

PEOPLE AND THINGS

By HAROLD NICOLSON

THERE must be something about frost, and snow in the afternoon, and "those winter dreams when the nights grow longer" which is trying to the temper of man. The week before last Mr. St. John Ervine, whom I had always supposed to belong to the more equable type of Ulstermen, rose and shook me until my teeth rattled. And last week Mr. W. B. Curry wrote a cross letter to *The Spectator* because I had asked some pertinent questions about Federal Union. He suggested, in this letter, that I was being pompous and pernickety. I was not, I hope, being any of these things; I was merely puzzled by the reckless optimism of the Federal Unionists. I remain puzzled.

Mr. Curry is a schoolmaster, and has, I understand, devoted a great part of his life to the study of educational matters. It would seem also that he takes an amateur interest in diplomacy. I served for twenty years in the diplomatic service, and have throughout my life been concerned with the theory and practice of international relations. I also, as an amateur, have for years been interested in educational experiments. It would appear therefore as if Mr. Curry and I were born to understand each other. But not in the least; for whereas I should not mind at all if Mr. Curry informed me that he had learnt from long experience that the system of Maria Montessori was not really applicable to the British public-school boy, Mr. Curry becomes hurt and angry when I tell him that his scheme for Federal Union does not, in its present form, make sense.

It has always struck me as singular that, whereas in other walks of life experience is regarded as an asset, in diplomatic matters it is denounced as a liability. There are, I would suggest, three reasons for this misconception. Diplomacy demands no obviously technical training, as do architecture, medicine or engineering. The public assume, therefore, that diplomacy is an art which any man of common sense can master, and that the professional diplomatist has been trained only in the conventions of court procedure and in the mastery of foreign languages. He is thus regarded by his more impatient compatriots as something pretentious, un-English and old-fashioned. Diplomacy, again, has suffered much as a profession from the external apparatus by which it is surrounded. An Ambassador represents, not merely the interests, but also the majesty of his country: he is obliged to live in a large house and to maintain a large staff: his entertainments must be lavish and well appointed; and on ceremonial occasions it is customary for him to array himself like a zany and to deck his own person with scarves of coloured silk and badges made of steel, and silver, and enamel. The emphasis cast thereby upon the externals of his profession inevitably detracts in the public eye from the true seriousness of his functions.

In the third place, the professional diplomatist acquires a habit of mind which can best be described as "balanced scepticism." This attitude is not, as some suppose, induced by any arrogance of soul. It is merely that he has lived among so many different people, that he has witnessed the failure of such fine enthusiasms, that the area of his credulity has been narrowed. His business, throughout his life, has been, not to initiate brilliant policies, but to foresee, and thereafter to surmount, practical difficulties. This renders him most unpopular with impatient politicians or impulsive reformers. They are apt to snap their fingers at him in disgust.

I cannot but feel that on this occasion the disgust of Mr. Curry was a trifle too impatient. I ventured to suggest that he had not, in expounding *The Case for Federal Union*,

paid sufficient attention to difficulties and details. Mr. Curry rejoins that his book "was not intended to be a detailed plan for the reconstruction of the world." I was aware of that; I had observed that it was dedicated to "all children everywhere." "Nor," he adds, "have I the expert knowledge required for such a task. I had the humbler object of helping to prepare public opinion for the need of such plans." I feel that Mr. Curry's humility would have been even more striking if he had prepared public opinion for some of the obstacles with which such plans will from the outset be confronted.

I had suggested that it would be well were the Federal Unionists to consider their problem inductively as well as deductively, and to examine, for instance, how the production and consumption of copper would fare under their federal scheme. Mr. Curry implies that by so doing I am putting the cart before the horse, and asserts that it is "ludicrous to suggest that before advancing such an idea one should have determined in advance what the decisions (of the Federal Government) should be." Yet is it so very ludicrous to ask a Federal Unionist how his plan would work out in practice? I will grant Mr. Curry that copper may be too small a detail to disturb his faith. But is immigration into Australia and New Zealand a small detail? Was it, in fact, impertinent to ask what happens if the Federal Government decide to people northern Australia with Germans or Japanese and if Australia and New Zealand refuse absolutely to accede to this demand? To ask such a question is, I suppose, to incur the charge of being "doctrinaire."

Let me, however, ask another question which Mr. Curry must admit cuts to the very root of his whole theory. Most Federal Unionists agree that there must be some central Federal Parliament or Council composed of representatives of all the member States elected by direct popular suffrage. In what proportions are the seats in this Parliament, or upon this Council, to be distributed among the several States? No self-respecting Federal Unionist would admit for a moment that any arbitrary method of allocation (such as the distinction between the Great and the Small Powers) could be adopted. One is thus obliged to allot the seats according either to area or population. Under such a system of allocation, France could obtain 41 members, Italy 43 members, Germany 72 members, the United States 120 members, India 300 members, Great Britain 37 members, Scotland 4 members, Norway 3 members, Australia 2 members, and so on. Is it conceivable that the British people would agree to hand over the decision of peace and war, the control of navies, the administration of colonies, or such economic measures as would directly affect their own unemployment problems, to a Parliament in which they were condemned to be in a perpetual minority? Is it conceivable that Norway or New Zealand would agree to surrender their "independence" to a body on which their representation was far less than 1 per cent.? To believe such things is surely to indulge in fantasies.

The Federal Unionists reply to this by stating that one must first rid the mind of artificial notions about "independent States." But such notions are not artificial; they represent the organic growth of thousands of years; they are profoundly rooted in the traditions and sentiments of millions of ordinary men and women. Mr. Curry will not uproot those traditions by drafting ideal constitutions at Totnes. I believe that with patience we can and must achieve something like the United States of Europe. But is it impertinent to suggest that any such achievement must be based upon reality?