

# WHY A TORY JOINED THE LABOUR PARTY

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*Adherence to traditional principles may be a virtue, but a refusal to view those principles in the light of new and pressing developments is a vice. The world was never less disposed to stand still, and those people who try to stand still will find themselves swept off their feet. A great war has been fought, and the passing of the war has left the world fundamentally changed: those who aspire to influence the course of public affairs must adapt their opinions and methods to the necessities of the time, or their participation in public affairs becomes an insufferable meddlesomeness.—Western Mail, leading article, February 20, 1920.*

WHEN a man who has been an active and prominent member of one political party leaves that party and joins another, it is not unnatural that his friends and associates should speculate on the causes of his change. It is not unreasonable that people should ask him to justify his action, especially when he is selected as a parliamentary candidate by his new party. It is because of this that I have thought it right to say a few words as to the reasons which actuated me in leaving the Unionist Party and becoming a supporter of Labour. Although I dislike talking about myself, perhaps my doing so on this occasion may be pardonable under the circumstances.

My father, who lived in Scotland, was a Tory and an admirer of Disraeli at a time when that statesman's Scottish admirers were few and scanty. I myself have been a Conservative all my life until about two years ago. I worked arduously and continuously for the Unionist Party for a quarter of a century. I did not do so for what I could get out of politics. I did indeed receive in 1911 an illuminated address and a silver tea set from the Unionist working men of Barry, and I once obtained a kind service from Sir Edward Carson, but there any obligation of gratitude to the Unionist Party ends. It is sometimes said that lawyers go into politics for jobs and pickings, but none ever came my way. If I had been a self-seeker in public life, I should have left the Unionist Party long ago.

While I was a Conservative I was always a democratic one. I called myself a Tory Democrat. I never lost any opportunity of pressing the democratic point of view on the party as a speaker and writer. If I may cite one proof of what I say, I should like to quote a passage from the *Western Mail* which appeared as far back as 1906. After the Unionist debacle in that year a representative of that newspaper, which is the leading Unionist organ in South Wales, had interviews with various Conservative leaders, and, amongst others, with myself. What I then said was as follows :—

If the Unionist Party is to keep a hold of the people, it must be democratic. It must adopt a sympathetic attitude towards labour problems. There is no greater mistake in the world than to be hostile to trade unionism. . . . It is all very well for the motor driving, self-indulgent capitalist, lolling in his club, to complain of the encroachments of labour. But those who know anything of the struggles of the decent poor in hard times, of the children coming to school on November mornings without having eaten a morsel of food, of the patience of the working man in monotonous and grinding occupations, will strive rather to make life easier for them than to make it harder. I, for one, am a Tory of the school of Disraeli, who, as Sir John Gorst recently said, considered that men of wealth and position and education were trustees for the people, and ought to make the good of the people the first object of their political action, and that the Church and the State institutions were worth conserving because they were useful to the people. That is the spirit that ought to actuate the Unionist Party.

I will quite frankly confess that there were times when I felt discouraged by the lack of sympathy with such democratic views as are enunciated above, shown by Unionists. I could not close my eyes to the extent to which the Unionist Party was permeated by the spirit of Tennyson's *Northern Farmer*—

“Proputty, proputty, proputty.”

I saw that, while men in the rank and file of the party held progressive views; the leaders did not. There was a lack of ideals, a worship of wealth, a blindness to the truth that “man does not live by bread alone” that was discouraging and repellent. Unionism seemed quite contented with an economic system under which one man gets £1,000 a week and another twenty shillings a week. My conscience was often smitten by the spectacle of the dull drudging lives which so many workers lived. Mr. Gladstone once said in golden words, “Be inspired with the belief that life is a great and noble calling; not a mean and grovelling thing, that we are to shuffle through as we can, but an elevated and lofty destiny.” But what chance of making life a great and noble calling was left to a man supporting a wife and four children before the war on eighteen shillings a week in some such place as “Coffin Court” in Glasgow?

All the time, however, I clung to the belief that I was not out of place in a party that had included a statesman of such broad and popular sympathies as Disraeli. Every student of Disraeli's career knows how democratic he was in his leanings and utterances. Those who have read *Sybil* and who remember his sympathy with the Chartists and his insistence that "Labour had its rights as well as its duties" cannot fail to admit the truth of this statement. Mr. H. M. Hyndman, the veteran Socialist, records in his *Record of an Adventurous Life* how he visited Disraeli a month before the statesman's death, and how Disraeli listened to him for several hours as he poured forth his programme. "What attracted me to his career," says Mr. Hyndman, "was his manifest sympathy for democratic and social progress as opposed to middle-class Liberal hypocrisy and chicanery." It appeared to me that if Disraeli could be a Tory, so could I.

