

THE PARTY SYSTEM

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649667833

The Party System by Hilaire Belloc & Cecil Chesterton

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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BY
HILAIRE BELLOC
AND
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LONDON
STEPHEN SWIFT
10 JOHN STREET, ADELPHI
1911



PREFACE

A WORD ON THE LATE ELECTION

THE country has just emerged from the heat and dust of a General Election. We have heard it proclaimed on all sides that "the Will of the People must prevail!" with slight variations as to the direction in which the Will of the People is to be found. We have seen Mr Lloyd George and Mr Winston Churchill represented on the one hand as patriots confronting a haughty aristocracy (as represented to Mr Churchill by his cousin the Duke of Marlborough), and braving its wrath and hatred, and on the other as a pair of low-born demagogues hallooing on their ragged and illiterate associates to the plunder of the wealthy! While the Conservatives have professed to be convulsed with fear lest Mr Redmond should buy up the whole Liberal Front Bench with the sum of £40,000 (or \$200,000, which sounds at once larger and more insidiously wicked), the Liberals have been singing a moving war-song of which two lines run :

One with us is He who leads us,
Asquith, God and right!—

lines which, however open to objection from theologians, must needs be spirit-stirring to those who presumably conceive Mr Asquith as leaving his plough or his smithy to lead the stormy democracy whose character and aspirations he in his own person sums up and represents to a great attack upon privilege.

Well, it is over for the present, and a good many of the voters are beginning to look at each other and to wonder what it is all about. The question is not an easy one to answer in regard to any election of the present day ; but to those who are not in possession of the key, which it is the aim of this book to give, there is about the election which is just over something particularly mysterious.

In the year 1909 the House of Lords, which had previously mutilated and rejected several bills passed by the Liberal Government, threw out Mr Lloyd George's Budget, thereby forcing an immediate General Election. The Liberal leaders declared that the issue at that election was not only the passage of the Budget, but also the limitation of the Lords' Veto ; and Mr Asquith, speaking at the Albert Hall, declared that he would neither assume nor retain office unless he were in possession of guarantees that the Lords' Veto should be limited.

Well, what happened ?

On that pledge Mr Asquith won the election. His team was once more returned to power. He did "assume" office ; he did "retain" office. But

no "guarantees" were forthcoming, and no attack on the Lords was seriously attempted. Instead, Mr Asquith entered into a "conference" with his alleged political "opponents," and six months were supposed to have been spent in the attempt to accommodate the divergent views of the two Front Benches, and to bridge the "unbridgable gulf" which one of his humbler salaried followers discovered, in a notable speech, to exist between the views of his uncle on the one hand, and of his first cousin on the other. Then both sides came out explaining with bland smiles that the Conference had failed. Immediately afterwards another election was declared to be necessary, though, as matter of fact, there was absolutely nothing to vote about, the Bill concerning which the two Houses were supposed to be disagreeing never having been really considered by either of them.

The key to this stage-play is not hard to find. The Conference did not fail. It did exactly what it was intended to do. It saved for a moment the life of the moribund Party System. The failure of the Liberal Government to fulfil the popular mandate in 1906, the Chinese Labour betrayal, the monstrous and unpopular interference with public habit and personal liberty included in the Licensing Bill, the collapse and absorption of the Labour Party, had disgusted most people with party politics, so that, in order to rally their supporters, the old cry of "Down with the Lords!"

had to be raised. The cry succeeded in its immediate object, but it placed the Government in an awkward position when a handful of Radicals began to demand the fulfilment of the pledges upon which the election had been won. Hence the Conference; hence the alleged "failure" of the Conference; and, finally, hence the election devised in order to give the Party System "second wind."

But the game is growing a little too transparent, and it has never been quite so transparent as at this election. The resolute refusal of the so-called "Opposition" to attack the really vulnerable points in the record of the Government—especially the breach of Mr Asquith's Albert Hall pledge,—and the determination of both sides to direct the attention of the public to unreal issues, all this must begin to suggest the idea of collusion to the ordinary elector. He does not know all; he does not know that practically every move in the silly and dangerous game is arranged beforehand by the confederates on the two Front Benches. But he is beginning to feel that the fight is unreal.

The object of this book is to support the tendency now everywhere apparent and finding expression, a tendency to expose and ridicule as it deserves, to destroy and to supplant the system under which Parliament, the governing institution of this country, has been rendered null.

We write to show why governments suddenly