

The Impact of the First World War on the British Political Class
L'impacte de la Première Guerre Mondiale sur la Classe Politique
Britannique

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Abstract:

Throughout history one can notice that the wars impose political stands that create differences and divergences between supporters and opponents of the war. This paper will expose a concrete instance and situation of the British political class during the First World War (1914-1918). The Labour Party inside which the rift on the eve of the conflict has contributed to its instability and threatened its future just few years after its foundation in 1906. During its governance throughout different eras, this party has a significant role in the history of Britain; it has succeeded to challenge the existing political institutions and perform a great change. Thus, it is worthy to shed light on the impact of the First World War on this party.

Keywords:British History- Division- First World War- Political Class- The Labour Party- (1914-1918).

Résumé:

A travers l'histoire, on peut remarquer que les guerres imposent des positions politiques qui créent des différences et des divergences entre partisans et

opposants à la guerre. Cet article exposera un cas et une situation concrets de la classe politique Britannique pendant la Première Guerre mondiale (1914-1918). Le Parti Travailleiste au sein duquel la rupture à la veille du conflit a contribué à son instabilité et menacé son avenir quelques années seulement après sa fondation en 1906. Au cours de sa gouvernance à différentes époques, ce parti a joué un rôle important dans l'histoire de la Grande-Bretagne ; il a réussi à remettre en cause les institutions politiques existantes et à opérer un grand changement. Ainsi, il est significatif de porter lumière sur l'impact de la Première Guerre mondiale sur ce parti.

Mots clés: Histoire britannique- Division- Première Guerre mondiale- Classe politique- Le Parti Travailleiste- (1914-1918).

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1. INTRODUCTION:

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the main European powers were divided into two broad groups: on the one side, Germany, Italy and Austria-Hungary, and on the other one there were Britain, France, Japan and Russia. The countries of each camp were supposed to support one another in case of danger or war. This was put in practice on the eve of the First World War. By the end of July 1914, Austria declared war on Serbia because a Serbian student had shot and killed Archduke Frantz Ferdinand, the heir of the Austrian throne. As a result, on July 28, 1914, Russia mobilised forces in Serbian defence determined to resist any extension of the Austrian troops. On the other hand, Germany supported her ally and declared war on Russia on 1 August. Therefore, it was inevitable that France would prepare to support the latter. Most damagingly, Germany invaded Belgium on 4 August. On her turn, on 9 August 1914, Britain was involved in the conflict

because Germany had violated a joint treaty obligation to respect the neutrality of Belgium. However, the British involvement was not approved by the Labour Party. Under these circumstances, Ramsay MacDonald resigned from the leadership of the party. In September 1914, with the other anti-war Liberals, he set up the Union of Democratic Control which asked for democratic control of foreign policy, and an international organisation to maintain peace and disarmament. This new deviation threatened the unity of the Labour Party as it split between supporters and opponents of the conflict. Consequently, MacDonald was replaced by the pro-war; Arthur Henderson and the party no longer presented a united front of opposition to war. In this context, this paper will try to answer the following question: Did the outbreak of the First World War and its course contributed to the unity of the party or it greatly affected its factions?

2. The British Entry to War and the Dissent of the Labour Party (1914-1917)

The spark that ignited the First World War at the start of the twentieth century was struck in Sarajevo, Bosnia where, Archduke Frantz Ferdinand- Heir to the Austro- Hungarian Empire- was shot to death along his wife Sophie by the Serbian nationalist, Gavrilo Princip on June 28, 1914. The latter and other nationalists were struggling to end Austro-Hungarian rule over Bosnia and Herzegovina. The assassination set off a rapidly escalating chain of events. By the end of July 1914, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, and the tenuous peace between the European powers soon collapsed. As a result, on July 28, 1914, Russia mobilised forces in Serbian defence determined to resist any extension of the Austrian troops. Germany, on the other side, supported her ally and declared war

on Russia on August the first. Therefore, it was inevitable that France would prepare to support the latter. Germany invaded Belgium on 4 August. On her turn Britain was involved in the conflict because Germany had violated a joint treaty obligation to respect the neutrality of Belgium. As a result, the British Expeditionary Force crossed the Channel to France on 9 August. It advanced to Mons, in Belgium, and fought the Germans for the first time. (Mauger & Smith, 1969: 47).

