Grey

Present-Day Politics

LORD GREY

ON

PRESENT-DAY POLITICS.

Observations made in the month of January, 1922.

THREEPENCE.

LORD GREY

ON

PRESENT-DAY POLITICS.

Observations made in the
month of January,
1922.

LIBERAL PUBLICATION DEPARTMENT,
42 Parliament Street, London.

OBSERVATIONS
ON
PRESENT-DAY POLITICS

By Rt. Hon.
VISCOUNT GREY of Falloden.

.....

WHEN I left the House of Commons in 1916, I entertained for personal reasons the wish to be free not to undertake further political obligation, with the intention of staying at my post till I felt I could no longer be of use there, or until circumstances set me free. That I did; and the time came when I left office with the rest of the first Coalition Government. For two years, till the end of the war, I took no part in political life. After that for some time I did no public work except in connection with the League of Nations, and such other work as I did was done at the request of the Government.

A Time of Danger.

Then why do I depart from that attitude now? I do it because, since the last election, there has been a House of Commons which has allowed any apparent scandal, however great,

to remain unexposed, which has allowed any policy, however extravagant, to go on unchecked, which has allowed any inconsistency, however flagrant, to take place without calling the Government to account, and because we have had a Government in power which has taken full advantage of that licence allowed it by the House of Commons. If that state of things is repeated after the next election it will be a danger and a disaster to this country, and it is incumbent on any man who feels that danger, now that there is an election in prospect, to make his opinion known for what it is worth; and where should I make it known better than on a Liberal platform?

In the years I have taken no part, or little part, in public life, I have not been conscious of any separation of opinion from old colleagues or from the party, and it is most of all congenial to me to express my opinions now on the same platform with those with whom I had previously worked, and particularly with Mr. Asquith. I suppose if any of us who have been for many years Cabinet Ministers were to write down the name of the colleague who was most ready to allow any of his colleagues to get the credit, the whole credit, it may be, for any success, who was most ready to come to the

assistance of a colleague when the colleague needed assistance, who was most ready, even uninvited and unasked, when there was the responsibility for any mistake to take upon himself that responsibility, or, at any rate, to share it to the full, though none of it might have been due to his own personal action—all of us on this platform who have been Mr. Asquith's colleagues would put his name first. If we were asked that question that would be the reply, and no one who has been among his colleagues knows the truth of what I have said better than the present Prime Minister.

True and False Co-operation.

I believe that it is absolutely essential to restore wholesome, straightforward politics in this country, and that the first thing for us to do is to resuscitate, strengthen, and revive the Liberal Party. But the times are such, and parties have been so shaken by the events of recent years, that personally I welcome the co-operation of any man outside of the Liberal Party who feels, as we do, the necessities of the situation. Lord Robert Cecil has spoken publicly of his agreement with me, and I should like to do the same as to my agreement with him. On Free Trade we have never

been divided. We have been acutely divided in past years on Ireland, on questions such as the Disestablishment of the Church and religious education in the schools. That question of denominational education forms no part of politics to-day; the Irish question, we hope, is settled, and Lord Robert Cecil is one of those who have accepted the settlement.

On labour questions, on social questions, and political questions of the day, as far as I can judge from his speeches, I find myself in agreement. With any one like that—and there are others who hold his views—I see no reason why we should not co-operate: I see every reason why we should. I can imagine some one clever on the Coalition side saying: "Then why do you object to people who belong to different parties co-operating in the Government if you are ready to co-operate with somebody who has belonged to a different party in Opposition?" My answer is that there is all the difference in the world between co-operation which arises from agreement and agreement which arises from desire to co-operate. The Coalition represent the second of those things. They came into office legitimately enough, brought together by one desire, that of winning the war. Now in time of peace they, with increasing

difficulty, force, at any rate, an appearance of agreement with each other because they are reluctant to separate. And then they tell us that there ought to be no party in this country: nothing but the national interest; no party politics. If we are patriots we ought to belong to no political party except that which supports them. There should be no party politics—that is, outside the Cabinet. Party politics obviously there are inside the Cabinet. It is impossible and intolerable that you should have a Cabinet divided by party politics in itself—the division so acute that it cannot be concealed from appearing in the newspapers—and that, while that is so, you should have no opposition and no party politics outside.