I was sometimes told that I was not a "real Conservative" and that I was in the wrong party. I remember, to take one instance, speaking outside Dubs' great engineering works in Glasgow during the dinner hour when I was Unionist candidate for Blackfriars. When the hooter blew I asked my hearers for their votes and stepped down off the chair on which I stood. A young man came up to me and said, "I can't vote for you. I believe you are honest in your proposals and would carry them out if you had the power, but your party will never allow you. You are in the wrong party." I hoped, however, that the view was not a true one and that Reform could be effected within the Unionist Party. I thought, when I became Unionist candidate for the Blackfriars Division of Glasgow, that if one were successful in entering the House of Commons, one might further the just claims of the workers and voice democratic views from the Unionist benches.

Then came the war. It is impossible to say how greatly moved I was by the spectacle of loyalty and patriotism exhibited by the great mass of the nation. The workers poured out of the slums and rookeries in which they had been compelled to dwell, and fought with invincible courage and died with unquenchable heroism for a country that had treated them but poorly. Universal admiration was expressed for the valour of the British army and navy, and it was loudly proclaimed that Britain must be made a land fit for heroes and that a "New England" was imperatively needed. I myself, on recruiting platforms and elsewhere, had said so as loudly as any, and meant what I said. I realised that the war had changed the whole atmosphere of the world. There are certain great historic events, like the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution, that have altered mankind for good. The war was one of those far-reaching forces.

Upon the declaration of the Armistice I looked eagerly for drastic action on the part of the party that I had hitherto supported. The most rapacious profiteering and legalised thieving were being practised on a wholesale scale. Gigantic fortunes were being piled up out of the dire necessities of the nation. The most shameless exhibition of

luxury and self-indulgence were given to people whose only apparent claim was the security of gigantic wealth during the war. Food and clothing and all the necessities of life were rising by leaps and bounds. The profusion and extravagance of the Government were without limits. A horde of unnecessary officials went over to Paris, under pretence of the Peace negotiations, where they had a glorious time at a cost which we now know amounts to nearly three quarters of a million. Housing was calling for attention with an urgency that was overwhelming. The men were returning home expecting to fill their pre-war situations and found them no longer open. The workers were in a state of unrest everywhere. They felt that they had done their duty by their country and demanded—and justly demanded—that they should have in future better conditions of life and labour.

Immediate steps were necessary to stop profiteering, to tax the swollen war-made fortunes, to terminate the waste apparent in almost every department of State, to repay the soldiers and sailors for the services they had rendered to their country, to provide dwellings for the people, to place labour on a new and higher plane. I saw a complete absence in the Unionist Party of that resolute determination to bring about those measures which were urgently necessary. The one desire which I found was to get things restored to the old pre-war conditions, to get back to low wages and high profits. Those who controlled the Unionist Party did not realise in the least what an upheaval the war had created. Those who, while Great Britain was fighting for its life, had promised to make our land one fit for heroes, quickly forgot what they had said when the danger passed away and the war was ended. Instead of drastic and comprehensive schemes of reconstruction and a statesmanlike grasp of the social and economic conditions, one saw paltry palliatives put forward by ministers who dealt with public difficulties not like statesmen, but like peddling politicians. The Unionist Party had not progressed in the least. Lord Henry Bentinck, who, although a Tory, has a sincere sympathy with the workers, published in 1918 a little book entitled *Tory Democracy*, in which he outlined a striking and progressive programme for his party, yet he himself admitted in his work how little sympathy he could expect from his Unionist confrères. "In the days before the war," he says, "whoever ventured to show sympathy with the aims of Labour was regarded by the Carlton Club and the Whips' Room as a dangerous 'Socialist.' Now it is the term 'Bolshevik' that is applied by those who themselves aspire to become 'Tchinovniks.'" (Page 23.)

The state of the housing problem in particular was calculated to excite the greatest indignation. I had been pointing out for years, as an office-bearer of a housing association, how serious the problem would become if it was not resolutely faced. Those interested in housing had urged that schemes for building should be drawn up, and preparations should be made, during the war, so that the erection of houses should commence as soon as the war stopped. Every effort