However, the British involvement in the war was not approved by the Labour Party. In fact, since it was founded, the latter was not involved in foreign affairs. But on the eve of the war, it announced its refusal of the British involvement in that war. To express their disapproval, Keir Hardie, its Chairman, and Arthur Henderson took part in a mass demonstration in Trafalgar square. Moreover, though the Conservatives were for the war, still Ramsay MacDonald made an appeal to the rank and file of the Liberal Party to support his party's refusal. He said:

Whatever may happen, what may be said about us, we will take the action of saying that this country ought to have remained neutral, because in the deepest parts of our hearts we believe that was right and that alone was consistent with the honour of our country and the traditions of the party that are now in office. (Pelling, 1961: 35)

Nevertheless, when Germany invaded Belgium, the National Executive of the Labour Party met and it was apparent that the party no longer presented a united front of opposition to war. Under these circumstances, Ramsay MacDonald resigned from the leadership of the Labour Party. In September 1914, with the

other anti-war Liberals, Norman Angel, E.D. Morel, Charles Trevelyan and Arthur Ponsonby, MacDonald set up a body called the Union of Democratic Control (UDC). As its name implies, it was primarily concerned about the lack of democratic accountability in the making of British foreign policy. Its prime target was what was seen as the processes of secret diplomacy which had drawn Britain into the war. Beginning with the publication of its manifesto in 1914, it campaigned throughout the war and continued to press its case during the interwar years and beyond. It developed an extensive local organisation, with at least 100 UDC branches across Britain and by 1917, had more than 10,000 members. Its credibility was further reinforced by the presence of its Executive Committee of men and women who were at the heart of national politics- Charles Trevelyan MP, Arthur Ponsonby MP, Philip Snowden MP, Helen M Swanwick, Norman Angel and campaigning journalist E.D. Morel who was its first Secretary. This new deviation threatened the continuity and the existence of the Labour Party as a political force. (Pelling, 1965: 37).

As MacDonald resigned, Arthur Henderson was appointed to replace him, and soon the majority of the Labour Party was supporting the government, taking part in a recruiting campaign for the duration of the war. Indeed, on 5 August, Henderson summoned a joint conference of Labour and Socialist organisations as well as trade unions and trade councils to set up a War Emergency Workers' National Committee. (Howard, 1977: 801) When the conference met on 5 August 1914, the United Kingdom had already declared war on Germany. The meeting wasted no time reflecting upon its original purpose: it spared no thought for the implications of the Stuttgart Resolution of the Second International. It rather addressed itself to the matter in hand, resolving to establish a committee which

would be responsible for safeguarding working-class interests during the 'Emergency'. And it stuck to its last. Its aim was the formulation of an economic and social policy to safeguard the living standards of the workers and their families in the increasing unfamiliar conditions of war time. (Briggs & Saville, 1971: 249)

As the war dragged on, in May 1915 Henderson was invited to join the Coalition Government under the premiership of the Liberal Herbert Asquith. Consequently, he became the President of the Board of Education. Yet, during this period, the Labour Party faced different difficulties. One controversial issue was the dilution of labour in factories which is the admission of the unskilled workers into occupations reserved for craftsmen. Another issue was the military conscription. In 1916, when the Conscription Bill was being debated in its annual conference, the Labour Party opposed the principle. Yet, the latter was passed on 27 January 1916 and became The Military Service Act (The Military Service Act, 1916: 5) enforcing compulsory military service for the first time on British society. Consequently, the conscription was not popular and in April 1916 over 200.000 demonstrated against it in Trafalgar Square. Although many men failed to respond to the call-up, in the first year 1.1 million enlisted.

Another major issue which affected the party was a bill drafted by the Coalition Government. On 2 July 1915, it became the Munitions of War Act (The Munitions of War Act, 1915: 5) which was a statutory measure employed by Lloyd George, the Minister of Munitions. It was a piece of emergency legislation designed to increase government control over the direction of the British war effort. Its main feature was to suspend trade union rights in the munitions industries for the duration of the war. It also made strikes in factories engaged on "war work" illegal. Moreover, it implied that all labour disputes were to be submitted to compulsory

arbitration. In fact, its objective was the introduction of a system whereby the munitions' workers could not leave their jobs without the consent of their employers in the form of a Leaving Certificate. It was made compulsory for workers to follow company rules and they could not move immediately to another employer without getting that document. Without such a certificate, other companies were forbidden to employ a person for the next six weeks.