The first need is that the Coalition, which has now become hollow—"a bubble," I think, is the description given to it by one paper—should be brought to an end. The speeches made last week on behalf of the Coalition read very well. It is pleasant to read them. The speech of the Prime Minister in particular reads like the speech of a very innocent man. With a great many of the words I do not differ. But those speeches had no relation to fact. They were not representing the policy of the Government as it had been; they were representing

the policy of the Government as it ought to have been—perhaps as the speakers now looking back upon the past wish that it had been.

Fluctuating Policy.

The Prime Minister said, "Britain has been steady; she has never wavered; her policy has never fluctuated." Never fluctuated in Ireland? Never fluctuated as regards Egypt? Never fluctuated as regards Bolshevism, and the trial of war criminals, and making Germany pay the whole cost of the war?

As to Ireland, like other Liberals I cordially welcome the settlement. I welcome the news of to-day. It goes to show that, provided she is left alone, Ireland will work through her troubles, and, as far as we are concerned, we want nothing except to see the Government for once remaining constant in letter and spirit to the latest phase of their Irish policy. I differ from Lord Carson and the "Die-hards" in my view in regard to the settlement; I agree with them entirely in their view of the humiliation and the disgrace of the methods by which that settlement was reached. As one critic of the Government has said, you should not announce that you have got by the throat something that afterwards you have to take by the

hand. We never knew the full facts of the policy of reprisals; we do know that it failed. To its failure, I admit, we owe the present settlement, but we need not have passed through that disgrace and humiliation. The Government say it could not have been done before. Quite true, but why? Because, quite apart from whether the Irish were prepared to accept it, the Government declared that anything like the settlement which they have now made was impossible and out of the question. The humiliation is a self-made humiliation.

In regard to Bolshevism, a policy of force was adopted avowedly to destroy the Bolshevists. Now there is talk of lending them money, and I gather the present policy is to lend internationally ten or twenty millions to people whom you have spent 100 millions in failing to destroy.

In Egypt the policy of the Government has oscillated between repression and concessions. It has oscillated sometimes so rapidly that it has been difficult at any particular moment to know which policy they have been pursuing.

Our Relations with France.

Then I come to a matter more serious still—our relations with France. The Prime Minister

seemed to think that the method of transacting foreign affairs by conference was something invented by himself. It was practised before the war. It would have been practised on the eve of the war if our advice had been listened to. What has happened under the new methods of the Supreme Council? The Supreme Council has undermined that trust and confidence which existed between France and ourselves for so many years. **At the present moment**—you can hear it from people who have been in France, you can read it in letters in the papers, it is obvious to any one who has followed the course of events—**there is less confidence, less good understanding between these two Governments than there has been at any time since the Entente was made in 1904.** A very serious fact! That is the most serious fact in European politics at the present moment.

The Entente was made by Lord Lansdowne and the French Ambassador in London, with the French Foreign Minister and the British Ambassador in Paris. It was made by those methods. It was maintained in the same way for years, and along with it was maintained trust and confidence under which neither Government ever sprang a surprise on the

other, and in which there was perfect good faith and close touch between them. The Supreme Council has destroyed that. It is no good blinking facts. The Supreme Council has lately been fatal to a French Prime Minister, and his successor apparently is desirous to have not so much to do with it.

The re-establishment of good relationship with France is the most vital thing in European politics to-day. Until that old trust and confidence is restored between the two Governments, no conference, none of those attempts to reconstruct Europe, will fare well. If that confidence be restored it will be a starting-point of security, peace, and reconstruction in Europe. But, believe me, it will not be restored by means of the Supreme Council; and it is only, as I believe, by the more usual, the quieter, and steadier methods that you will again get back those good relations which we ought never to have lost.

The Steadier Methods.

Well, now, I am told, that because I have criticised the method of dealing with foreign affairs by the Supreme Council, therefore I am in favour of secrecy and the old diplomacy. I suppose you all know what the old diplo-

macy is. I don't. I do understand what is meant by secrecy, and I would just like to say this, that when I advocated other methods than the Supreme Council I did not say secret methods. I advocated methods which should be quieter and steadier; but things may be quiet without being secret. It is not necessary to be noisy in order to avoid secrecy. I quite agree that methods before the war could be improved and adjusted to new conditions, and I think undoubtedly you may have more openness than there was in past years.

