

## THE POLITICAL OUTLOOK

'PERHAPS some of our friends may be surprised at a Socialist whom they may be disposed to look upon as a purist having anything to say about politics at all, and indeed it must be admitted from the first that politics of any kind are no very pleasant study, since they chiefly mean a record of the crudest blunders and follies of mankind, so that it is not to be wondered at if many men of good feeling, and who are deeply impressed with the evils of our daily life and would sacrifice much to do away with them, do nevertheless shrink from politics: it is not strange that such people should say, Let us teach people what to aim at, try to educate them, form opinion that is, and then stand by and see what will happen. That's all very well, and I am far from saying that such men are not useful; but after all what will happen? Why when opinion becomes strong enough, that is, becomes the opinion of many people, it must strive to get itself carried out in action: as long as there is discontent with the present state of things there will be hope of altering it. That hope can only be realized by the combined action of those who are moved by it, who as soon as they are so combined with a view to action, and are determined that they will by some means or other get people in general to accept their opinion, must become a political party whatever they may call themselves; and when they have reached this point they are and must be in spite of all disclaimers hostile to all parties who are obstacles to the furtherance of their opinions. As far as their opinions are concerned the world is composed of friends of their party and enemies to it: he who is not with us is against us: they are at war in short. They may carry on the war feebly or stoutly, well-manneredly or

ill-manneredly, implacably or forgivingly, but it is war no less as long as they are a party. Such war, like all wars, is in itself an evil; or at least there go with it such turmoils, miseries, disappointments, such traps for the unwary in morals and honour on all sides, that it is hard to separate its beneficent essence from its evil accidents. Yet for all that those who hold strong opinions and who shrink from it must have some doubts of the value of those opinions or else are overmastered by very natural timidity or love of ease: I don't blame them for that, but I do rather blame them for putting forward their timidity and love of ease as standards for others to follow as they not seldom do: it is weakness not strength in them that they dare not enter into the war necessary for the realization of their hopes. Let them at least stand aside lest they become mere obstacles and enemies of the very opinions which they hold.

'People therefore who hold strong and definite opinions on the relations of men to each other must either belong to some political party or be cowards: I say there are questions of the day that press so strongly on thinking men for solution that they can only be evaded by cowardice: neither can I allow that some of men's dealings can be wholly separated from others so as to escape the sweep of the net political: strong opinions on religion, ethics, economy, science nay even art and literature (as I myself have found) will at last bring us face to face with the question "what is true society?" If we answer that question rightly and accept all the consequences which flow from that answer we are free in mind at least whatever compulsion may do to our bodies, if we answer it wrongly we are slaves: nor less slaves if we evade it, however proud we may be of our superior education, intelligence and refinement.'

'Therefore it seems to me that we Socialists must be political in the sense in which I have been using the word: in point of fact it means the same thing as practical, which is a title however which I should be slow in claiming as the word has been so terribly misused in these days, and so in

political language at least has come to mean pretty much the same thing as cowardly or evasive.

'We of the Socialist League have fully expressed the fact that we consider ourselves political by calling ourselves Revolutionary Socialists: it is quite clear if you come to think of it that since we condemn not only the obvious evils of modern Society, but also the ethics and economy of which they are the result, we must have a practical and political aim in view: we cannot be content to sink into a mere philosophical society enunciating opinions which some people may accept if they will without altering their daily relations with other people: if our opinions are to be accepted they will alter the relations of men altogether, nobody will be able (or willing) to stand out of the society which they will form....

'It is quite necessary for us to face the position and see what we really are, because there are on the one hand so-called Socialists who are not revolutionary or political at all, and on the other some who are political but with whose policy we cannot agree. The first are represented by various experiments in association, for instance communities some of which are founded on absolute conditions of equality as amongst themselves, but do not pretend to meddle with society at large: as for these it seems to me they are destined either to failure and extinction after having played their part of experiments of association more or less valuable; or else if they can live long enough to meet the active revolutionary period they will gradually melt into the general party, and in that case be of much use to it from the habits of association and of the practice of equality which their experiments will engender: in any case except as a token and offset of the general movement they are valueless because of their standing aloof from politics as I have been using the word. Apart from that function of betokening the great change our enemy in the present state of things can afford to disregard them because he does not fear them, since they have renounced the contest.'

