilege of slowly evolving out of others which functioned in previous periods.

Prof. Jenks in his "Short History of Politics," de-

scribing the inception of the medieval Parliament says: "It was not in any sense of the term a popular institution. On the other hand for many years after its appearance, it was intensely unpopular both with 'constituencies' and representatives. The counties hated it, because they did not want to acknowledge the secular authority. The boroughs hated it, because the parliamentary boroughs paid a higher scale of taxation than their humbler sisters. And all hated it, because a Parliament invariably meant taxation. The notion that Parliaments were the result of a spontaneous democratic movement, can be held by no one who has studied, ever so slightly, the facts of history." (Emphasis original).

Through the course of several centuries the institution changed. As the trading and manufacturing class developed to that stage where it became the dominant class in European society, Parliament became its most important weapon in the administration of class property, as well as in the coercion of the propertyless masses comprising the proletariat.

Parliament is, today, the instrument by which the capitalist class imposes its desires on the people, and controls the public forces in all countries of the world. The fact that during the war a number of Boards such as the Railway War Board, the Munition Board, the Food Supply Board and others were created to attend to the various departments of administration in no way refutes the contention that Parliament rules. All these Boards owed their existence to Parliament. It was to this same institution that they submitted their plans and decisions, and received instructions concerning their maintenance and functions. The great responsibility of effectively carrying on a military campaign necessitated the construction of special Boards for the purpose but, as these were answerable in every case to the body that created them, there was obviously no diminution in the powers of Parliament.

The Cabinet bogey is likewise easily dispersed. What is the Cabinet excepting a committee chosen by the majority in Parliament to carry out its dictates? This Cabinet can be over-ridden or dissolved at any time the majority in Parliament may decide. To make the statement that Parliament does not directly supervise the business affairs of a nation in no way discounts its importance. One has only to glance over the political events of the two most advanced capitalist nations in the world—the United States and Great Britain—to see the relationship existing between Cabinet and Parliament. When the U. S. Cabinet endorsed the Versailles Treaty, the League of Nations and the Shantung "steal," its decision, far from becoming law, was soon reversed by the Senate and Congress, and ultimately by the will of the people expressed at the polls. The recent events in Britain in regard to the miners' strike and the Irish settlement amply portray the fact that Parliament is still the law-making body in that country. The roundabout method of approach is made necessary by the increasing complexity of the present social system, but the change in method does not obviate the fact that the power to enact or repeal legislation resides in Parliament.

In Soviet Russia today we have the intermediary branches of control between the Urban and Rural Soviets, elected by the people, and the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, in whose control the affairs of the country are placed. But this form of structure does not detract from the democratic nature of the State machinery. All these branches are necessary to ensure the desires of the people being expeditiously carried out. The workers at the base rule, and can recall their elected officials in each department should they fail to function properly.

While the affairs of State in highly developed capitalist countries are manipulated through the instrumentality of the Cabinet, this body is itself obeying the wishes of its maker, or in such cases as it anticipates those wishes the sanction of Parliament must be received before any act becomes a law of the land.

Even Orders-in-Council are subject to reversion by Parliament, and have often been annulled when considered inimical to the welfare of the ruling class.

## REPLY BY J. HARRINGTON

SO far as I can judge, Comrade McDonald has not made clear where he disagrees with me in the general view of Parliament—that it does function.

I hold that Parliament is neither powerless nor superfluous, and to combat the sentiment that it is was precisely the purpose of my article.

In matters of fact, however, I am entirely at odds with Comrade McDonald. He says: "Parliament is indeed a superfluous institution. By the same mode of reasoning could we not go a step further and say that Cabinets have ceased to function as they are generally dominated by the will of an individual?" Then we have a story of Lincoln which may or may not be true of some minor matter, and which can be regarded purely as a joke. I recollect that Seward, Cameron, and the other serious minded men who were his cabinet ministers had their patience tried more than once by his untimely and, to them, unseemly jokes. But cabinets are **not** dominated by the will of any individual; rather by the needs of a class. If Comrade McDonald will review his own statements of the United States and the League of Nations this will be apparent.

In the American Cabinet the President dominates by virtue of his constitutional powers, which are greater than those of any other governmental official in the world. **But he is not elected by the people.** Yet who does not remember the sorry plight of Wilson in the closing days of his office, and who shall say that he was not prompted—I might say forced—to alter his tactics absolutely during his second term of office.

Again, the British Cabinet is not elected by the people or chosen from the Upper House. In theory, the king asks someone to form a government, and the people then accept or reject it. Actually, two at least of the ministers, the Foreign and Home Secretaries are chosen by the Manchester cotton lords and the Birmingham steel lords, and in the Foreign Office, no matter what political complexion the government may have, continuity of policy is and has long been unconditionally maintained.

I can very well believe, not on the say so of four, or forty-four premiers, that a vote is seldom called for in cabinet meetings, though not because "one strong man rules," etc., but because the entire gang has already received a hint, a strong hint, as to how they are expected to act. Take Lloyd George, the one dominator who has survived the mercurial nature of "capital today" and its requirements. Bullitt tells us that Lloyd George said to him, "as long as the British press is doing this kind of thing how can you expect me to be sensible about Russia?" (Bullitt Mission to Russia, p. 66).

But let us take what the logicians call a deductive view, that is, from general conditions to a particular consequence. When I said that Parliament had ceased to function in the interest of all, I had in mind all those represented. When the vote was extended to the workers, with each enlargement of the franchise, we find an increasing interest in their welfare manifested by the politicians. It is quite patent that even in the bewildered state of slave mentality as we see it, voters will resent any interference with what they consider their rights. And any politician from a working-class centre who dared to consistently attack these rights would very soon realize that, while dealing with the "lower orders" *tra la*, he was not dealing with mud and clay exactly. It is equally plain that political experience would enlarge their political vision and demands. As these demands came from a propertyless class, their intrusion into an institution which concerned itself almost entirely with property would, of course, cause

\* Editor's Note: The two articles mentioned were reprinted in last issue (Sept. 1st). The replies of Comrades Harrington and "R" to Comrade McDonald's criticism now presented are subjoined hereto.