I do not believe war could have been avoided by anything we could have done before 1914. I can see some ways in which the war might have been precipitated under more unfavourable conditions than when it came, but I have always felt—and, looking back, I feel just as strongly as ever—that no change in diplomatic methods, nothing we could have done, would have prevented the war, because the war could only have been prevented by there being the same will to peace in Germany that there was here. So when I say that I think you can improve old methods, don't think I mean that the war could have been avoided by any improved methods. But secrecy in the form of secret treaties I have always been against in

times of peace. I never was a party to making a secret treaty in time of peace. Indeed, when the war came there were, I think, two agreements which I had initialled, and which might have been completed, but for the fact that I had stipulated that as soon as they were completed they must be published, and Germany, with whom they were being made, was doubtful about the desirability of having them published.

Secrecy of the Supreme Council.

But when I say I want as much openness as possible in diplomacy, do you think there has been more openness in these new methods with the Supreme Council? What I complain of is that in the foreign policy of the Government there has been more secrecy than there was formerly.

You hear a great deal about the Washington Conference, but you do not get papers published to tell what has really passed. In what is called the "old diplomacy," where Foreign Ministers and Ambassadors conversed, records were kept of their conversations, and very often those records were published, which explained to their respective countries exactly the policy which had been pursued. The new method, I understand, is that the British Prime

Minister and the French Prime Minister, for instance, converse together, but we never seem to have any records of their conversations published. We have had all sorts of trouble in Egypt, a Commission appointed to inquire into things in Egypt, but we have had no papers showing what advice was given to the Government by the people on the spot, what advice Sir Reginald Wingate, what advice Lord Allenby, has given, and what the Government have said in return. We are told now and then something upon which the limelight is thrown very strongly, but we are given no Parliamentary papers as we used to have which explained how our public servants were advising the Government, what instructions the Government were sending, and generally made the whole course of policy adopted by the Government plain and intelligible to the country, so that they might form an opinion on it. That we do not have. My criticism of the present policy, the present methods of the Government, is this, that there is both too much limelight and too much secrecy.

Defects in Foreign Policy.

Mr. Asquith quoted the Attorney-General's principle of "measures, not men." But the

colleagues of the Attorney-General have spoken quite differently. They spoke not so much of measures as of the man—the one man, the only man, or, as Mr. Austen Chamberlain says, the same man. He says it is such an advantage that in international matters we are always represented by the same man. Well, that depends. The same man representing the same policy, and that a good policy, is good. The same man representing the same policy, and that a wrong policy, is unfortunate—how unfortunate depends upon the wrongness of the policy. But the same man representing from time to time different policies is altogether bad. It would be better to have different men representing different policies. There are drawbacks to that. A different man representing a different policy may, at any rate, be trusted for the time that he is in office. But if the same man represents different policies, he can never be regarded as reliable, whatever policy, good or bad, he may be advocating at the moment.

There has been another misfortune about our foreign politics. Somehow or other more than once the trail of domestic electioneering has got mixed up with international affairs. That untimely election of 1918 did something

to impair the peace negotiations which followed. We have been handicapped ever since by the part which that election of 1918 and the consequences of it, played in the peace negotiations. And do you suppose that the other day, when the Supreme Council was meeting at Cannes and the whole of this country became engaged in discussing a February election—discussing it on pure grounds of opportunism, openly suggesting as I think was the case, in some quarters of the Press, that it would be such a convenient time for an election when the Prime Minister returned triumphant from Cannes—do you suppose that was altogether wholesome for the international discussions which were taking place there?

Conferences and the League of Nations.

