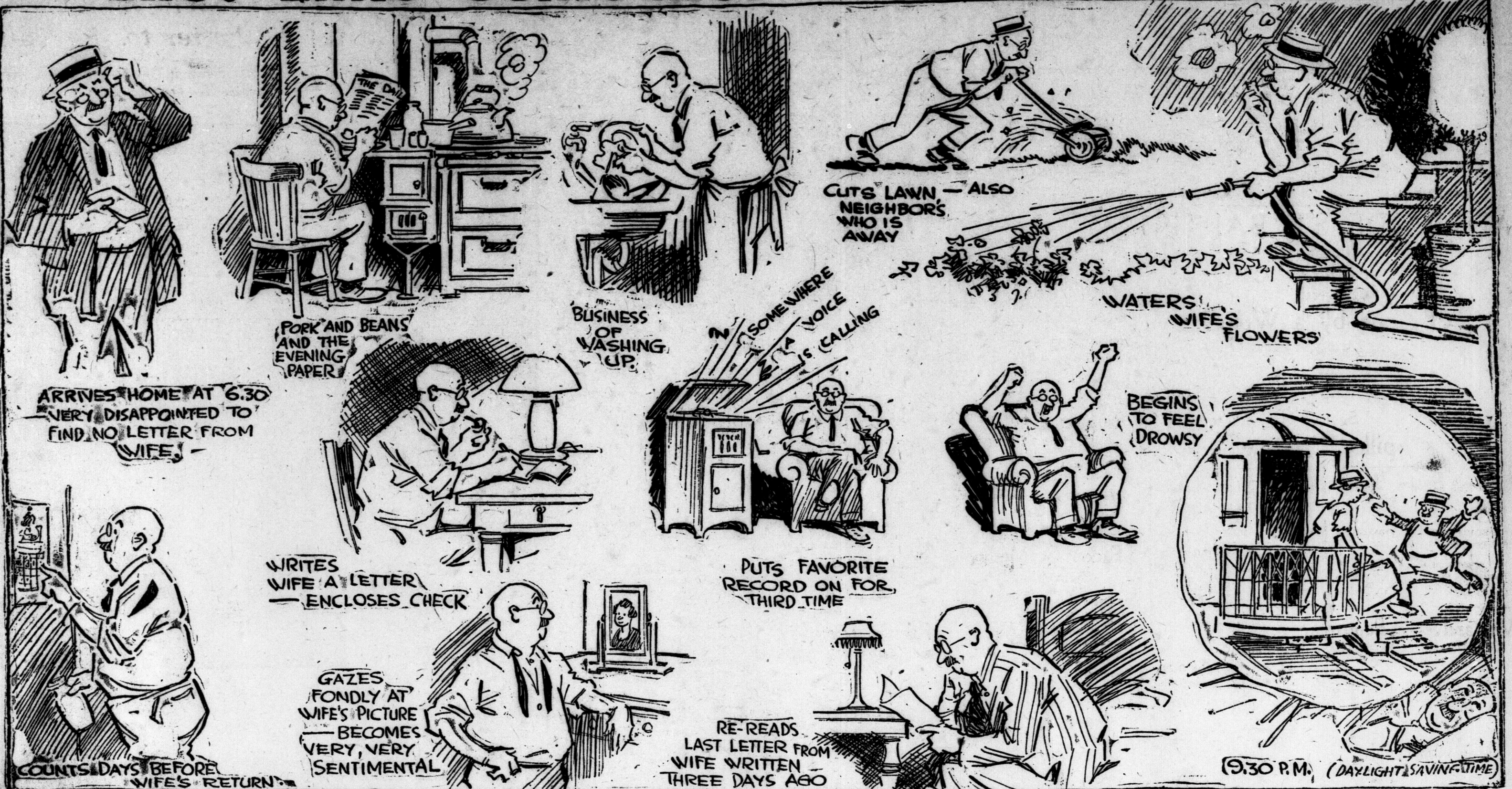


Life's Little Comedies ~ An Evening with a Summer Bachelor



PHILIP SNOWDEN SAYS LABOR WILL SINK CLASS IN NATIONAL WELFARE

British Labor Statesman Believes That Trade Unions Would Not Be Allowed To Dominate a Labor Government— Outlook of Trade Unions Is Widening.