Consequently, the occurrence of different strikes across Britain was inevitable as labour campaigned to amend the Munitions Act. For it was a harsh experience of munitions workers to be in the hands of employers in addition to tribunals, especially but not exclusively in Glasgow, which triggered off demands for the reform of the 1915 Act. In fact the imprisonment of three shipwrights from Fairfield shipyards in Glasgow in October 1915, for having infringed the strike provisions of the Munitions Act, the crisis proportion of the pressure events on Clyde-side, involving threats of a general strike in that crucially important munitions centre, galvanised the government into a drastic reconsideration of its legal strategy. The civil servants at the Ministry of Munitions had, in fact, been toying with the possibility of framing a few technical amendments to the Act. The situation on Clydeside caused them to address the prospect of radical changes. (Munitions of War Act-Amending Bill, 1915: 67).

In addition, during this highly speculative period immediately following the passage of the Act, there were also uncompromising demands calling for direct action. For example, a body called the Trade Union Rights Committee (TURC), established in London on July 12, issued a manifesto designed to mobilise support against all coercive legislation and to organise a struggle within the trade unions to regain what it described as their "lost rights and freedoms". Yet its call for the

defence and consolidation of trade unions together with the restoration of their rights and resistance to further capitalist encroachments was long on rhetoric and short on practicalities. Predictably vilified in the patriotic press and rebuffed by trade union leaders such as J.S. Brownlie of the ASE and Harry Gosling of the Watermen's Union, its blatant appeal for strike action against the Munitions Act was not shared by fellow critics of the legislation. Thus, as the *Herald*, the Labour Party's newspaper, commented:

To talk as some are doing, about a general strike against the Munitions Act, is very heroic, but unfortunately very foolish. Why should we disguise for ourselves the fact that never before was Labour so divided, so impotent and so content to let the future go hang?(Pelling, 1987: 139)

A general strike, it asserted, would only end in disaster. In fact the hugely successful South Wales miners' strike was only a few days off. It broke up following the breakdown of wage negotiations and despite the intervention of Lloyd George and other government ministers, the South Wales miners resolved on industrial action. In the hope of pre-empting the strike, Lloyd George extended the recently enacted Munitions Act to the coal industry, and posted notices in the district, advising of the statutory prohibition on industrial action. The move had the opposite effect, for, the following day, 200,000 South Wales miners stopped work. The newly-appointed munitions tribunal chairman pointed out the futility of mass prosecutions to Lloyd George, who then exerted more pressure on the coal owners. A settlement, without any prosecutions, was reached within a few days. (Wrigley, 1976: 125) In its place, Labour had to "wake up" and be more "practical", and see

whether "something cannot be done with the existing machinery." (Cole & Mellor, 1915: 124)

On the other hand, the *Heralds* call for a more constructive alternative during the very early days of the Act was, however, taken up in the following week's issue of the newspaper by George Douglas Howard Cole and William Mellor both socialists advocating the workers' rights. Under the headline "Trade Unionism Dead?" they asked whether nothing could be salvaged from the wreckage caused by Lloyd George's "confidence trick". The union leaders, they suggested, had meekly succumbed to capitalist aggression, receiving nothing in return. Instead, trade unionists faced a gloomy future of speed-ups through the rapid Americanisation of production, as well as a mobile army of blacklegs and a system of fines deducted by employers from wages. Since the main battle against the Act was lost, the union rank-and-file were urged to press for the reorganisation of trade unionism itself: "Out of chaos may come a new birth. The old unionism was not so marvellous a product that we cannot dream of something better to take its place. Only it is up to us."(Cole, 1923: 124).

The most influential factor in propelling the case for reform onto a 'respectable' platform was, however, the report of the Balfour-Macassey Commission set up by Lloyd George to "enquire into the causes and circumstances of the apprehended differences affecting munitions workers in the Clyde district". (Balfour & Macassey, 1915:10) Its sober criticism of the methods employed by local employers to enforce the leaving certificate scheme on Clydeside; its acknowledgement that the Act was creating added tension between foremen and workers, as the authority of the foremen was now underpinned by penal sanctions; that there was widespread disruption to existing payment systems; that jealousy had been created by the

arrival of more favourably treated newcomers from Canada and the United States; and that the imprisonment of the shipwrights following the Fairfield episode had had disastrous consequences, served to confirm the legitimacy of the reform campaign. A government commission of enquiry whose credentials could scarcely be impugned by the authorities had, in effect, now assumed the mantle previously worn by less respectable and publicly disapproved 'wrecking movements' such as the Trade Union Rights Committee and the critical labour press. (Reid, 1980: 342).