I have expressed some hesitation as to whether the Genoa Conference was really a well-thought-out scheme, and because that was said I see it stated that I am opposed to all conferences. The Washington Conference I have always given the most unhesitating praise to, both to the Conference itself and to the policy of the Government as executed by Mr. Balfour at the Conference. I think there is some lesson to be drawn from the success of the

Washington Conference. If these Conferences are to be a success there must be ample time, ample leisure, and the men who do the real work of them had better be men with special qualifications for the work, and able to give their whole time and attention to it. The League of Nations is a conference. It is a sort of permanent conference. Well, I have certainly never been opposed to the League of Nations; and even before the war, when there was trouble in Europe in 1912, I took an active part in, and presided over, a Conference of Ambassadors in London which did adjust some very difficult questions which, but for that Conference, might have disturbed the peace of Europe then. So I say that to show that I am by no means opposed to conferences, and that if I have views about the Genoa Conference it is not because I think conferences as a rule are undesirable.

The Prime Minister complained the other day that those of us who criticised the Conference he has suggested at Genoa, on the ground that it may prejudice the League of Nations, are running the League of Nations as a little party show. I make these criticisms in no party spirit, but I would put this before you—I would suggest it as a point for the

Prime Minister, as he says he is in favour of the League of Nations. It is not everybody who has been in favour of it. It is not everybody who is in favour of it now. There are many who say—"Oh! the League of Nations! A very nice idea, but nothing will ever come of it; it will never be of much use."

What is the object of the Genoa Conference? One of its objects is to form a European Association of Nations pledged against aggression on each other. That is the League of Nations. What are these faint-hearted people who have never believed in the League of Nations going to say about that? They are going to say—"After all, we were right; the League of Nations is no use; it is to be put on one side already, and something new is going to be formed, which is something like it, but with a new name." And they are going to say—"Is this something new going to be of any use?"

Now the Prime Minister says the League of Nations could not do the job he wants the Genoa Conference to do. The League of Nations has done one job which the Supreme Council could not do. It has settled the question of Upper Silesia, and we hear the settlement is working well. It is not a thing to be put lightly aside. Why cannot it achieve

what the Genoa Conference could do? That I should like to have explained. One of the things the Genoa Conference is to do is to deal with economics. The League of Nations has already started with a Financial Committee at Brussels, in which Germany took a part.

The Prime Minister said the United States would not take part in the League of Nations, and that there was a chance, at any rate, that they would take part in the Genoa Conference. I would have liked, first of all, to ask the United States whether they would be prepared to participate at all in a conference of this kind, to ask them whether the organizing of a conference under the League of Nations would be an objection or not, and only when you had ascertained that the United States would not participate in anything organized under the League of Nations, but would participate in some economic conference organized outside the League of Nations, then, and then only, would I have gone past the League of Nations.

Trade and Economy.

Now, I come to a point at home. The country is not prosperous, and there are a great many people in consequence who are not happy. This unemployment question is a very serious

and distressing one, and I agree that there must be relief of actual distress. You have no choice for it, and, as measures can be taken by Local Authorities or by the Government to relieve actual starvation and distress, those measures must be taken, but they are only palliatives, and I agree that the problem of unemployment, being one which may always recur, does require the most serious consideration from the point of view not only of temporary relief, but of permanent dealing with it when it occurs. But I would not believe at this moment in holding out as the first objective any great national scheme, for this reason: the best permanent remedy for unemployment is good trade. Until you have got trade back to a condition of normal welfare you will not be able to gauge what are likely to be the normal dimensions of the unemployment problem, nor what amount of normal resources the country will have to deal with it, and at the present moment I would not spend time in elaborating or advocating large programmes on the subject of unemployment or any other question. I would concentrate on the one question of enabling the country to recover its prosperity by getting expenditure down.

I would have more faith in a Government

which came forward and said that for the next year or two it was going to have no programme except to concentrate on reducing expenditure. I believe in that way it would do far more good than by coming forward with large programmes, and not concentrating on the one point of getting the expenditure down. Well, the Government at last are alive to this question of expenditure. The Geddes Committee attacks this problem of expenditure from one end, and I am not sure that it is the best end. It attacks it from the point of view of expenditure. I am not sure that the best end to approach the problem of retrenchment is not from the point of view of income. I should very much like the Government to go into the question of how much revenue can be raised in this country every year at the present moment without trenching upon capital, and without depressing the springs of industry. Let us know what is a fair national income, which can be raised consistent with enabling the country to recover from the war. I should have liked if it had approached the question from that end as well as the other. It ought to have been approached long before from both ends. When I think of all the money that has been wasted, or worse than wasted,

since the Armistice, I cannot think that the Government deserves great credit for economy, or that they inspire me with great confidence as to their efforts in the future.

