The Crisis of Democracy

Al-Balagh, 24 May 1945.

World political affairs have not grown as complicated, since Germany's surrender was completed, as they have grown in these last days; for the great international rivalries alone used to occupy world public opinion, whereas now other, partisan rivalries have been added to these international rivalries — rivalries within the domestic politics of some of the great powers.

And since these domestic rivalries carry far-reaching consequences for international politics itself, attention to them has intensified, and interpretations of them, and disagreements over what conclusions to draw from them, have multiplied, to the point that foreign policy itself now comes second after these domestic political problems. And the gravest of these domestic problems is, of course, the problem of Great Britain; for Great Britain holds a preeminent position in the whole world, and has complex relations with the great and small powers alike, with her independent dominions, and with her vast empire — so it is no wonder that all these states should concern themselves with everything that happens in Great Britain, and with everything that might have an effect upon her foreign policy and her conduct toward the colonies.

And the source of this domestic rivalry in Great Britain is entirely natural, no cause for wonder; for Britain was governed during the war by a coalition government resting on the agreement of parties whose programs and platforms diverge sharply. Prime Minister Mr. Churchill had believed that this coalition government would continue until the war laid down its arms in both East and West. But events have shown, for some time now, that this coalition had begun to crack, and that disagreement among the parties over foreign policy itself had grown too great for the coalition ministry to withstand.

It is enough to recall the events in Greece, not long past, to see that the allied parties in Great Britain did not view them with one eye: the Conservatives viewed them with satisfaction at British policy's handling and conduct of the affair, Labour viewed them with indignation, and the Liberals viewed them with an anxious, hesitant eye. Nor have we yet forgotten those parliamentary maneuvers Labour resorted to during the Greek crisis, in order to preserve, on the one hand, its freedom of opinion and its rejection of the Government's policy, while preserving, on the

other hand, the coalition itself, until victory in Europe should be achieved and Germany should lay down her arms.

Mr. Churchill sought a vote of confidence from the House of Commons more than once over his Greek policy, and won it, but won it incompletely: he won a confidence that amounted almost to a mere formality, since a huge number of members, approaching, or even exceeding, half the House, did not attend the vote at all; so the Prime Minister won the confidence of those present, and was able to state officially that he enjoyed the confidence of the House — yet he could see for himself that the House's support for him was neither strong, nor deep, nor fit to be relied upon.

And what happened at the Crimea conference was another manifestation of this coalition's cracking; for Labour and the Liberals were indignant, and British public opinion backed them, over the settling of Poland's affairs while she herself stood at a distance, and subsequent events showed that those who were indignant were not mistaken; for Poland still stands in her tangled predicament, taking no part in world affairs, and absent from the San Francisco Conference — because the Russians hold one view of her case, and the English and Americans hold another, and she herself is lost between the two.

The truth is that British foreign policy proceeded on a straight course, satisfactory to Labour, Conservatives, and Liberals alike, during the ordeal, when Germany was still a power to be feared and her danger dreaded, and when the Allies stood in urgent need of the support of strong and weak alike, in every corner of the earth. But once Germany was defeated in Italy and France, and the Allies began invading her own soil, and the Allies became certain of their victory, the direction of British foreign policy shifted somewhat, and began recovering, little by little, its old coloring — one that relies on seizing opportunities, strengthening imperial authority, displaying British might, and making both the strong and the weak feel that British power is a strength that dislikes weakness, and a severity that dislikes gentleness.

The traces of all this appeared in the Greek crisis, as something of it appeared too in the Near East; promises once given were forgotten, inclinations once carefully concealed came into view, and all of this soon collided with the other great powers' own concern for the influence and authority they wished to retain for themselves. From that time on, Labour sensed that the Conservatives had begun returning to their traditional

policy, and bore it for a while in resentful silence, then muttered and grumbled in denial, then openly voiced their disagreement, declared their rejection outright, and exposed the coalition itself to danger.

And if you add to this that domestic policy in Great Britain followed the very same path as foreign policy — Labour's conduct is no surprise there either — for the Conservatives had gone along with their Labour allies in the war to the furthest extent, which led them to extend the authority of the state over everything, and to extend it with a force that knew neither leniency nor slackness, until many people were saying that Great Britain was moving rapidly toward socialism. But no sooner had Professor Beveridge announced his famous report than the Conservatives sensed a danger worth guarding against and preparing to resist, and lo, Professor Beveridge's report was shelved for the time being, and lo, the talk resumed instead of the right of individuals and institutions to enable their own persons to work, innovate, and produce.