LABOR RULE WOULD BE CONSERVATIVE

By PHILIP SNOWDEN, M.P.
In the following article Mr. Philip Snowden, M.P., deals with the suggestion that any Labor government which may arise in the future will be simply an instrument for carrying out the orders of the trade unions.

There is a fear in certain quarters that a Labor government will be simply the instrument for carrying out the orders of the trade unions, which, in the main, form the constituent parts of the Labor party. This is not an unnatural fear, but in reality there is little reason to expect that it will be the fact. If it were a likelihood, then all that is said about the Labor party being a class party would be justified. I will give some reasons why I think this fear is groundless.

The present constitution of the Labor party, under which the affiliated bodies promote candidatures for which they are financially responsible, is not an ideal method. But there was no other way in which a Labor party could be started. Gradually, however, the method of selection is being broadened, and political considerations, rather than sectional trade union interests, are becoming the deciding factor in the adoption of parliamentary candidates. A few

years ago the constitution of the Labor party was changed, and local Labor parties were given the standing of affiliated bodies. These local Labor parties are composed of the local branches of socialist societies and trade unions, whose national bodies are eligible for affiliation to the Labor party, and also of individual members. Any person, whether a member of a trade union or socialist society or not, can join a local Labor party. These local Labor parties occupy a position in relation to the national party precisely similar to that held by local Conservative or Liberal associations.

More and more the selection and financing of parliamentary candidates is being undertaken by these local Labor parties. I believe that at the last general election the majority of the Labor candidates were run as the nominees of local Labor parties, and judging by the preparations which are being made for the next election, it seems likely that a considerably larger proportion of the Labor candidatures at the next election will be similarly promoted. In addition, the Socialist societies will promote about one-fifth of the candidatures. So that the majority of a parliamentary Labor party under a Labor government will be dominated by trade union interests with no wide political outlook.

Widening of Trade Union Outlook. But even if the majority of a Labor government were trade union officials and nominees, it is not unlikely that national considerations would be subordinated to sectional trade union interests. Believe me, when I say that nothing has been more remarkable than the widening of the trade union outlook in recent years. It is seen in the trade union movement itself in the growing demand for trade union amalgamation, and for the strengthening of the powers of the general councils of the trade unions to deal with matters common to all classes of labor. An examination of the agenda of a trades union congress will show in a striking manner that the trade unions, as trade unions, are as much interested in great political issues as in purely industrial questions. The annual conference of the National Labor party meets in London this week, and the conference agenda throws a strong light on the mind and outlook of the party. It shows that it is not the trade unions, but the local Labor parties, which make the program and direct the policy of the party. Of the hundreds of resolutions on the agenda, not more than a dozen have come from affiliated trade unions. It is the local Labor parties, and to a small extent the Socialist societies, which have brought forward the topics for discussion. That is to say, it is the affiliated bodies which are not sectional which are the active elements in the party.

It may be true that a Labor government would attach more importance to the decisions of its national conferences than a Conservative or Liberal leader does to the resolutions of party conferences. But no Labor government could be hidebound. Nor, I am sure, would the party outside parliament try to interfere with its discretion so long as it kept its policy and legislative program within the general lines of the party platform, and its election pledges. Conference resolutions are not parliamentary bills. Conference resolutions indicate in broad outline the ideas of a party on a particular subject, but the treatment of the idea in a legislative proposal is a matter which must be left to the decision of the responsible executive, who must take all relevant circumstances into consideration.

The Advisory Committees. In a very general way, then, the resolutions on the agenda of a Labor party conference indicate the mind of the party on public questions, and really give an indication of the line which a Labor government would take when it rules the country. It is important that it should be known, because it shows that the Labor party takes its present and future responsibilities very seriously, and that it is not a party of mere promises. The resolutions of the annual conference of the party, which are brought forward, of course, by the rank and file, who have only a general knowledge of the subjects dealt with, are afterwards submitted to these advisory committees, who work out a scheme for giving legislative effect to the general idea. The resolutions of the annual conference, therefore, even when somewhat detailed in their character, must not be taken as committing the party to the precise terms of the resolutions, but as indicating in broad outline the party's views on the subject.

