

The Crisis In Liberalism

By Bert Wolfe

UNDER the same title as this article, John Maynard Keynes some time ago wrote an article in which he indicated that British liberalism was in a critical state and the old theory of laissez faire was yielding to the ideas developed by the present-day order of monopolistic imperialism and fascism on the one hand and the proletarian revolution on the other. That this crisis is a deep-going one is proved by the fact that in England, the classic land of liberalism, the liberal party has been relegated to the position of third party and the labor party has forged ahead of it. In addition to that, there is an internal crisis within the liberal party which indicates a further polarization of liberalism towards the labor party on the one hand and towards the conservative party on the other. This inner crisis takes the form of a fractional fight between Lloyd George and Asquith and then between Lloyd George and Earl Grey.

LIBERALISM was long bankrupt in fact in England before it received its theoretical death sentence in the post war period, for the practice of liberal laissez faire England was increasingly becoming one of regulation of industry by law, of unemployment insurance and other forms of social legislation, of imperialism (which begets a theory that is directly opposed to liberalism) and of other practices which directly contradict the whole liberal theory.

Now comes Harold J. Laski and in a quiet book review of a not too important book announces his apostasy from liberalism and goes over in his own special field of political theory to the Communist position. To those worried liberals who have been trying to hold onto their philosophy in an age which no longer gives it any color of truth and validity; to those few liberals who were not either going over to the position of sympathizers with the labor movement or the contrary position of defenders of imperialism, the apostasy of Harold J. Laski will prove a fatal blow for he commands considerable prestige among them as one of the few apostles of liberalism in the field of politics that is still capable of writing books that have an air of having something to contribute to a philosophy that is going into bankruptcy.

LASKI was not as sensational as Keynes in his choice of a method of announcing the bankruptcy of liberalism; he has written no leading article expressing his new views nor given any such dramatic title as Keynes' "The Crisis in Liberalism,"

but he is obviously a more thorough-going thinker and has followed his thoughts to their logical conclusions which land him, as indicated above, in the field of Communist theory in his own special subject.

Laski's declaration appears in the review of Professor R. M. MacIver's book, "The Modern State," a book which, judging from Laski's review is of not very much importance. It serves, however, as a foil for an expression of Laski's new conclusions. Although his conclusions are expressed in the complicated language of academic writing, yet they are clear, sharp and decisive. Laski writes:

"I CANNOT, in the first place, understand what he means by words and phrases like 'solidarity' or 'common interest;' I see no unity of any kind in society except what is put there by men, and I see none possible of achievement except by a complete reconstruction of the foundations of the present order.

"Professor MacIver seems to me to write as though there is somehow a unity in society which a force called 'progress' or 'evolution' is unfolding; I cannot see that this is so . . . And, as a corollary view, he seems to lay far too little emphasis upon the importance in the social order of the system of property. (Emphasis mine throughout the citation—B. D. W.) It is, in fact, from the rights annexed to property that a social order takes its color. Society may make its impact upon the state; but the state also makes society, and the whole pro-

cess of life is set in the context of what its property-system implies. Rights, for instance, which Professor MacIver admits the state exists to maintain are always, in fact, relative to property, whether it is freedom of discussion, equality before the courts, or a living wage that is involved. The result of unequal property is, accordingly, that the state exists actually to protect unequal rights and in 'maintaining the universal conditions of social order' it is, again in fact, maintaining unequal rights. This is the great truth in the Communist answer to the classical political philosophy. There is a real sense in which the modern state is substantially the 'executive committee of the capitalist class.' To those of us who believe that the present system involves the class-war as its inherent logic, this aspect of the problem is urgent, and needs more discussion than Professor MacIver had devoted to it."

Shadow of Death on Them.

Shadow of death on them, the dauntless brave,
Shadow of death on them because they stood
Amid the press of battle for the slave,
And organized their class to fight for food.
Shadow of death on them because the tears
Of little children wrung their taut heartstrings;
Shadow of death on them because the years
Had made them foes to Profit Butcherings.

Shadow of death on them because they cried
Their murdered brother's blood aloud to Gain;
Shadow of death on them, their lives denied,
Because they pointed to the martyred slain.
Shadow of death on them, the grisly chair
Waiting beyond their barred cells in the gloom;
Shadow of death on them, the strangled fear,
The mouthing monsters and the ghastly room.

Shadow and death on them. And must they die,
In that they felt too much the misery
Embodied in a starving baby's cry,
In women driven on to harlotry?
Shadow of death on them. And must they pass,
Scared and consumed, because we are too meek,
Too spiritless in courage as a class,
To dare the Bosses' might—to rise and speak?

Henry George Weiss.

