

# **SOCIALISM**

**Vol. I**

# PRACTICAL SOCIALISM

*By the Rt. Hon.*

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## INTRODUCTION

THE majority of people are possessed of good will, and none of them can look upon the present state of things as satisfactory. They admit and deplore the bad trade, the unemployment, the perpetual unrest, the wretched home conditions and the poor opportunity in life that so many of our fellow-citizens have to endure ; they would go a long way, I think, if they could be convinced that the remedies proposed were practical and likely to be successful. The trouble is that, whilst dissatisfied at present, they are bewildered by the general clamour and are not sufficiently satisfied of the usefulness of such proposals as are put forward. They therefore prefer to bear those ills they have than fly to others that they know not of.

Since the use of machinery and organized mass industry began to break in upon the relatively placid life that prevailed throughout most of the eighteenth century, it has seemed to require the lapse of at least a generation before a British Government could make up its mind to attempt to regulate or control what was going on in industry in the interest of those whose lot in life was being worsened by the new conditions. Fox and Grey, as well as Tom Payne, were before their time, although Grey lived to initiate reform. A long "sinking-in" process was required with the British public before the new conditions were realized, and we were confronted by the phenomenon of Wilberforce and his friends nobly battling for the abolition of slavery overseas, whilst they had little perception of what was going on at home with those whom the new industrial developments were condemning to a life of unrelieved toil, squalor and misery. As Trevelyan puts it: we had to wait till

Shaftesbury began to agitate for the liberation of white slaves at home before the public conscience realized that things were nearly as bad in some of our industrial centres as they were in the West Indies.

In a similar way the immense change that is coming over industrial conditions in our own time by the vast amalgamations of capital, and by comprehensive trade organizations that are able to dictate terms to the producer and to the consumer alike, is leading rapidly and inevitably to a great extension of State intervention. The war accelerated the process of industrial consolidation, although, for a time, post-war reaction has retarded the recognition of its significance. Nevertheless the consciousness of the immense power of these great combines and of the need for protection against them is becoming more definite, and the practical question as to what is to be done is exercising many minds.

Many people are frightened by words, especially by anything styled "socialistic." It brings up visions of some bureaucratic tyranny, of conflicts, of spoliation and of peril to their homes. The last thing they think of is that it may be something which may promote development, although the experience of the practical working of things under national direction—or under a socialistic system, if you like—during the war convinced very many people, myself included, that such would be the case.

Of course, the success of any system of working is dependent upon how you work it and upon the quality, experience and good sense of those charged with its direction; but on the moderate assumption that no British Government would be so silly as to put things in charge of people who have not the requisite knowledge and capacity, it seems undeniable that our recent experiences prove that unregulated "private enterprise," as it is called, is being very harmful, and that, on the other hand, we could get a much better development of our mineral and land resources under

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national direction than under the present system; that such a change would be beneficial to the producer and to the consumer alike; that it would encourage, not discourage, invention and the applications of science to productive processes, and immensely promote the welfare of the mass of the people.

In the wider vision that characterized the close of the war period this view was shared by many men of acknowledged capacity and of diverse party allegiances. In some cases they went so far as to express their conclusions in definite form. Neither then, nor now, had they or the rest of us any liking for being ordered about by "Jacks in office," or "Whitehall mandarins," as current misrepresentation depicts those who would direct national enterprise; but they had got behind phrases and had seen the atrocious waste of the present system and had had a glimpse of the organized capacity of the British people. They saw that the way of national organization was the way of real "economy," as against the gigantic levies that are now imposed upon the mass of the people, not so much in taxes as in prices and in deprivations.

But the forces of reaction have triumphed so far, and many of us are voices "crying in the wilderness." Nevertheless, a useful purpose may be served by presenting in popular form some of the lessons that emerged from our experiments in practical socialism and that seem applicable to our present distresses. I do so with the more confidence because it was my privilege to hold Government office throughout the whole of the war period.<sup>1</sup>

In order to secure a sufficient compactness of form

<sup>1</sup> For convenience of reference in the following pages the offices held by the author during the war period were:

August 1914 to May 1915—Under-Secretary Board of Education.

May 1915 to December 1916—Under-Secretary Ministry of Munitions.

December 1916 to July 1917—Minister of Munitions.

July 1917 to close of war—Minister of Reconstruction.

this volume is limited to an analysis of our experiences in industrial and commercial matters, and an attempt will be made in a Second Part to examine them in relation to individual initiative and to their possible application to some outstanding present-day problems.

C. A.

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