3. Lloyd George Government and the Consolidation of the Labour Party (1917-1918)

In fact the Labour Party had demanded the most drastic amendments to the Act. While it was active in parliamentary discussions on the munitions legislation, the executive committee of the party was rather more subdued and scarcely gave any consideration to it at its regular meetings, as the absence of reference to this question in the executive minutes seems to suggest. But Ross. M. Martin, the Trade Union leader, argued for a leading role for the party in forcing a relation of "close dealing and hard bargaining" between the government and the unions. The assessment of the role of the Labour Party could only be understood if not taken into isolation but in a larger frame as many social, economic and political factors had impeded its achievements. Its various conferences (Report of Fifteenth Annual Conference, 1916: 128) throughout Britain had been the landmark of its willingness to relief the workers' grievances in those harsh circumstances of the war. (Martin, 1980: 132).

Within those conditions, in December 1916, Lloyd George formed a government to replace Herbert Asquith who resigned office over criticism and opposition to its premiership as the war was going badly. The new Prime Minister

found it convenient to offer the Labour Party considerably better opportunities to participate in Government. Indeed, when he formed the War Cabinet, he appointed different Labour members. In fact, the cabinet included five members besides him; there was Henderson and two other Labour M.P.s, John Hodge, the Secretary of the Steel Smelters who was appointed as Minister of Labour, and George Barnes, former Secretary of the Amalgamated Engineers who became Minister of Pensions. There were several other Labour M.P.s who were appointed to junior posts as well as former trade unions' officials. (Pelling, 1978: 144).

However, the appointment of so many Labourites did not prevent the recurrence of industrial unrest. Different strikes took place as the workers' conditions were getting worse. As a result, in 1917, the government appointed a number of commissions of enquiry into the prevailing industrial unrest in the different regions of the country. For that purpose the latter was divided into eight districts, Ireland being excluded. Each district had its own separate commissioners, who issued special reports. The most significant one was a commission of inquiry that had been set up on June 12, 1917 for the Northwest area. Its chairman Honour Judge Parry was appointed to conduct the investigation besides Sir John Smethurst and the M.P, J.R Clynes. The commission concluded that the main cause of the industrial unrest was not the war but it had been greatly aggravated and intensified by wartime inflation, shortages of food and overcrowding in munitions areas. The strikes were the only means to express their dissent and refusal to the Government measures. As a result, the needs of the war and the strong position of labour made it difficult for the government to enforce its legal measures. For instance, it found that the vital need for coal made coercion against South Wales miners' collective action unrealistic. Thus, Lloyd George chose to concede to the

miners' claims whose strike had a drastic effect on Britain. Indeed the major achievement of those different sectors' strikes had been the abolition of the Leaving Certificate legislation. (Pelling, 1987: 146).

In the course of the same year, another major upheaval, which transformed the political climate in Britain as well as the whole world, took place. It was the Russian Revolution of October 1917 that was welcomed by the British socialists and trade unions' officials. Indeed, on June 3, 1917, the leaders of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the British Socialist Party (BSP) summoned a special conference at Leeds to greet the event (Lee & Boggs, 1974: 10). The Leeds gathering included delegates from Trades Councils and Unions, local Labour Parties, the British Socialist Party and the Independent Labour Party as well as independent Socialist Societies, Women's organisations, local Co-ops and assorted Peace Groups. The resolutions of the conference to be voted upon were four, with no amendment permitted. The first one embodied the different fractions of the conference of Labour which hailed the Russian Revolution. The second one mentioned that the *conference shared* with the Provisional Russian Government the pledge to work for an agreement with the international democracies for a re-establishment of a general peace...a peace without annexations or indemnities. The third resolution was a call for full political rights for all men and women, unrestricted freedom of the Press, freedom of speech, a general amnesty for all political and religious prisoners. The fourth resolution urged the constituent bodies at once to establish in every town, urban and rural district, Councils of Workmen and Soldiers. (Lee & Boggs, 1974: 35).

On the other hand, the Government's attitude towards the Leeds conference was by no means in favour of its resolutions. In fact the War Cabinet

was worried about its effects on British labour who were dissatisfied with the wartime conditions would embrace the new ideology. A strike started at a Rochdale engineering company already affected 48 towns and involved over 200,000 workers. Colonial Secretary Edward Milner confided fears about the Leeds Soviet to the Prime Minister:

This Convention will begin to do for this country what the Russian Revolution has accomplished in Russia...and I fear the time is very nearly at home when we shall have to take some strong steps to stop the rot in this country unless we wish to follow Russia into impotence and dissolution. (Roberts, 2001: 150)

Indeed, when the Leeds Conference set out dates and venues for future regional follow-up meetings to create a national network of a dozen Workers and Soldiers Councils (W.S.C), the government took strong steps to stop what it considered as the rot. As a result only three of the twelve WSC districts were able to organise meetings without facing cancellations, bans, violence or arrests.