Labor's Fundamental Aim. The fundamental difference between the Labor party and other political parties is this, that while other political parties accept the basis of the present industrial system, namely, private ownership and private management of productive concerns as a system which must be preserved, while admitting that it has evils which should be ameliorated or remedied, the Labor party believes that such a system is inherently wrong, and that no amount of tinkering with it can make it permanently tolerable for the majority. The program, therefore, of the Labor party is framed with the ultimate aim always in view. The "acid test" which it applies to every ameliorative proposal is whether it gets down to the root cause of economic and social ills.

It is ridiculous to assume that the Labor party believes that capitalism is the cause of every ill which afflicts mankind today. But it does believe that general poverty, and all the evils which arise from that, are due to capitalism, and that the abolition of the private monopoly of the means of life would insure conditions where poverty would not be the compulsory lot of the vast majority. When such conditions had been established it would depend upon the character and will of the individual whether he made the best of his opportunities, and if he failed to do so economic conditions would not be responsible.

This fundamental aim of the Labor party can be detected by the discerning mind in all the resolutions of

the party conferences, and in its schemes for dealing with problems, which are the common concern of all political parties, such as municipal administration, public health, national insurance, unemployment, education, finance, and taxation, housing, land reform, and agriculture, and the empire and international relations. How a Labor government would be likely to deal with these problems I shall explain in detail in subsequent articles. And let me state explicitly that the Labor party is wholly united upon this fundamental aim. When my Socialist motion was brought before the House of Commons it was widely reported in the press that this was a move on the part of the Socialist members of the party to commit the whole party to Socialism, and that my action was seen by the trade union members. That is not the case. And it will be seen when the debate is resumed and the vote is taken that the basis of the foundation for such an assumption.

The Extremist Section. Neither is it true, nor will it be true of a Labor government, that the party is under the domination of what is called the "extremist" section. The party is not extremists, it is true, and it will have, but they are mostly young men with little experience. Time and experience will mellow them; or, if they do not, they will become useful members of the Tory party. "The pure and unadorned" in politics, as the world generally, often wrong, or at least expect a Labor government to err rather on the side of conservatism than of "extremism." While consistent in its principles it would hesitate to go too far. It would know full well that it could not move faster than public opinion. It is a crime often charged against the present leaders of the Labor party that they are too punctilious in their observance of the forms and procedure of the House of Commons. But that is a good fault. And it is due to the knowledge that the House of Commons, with all its anachronisms and shortcomings, is the greatest achievement of democratic government. The leaders of the Labor party will do nothing to bring that institution into popular disfavor, because they look to the time when Labor will control it, amend its deficiencies, and make it the instrument of the popular will.

The question is sometimes asked how a Labor government would be formed. While in theory the Labor party would expect to elect a government, in practice it usually shows a conservative spirit. This is proved by the way in which it re-elects, year after year, the same men to its executive councils. But at the same time there is a decided unwillingness to put any man in the position of permanent leader of the party. It is only recently that the elected chairman of the parliamentary Labor party has been designated leader of the party; and it is doubtful if that change would have been accepted if it had not been necessary because he is now leader of the opposition. I remember in the early days of the parliamentary Labor party what safeguards were adopted to prevent the chairmanship of the party from becoming a party leadership in the sense in which the other political leaders are not only parliamentary leaders, but they are too party in the country. Chairmanship of the parliamentary party has always been, and is still, an annual office, and on many occasions a chairman, though still in the House of Commons, has been superseded. Behind this practice is a fear and an idea—the fear that a permanent leader may develop into an autocrat, and the idea that it is not for a leader to dictate policy and propose programs. According to the democratic theory it is the party who should settle policy and programs.

But I am sure that there will be few, if any, members of the parliamentary Labor party, in the day when Labor has to form a government, who will suggest that the various offices should be filled by a vote of the parliamentary party. The leader of the party at the time will, of course, be called upon to

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