And so the Conservatives began recovering something of their own freedom, returning to their traditional policy, which favors slow evolution rather than revolution in anything connected with social and economic systems; nor are Labour unaware or inattentive — they have noticed this shift in Conservative policy in domestic affairs just as they noticed it in foreign affairs, and they had borne the coalition reluctantly for a long time already, so that once the war in Europe ended, they resolved to reclaim their freedom, and did reclaim it in fact — but they sacrificed, for the sake of this freedom, a good deal of what they had been counting on to win the election; for they had wanted to fight a long, calm electoral campaign in which they could make their case once hearts had settled in their breasts, once the British people had recovered from the intoxication of victory, once they could judge matters calmly and patiently, once many of the fighting soldiers had returned home to hear from the people and speak to them, and once the people could decide their own fate with reflection and discernment.

But Mr. Churchill granted them no respite, and did not allow them this long, calm contest; he gave them instead a choice between continuing the coalition until Japan's surrender, or an election in early July — and they accepted the challenge reluctantly, describing Mr. Churchill's plan as a shameful scheme, laying its responsibility at his door, and beginning their own electoral campaign as of this past Tuesday.

And the world awaits the outcome of this contest now unfolding among these three parties, and awaits what effect this contest will have upon foreign policy, and upon the relations between Great Britain and the great powers on the one hand, and the small powers on the other. The simplest thing that ought to be said to Egyptians in particular, and to the Arab East in general, is that proud, independent peoples must rely upon themselves above all else, and must not rely upon some political shift occurring here or there — while at the same time they must not ignore this political shift either, but must reckon with it, and prepare to profit from it if it proves beneficial, and to guard against it if it proves alarming.

Yet this internal democratic crisis is not confined to Great Britain alone; for it appears there is in France something resembling a democratic crisis as well — the municipal elections have shown that France is shifting sharply toward the left, and everything suggests that there is, within the French people, a considerable measure of anxiety as they look to their near future and to the ordering of their own domestic affairs. Léon Blum, leader of the Socialist Party, delivered his latest speech, which showed that affairs in France are not proceeding in a manner that invites contentment and ease. The most notable thing in Léon Blum's speech is his statement: "The rendering of service to the homeland, however great, earns its doer no special right in a democratic country — it earns him a right only in a dictatorial country; for rendering service to a democratic homeland is a duty incumbent upon all citizens alike, required by the very nature of things."

The insinuation in these words is plain enough, as is his further statement: that France must attain her greatness by the path of union among her citizens, and cooperation in achieving social justice in domestic life, and in achieving social justice among nations — so that the strong may not wrong the weak, nor the mighty monopolize affairs to the exclusion of those who have no share of strength or might. This program, brief as it is, if it depicts anything at all, depicts the highest ideal of justice both at home and abroad — but the highest ideal is one thing, and actual life is quite another.

You will observe that the problems of domestic politics have very nearly come to dominate, in these days, the problems of foreign policy — and I do not know whether I am mistaken or correct in saying so. But I sense that some of Europe's sharper problems have begun to lose something of their edge; for the problem of Trieste is on the verge of reaching a solution satisfactory both to the Allies on the one hand and to

the Yugoslavs on the other, and I do not think the next few days will pass without an announcement that a complete, if temporary, agreement has been reached between them.

There was also the problem of governance in Germany, with Moscow deeply indignant at the survival of a German government headed by Admiral Dönitz — and this problem has now been resolved by abolishing that government and arresting all its members. As for the Polish problem, it has been deferred pending the resumption of negotiations — but will these negotiations resume with the provisional British government Mr. Churchill now forms, or with the government the election will produce? What is clear is that Poland will take no part in the San Francisco Conference; but what is equally clear is that the San Francisco Conference has now become a matter of second or third rank, having lost a very great deal of its earlier weight, so that Poland will lose little by having had no part in it. And who knows — perhaps she will one day come to feel grateful for these harsh circumstances that kept her from taking part in it at all.