Nevertheless, when Russia decided to withdraw from the War, Lloyd George sent Henderson there in order to advise on the best means of keeping her in alliance with Britain and France. Once he came back, Henderson announced that the best way to keep the Russians in line was to explore in conjunction with them the basis for negotiated peace. As a result, Henderson was summoned to a meeting of the War Cabinet to discuss the issue. However, this event turned to be known as the “doormat incident” because Lloyd George who opposed sending British representatives to Stockholm put Henderson’s proposal to the rest of the War Cabinet which discussed it while keeping Henderson outside, as if “on the

doormat.” The rest of the Cabinet agreed with the Prime Minister but Henderson was offended and decided to resign from the Cabinet. Consequently, he was replaced by George Barnes who remained with the Labour Party in the Coalition Government. (Robert, 2001: 177).

Though he resigned from the War Cabinet, Henderson continued his activities inside his party and promoted its foreign policy. Indeed, in 1917, when the Trade Union Congress (TUC) enabled its Parliamentary Committee to be active in shaping the new foreign diplomacy of the Labour movement, Henderson welcomed the decision. As a result, towards the end of 1917, with the help of Sidney Webb and Ramsay MacDonald, he drew up a Memorandum on war aims. It provided for the universal abandonment of discriminatory fiscal barriers to international trade and recommended the administration of Colonial possessions exclusively in the interest of local inhabitants, and on the basis of equality of opportunity for traders of all nations. In addition it concerted international control of the exportable surplus of material and foodstuffs. Besides, the memorandum urged the deliberate government action in each country for the prevention of unemployment. (The Labour Party, 1919: 29).

The latter was submitted to the Inter-Allied Socialist Conference, held in February, 1918, in London, and made the basis of peace of international labour. The organisations represented at the conference included: the Labour Party, and Trade Union Congress; the Belgian Workers Party; the French Socialist Party and the French Section of International Labour and General Confederation of Labour; Italian Reform Socialist Party and Italian Socialist Party. Besides Consultative delegates were present from South Africa, Romania and the “South Slav

organisations. (The Seventeenth Annual Conference of the Labour Party, 1918: 126).

Thus, the Conference adopted the Memorandum on War Aims that had been presented by the Labour Party. Among other points, the latter proclaimed the establishment of a League of Nations, which would have the power to enforce the decisions of a World Court regarding the international disputes and conduct elections for the purpose of national self-determination. In addition there would be an International Legislature in which each civilised state would have their allotted share that would pass binding international law. This implied the complete democratisation of all existing states including removal of arbitrary powers, elected parliament, publication of all treaties, abolition of secret diplomacy and the responsibility of foreign policy to the legislature. (The Seventeenth Annual Conference of the Labour Party, 1918: 126).

These claims were to be put in practice after the First World War which came to its end one year later. Indeed, on 11 November 1918, news of signing the armistice was celebrated with wild enthusiasm. In fact, the event announced the beginning of a new era of great changes in the policy of the Labour Party.

4.CONCLUSION:

One significant point which emerged from what had been discussed throughout this paper is that the Labour Party that was founded in 1906 could stand to the fierce conditions of the wartime. Though it had been affected at the outbreak of the conflict by the resignation of its leader and the division inside its ranks, the whole four years of war served as a lesson to strengthen its fractions and to consolidate its components to become the dominant figure of British politics.

The First World War transformed the Labour Party and its prospects. Indeed, the Trade unionist who served as members of Parliaments held ministerial posts in the Coalition Government and even when Henderson resigned from the War Cabinet, he was replaced by another trade unionist member of Parliament, George Barnes. The trade unions not only grew in size, but also in financial strength. Another major point that emerged from this paper is that war gave the Labour Party the impetus to alter its policies, its constitution and its organisation, and so prepared it for government. The impact of the war on the Labour Party threatened its unity at the beginning of the war but throughout its course, the party consolidated its ranks. This fact in particular was a prelude to the rise of the party which would stand as a strong opposition to the existing political structures in Britain.

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