What is a Coalition Liberal?

I cannot define a Coalition Liberal, of whom Mr. Churchill speaks so highly, but I have an idea what he is. I will try to describe him. He is a man who three years ago acclaimed the Government, and would hear no doubt about it, when they announced not only that the Kaiser was to be tried in London, but that the German war criminals were to be tried and receive most condign punishment. The German war criminals have been tried in Germany; some of them got light sentences; some of them have been acquitted; and, so far as I can make out, **a Coalition Liberal is the man who has forgotten all that was ever said about them.** Three years ago Germany was to pay the whole cost of the war, or if not the whole cost I think the sum named was 24,000 millions; and the Coalition Liberal was a man who would hear no doubt about it, and believed the Government was sure to get it. Well, how much have we got so far? I believe we have not got the expense of the Army of Occupation

in Germany covered. One phrase used to be, on the Government side, that Germany was to be like an orange which would be squeezed so hard that the pips would squeak. There has been squeaking, but there has not been indemnity; and **the Coalition Liberal is a man who seems quite content.** Then take Egypt. There has been trouble in Egypt. The Government shuts up some of the people who are fomenting trouble, and the Coalition Liberal **praises them for their firmness.** The Government lets them out; the Government is **praised again for its adaptability.** The Government shuts them up again or deports them—well, **that is right, too.**

What the policy of the Government is in Egypt at this moment, whether it is on the tack of repression or whether it is on the tack of concession, I do not know; and I fancy the attitude of the Coalition Liberals is "wait and see." Whichever it is, it is sure to be quite right if the Government does it. Well, then, take the policy towards the Bolshevists. The Bolshevists were very wicked people, who were to be destroyed. Money was wanted. Fifty millions the Coalition Liberals would vote for such an excellent purpose as the destroying of this wicked people. That was not enough. It

came to about 100 millions. "Oh, well, you must spend money for such a good purpose as that; the Bolshevists are to be destroyed." Time goes by. The Bolshevists are still there. "Oh, well, we must look on Russia with sympathy; let us lend these people whom we have been destroying some twenty millions by international finance." I am not criticising the policy of doing what is possible to restore Russia. It is urgently necessary, but I do criticise the fact that we wasted 100 millions of money by interfering in that country.

Coalition Liberals and Ireland.

Mr. Churchill gave a picture of Irish policy in his speech. It did not represent either present history or past history accurately. But what is the Coalition Liberals' attitude upon Ireland? Some time ago Dominion Home Rule was being advocated as the remedy for Ireland. Mr. Asquith advocated it, but to the mind of a Coalition Liberal that would not do, that was being brought forward by factious Independent Liberals. There was crime in Ireland, very bad crime. What was the Coalition Liberal attitude to that? Well, that must be repressed. I have nothing to say against attempts to repress crime, provided

you do it with the strong hand of justice. That was not what was tried. It was the weak violence of reprisals, but, as far as I can see, the view taken, the Coalition Liberal view, would have been that previous Coercion Acts in Ireland had been tried and failed; they must have something different, because reprisals were quite different to the old Coercion Acts. The object of the Coercion Acts was that when a crime was committed an effort was made to discover the guilty person and punish him. Under reprisals, when a crime is committed, if you cannot discover the guilty person punish somebody or other. The burnings of Cork were on such a scale that, if perpetrated by the forces of the Crown, they were a real scandal in administration. The Government was prepared to get at the truth, they appointed a Commission—the Coalition Liberals, no doubt, very admiring of the Government's courage and firmness in appointing a Commission, and having an inquiry into the whole matter. But when the Commission had taken place, the report was never published. It was withheld from us, and **the Coalition Liberals were equally contented.** Time went on; crime got worse, the policy of reprisals failed, the Government came forward with a scheme

in the very widest and fullest sense ever conceived of Dominion Home Rule—so full that, rightly, under the agreement, Ireland is called the Irish Free State; and the Coalition Liberals, who had agreed with the Government previously that Dominion Home Rule was impossible, who had supported reprisals, who had acquiesced in the hushing up of the report on the Cork burnings, all applauded this last proposal of the Government as an evidence of statesmanship, which no other Government could have conceived, and no other Government could have carried. That is not a state of things which redounds to the credit of the country. We have reached a settlement, but we have reached it by a most humiliating and degrading road. And when Mr. Churchill goes into the question of who are the real Liberals, I say that it is not a question of labels or of terms, but it is a question of facts and policy and the conduct of the Government. I don't care what label is attached to me; but the title I am not going to qualify for is that of Coalition Liberal. Mr. Churchill says, "All patriotic people ought to co-operate with the Government." Co-operate in that series of policies which I have been describing! If that is the test of patriotism, I have not got sufficient political agility to be a patriot.

House of Lords Reform.

The fact is, it is we Independent Liberals who are a homogeneous party; the Coalition is not. They were told the other day that they were in honour bound—told by one of their own supporters—in honour bound to remain in office till they had reformed the House of Lords. I understand that is now postponed till after the election. I would not state that too distinctly, because we do not know what else we may be asked to understand to-morrow; but that seems to be the impression. Then that is the policy which unites them, the reform of the House of Lords, and which is to unite them for the future. Are they really agreed about it? I know what a Conservative wants in the reform of the House of Lords. What he wants is that its power should be restored, so that if by any chance an extreme Liberal Government or Radical Government, or even Labour Government gets a majority at the election, there shall be a caretaker left at Westminster who will see that nothing happens, and that the House is kept in order until another election takes place.

But is that what the Liberal wing of the Coalition wants? I agree that much might be done to reform the constitution of the House of

Lords, but I do not believe that as long as you retain the hereditary element as the base of the Second Chamber you can touch the powers of the House of Lords as they are. I believe that the reason why this House of Lords scheme hangs fire is that the two wings of the Coalition are not agreed about it. If so, their agreement is not a real one. It is a hollow one.

The Coming Election.

Now, when we have an election, how are people going to vote? I know some people who are going to vote for the Government because they think there is no alternative. That is one sort of vote they will get. I know at least one person—I suppose there are others—who will not vote against them, because till the people of this country are better educated, it is thought they do not deserve a better Government. But who is going to vote for them because he trusts them? Ask business men—they do not trust them. Ask the miners—what have they to say about fluctuations of policy in the matter of decontrol? Ask the agricultural interests—we do not trust them. Ulster considers itself betrayed by them. The Die-hards do not trust them. The only question that remains to be asked is—do they trust each other?

As to an alternative, I agree with Lord Carson, who said the other day there will be no difficulty about an alternative. There is more than one. This cry about alternatives we have heard before. We heard it between 1895 and 1905, when the Conservative Party was in office. It was said constantly. The Liberal Party's great leader, Mr. Gladstone, was gone, Lord Rosebery had stood aside, Sir William Harcourt had resigned and died before the election came. We were supposed to be divided. There was no alternative. All the time I remember thinking what nonsense it was that in England, in Scotland, and even in Wales there was no alternative. Now, to-day, as regards alternatives, Wales may be a little exhausted. I am certain that in England and Scotland there is no party which, if it were returned to power—if it had a majority in the country—would not find personalities perfectly fit to form an alternative Government.

We have the same situation to-day as we had in 1905, when you had a great party pretending to be in agreement, when they were fighting on the subject of tariff reform. Years ago Lord Beaconsfield said, "England does not like Coalitions." I used not quite to understand why. Now I do understand why. In wartime,

when they were united for a single purpose, they were not really a Coalition; they were just one body. Now they have remained together for purposes on which they are not united. They are not a Coalition, they are not a homogeneous party, and they are not a wholesome Government from the point of view of political principle. Sooner or later we must have this election, and when it comes I believe the country will go back to the pre-war conditions of desiring to have a straight contest between parties who are agreed in principle, opposing parties holding different principles, with the object of having again, as we have had before, a homogeneous Government which can be trusted not to sway this way and that, but to adhere to principles and policy which are known to the country.

LONDON: STRANGEWAYS, PRINTERS.

100 copies ... 15s.
500 copies ... 60s.

From the Publisher.