'On the other side are those who would be political from a false point of view: they would mix with the political parties of the day whose aim is not the destruction of our slave society, but its continuance, and would ally themselves as opportunity serves with one or the other band of those who are their direct enemies in the hope that those enemies can be cajoled or frightened into doing the Socialist's work and not the Bourgeois's: I shall have some more to say of this view further on, so at present I will only remark that this kind of policy is what is commonly but I think erroneously meant by political Socialism, and I think it is a mistake in tactics altogether. When they have got as far as they can the enemy will still be the enemy and will have to be met directly and in face, and they will have to begin again on the road which the Revolutionary Socialists have been following steadily all the time.

'But though we have nothing to do to mix ourselves up in the parliamentary squabble, and though to many worthy people that degraded and degrading twaddle-shop called Parliament means nothing at all, it would be a mistake not to watch the signs of the times in all directions.'

He then enumerates the types of people who look to Parliament as a means of change, while there are those who watch the change to democracy with apprehension like Frederic Harrison in his New Year's speech:

'Anyhow he is much put out and the other evening he no longer talked about the *coming* triumph of democracy but asserted that it had really taken place; and to him that democracy seemed very much of a tyranny, and to be dreaded accordingly. I must say no wonder, for the Positivists having a righteous dislike to the more commercial aristocracy of the time, have nothing to put in its place except the spectre of righteousness definitely drawn indeed, but quite imaginary, which may be born they hope some thousand years hence.'

'Well, what Mr Harrison, a disinterested man and of real goodwill towards the people, fears in a not unreasonable manner if his blindness could be taken for a standard of fact, if what he fears were all that could come between the present muddle of things and the orderly hierarchy of realized Positivism, what he fears in this way there is many a man fears in other ways, for the most part thinking that life will be rougher and harder for those who now live refined and delicate lives, that they will have to work more when the final triumph of Democracy comes.'

The lecturer picks up the thread again and observes you have 'different kinds of minds all of them looking on parliamentary matters with various degrees of attention, some fearing it, some hoping from it, nay almost worshipping it.'

He goes on to describe them as follows:

'First there is the great body of uninstructed people such of them as are well enough off to have time to think about politics at all, who by hereditary habit have got to expect that "government" can do something for them, and who after all in spite of their improved political position are not conscious yet of the terror which that improvement has carried into the souls of their masters; perhaps because they are quite conscious that they are still needy and have a hard time of it, and that former political improvements have not helped them much. Yet when they get to know what real politics mean their enlightenment may be both sudden and complete.

'Then comes the group of the intellectual aristocracy, pessimists mostly who fear for their position, prematurely perhaps but certainly not without reason if a monopoly of culture and refinement is what they wish to preserve, and I fear few of them have much wider views than that.

'Lastly there is the group (a big one) who have not found out that there is any danger underlying their comfortable position of culture and superfine morality: to these optim-

ists the world is good because they know nothing of it but their own drawing-rooms; as they get enlightened they join the ranks of the timid pessimists, and learn to fear a new foe, the people grown bold enough like Oliver Twist to ask for more.

'What has happened to give these ideas to those groups of hopers, fearers, and self-complacent people? Democracy has developed, as surely every thinking person expected it to do, but it has not developed in the direction it was expected to: I don't think it is misrepresenting the views of advanced politicians of, say, twenty years ago, to say that their hope in democracy was that without levelling all distinctions of rank or talent it would turn the whole of the decent working-class into small bourgeois, leaving outside a fringe of the vicious idle incapable, or in a word the unlucky; of whom I am afraid those advanced ones took no account at all; did not even think of taking the pains to provide a sufficiency of gallows for them.'

He points out that these ideas, these ideals have fallen through: 'the paradise of the little Bourgeoisie is vanishing like the desert mirage, and showing us the hard realities of depression of trade and over production, the tokens of the commercial system nearing the end which unlimited competition and the growing aggregation of capital are preparing for it.'

Then speaking rather hopefully of the better instruction of the working class and the widening of knowledge, he observes: 'Meantime historical intelligence has been growing, and basely as the men of culture do often use their gifts and knowledge, yet the things themselves are good and have opened the door to many a life-giving truth. History which was once little more than a string of doubtful tales of the bloody wars and unaccountable follies of kings and scoundrels in which the necessary slavery of the people was taken for granted, has now been forced to confess the truth,

at least in part, and to show us the ceaseless struggle of the people to be free.'

The lecture contains an interesting passage which shows Morris's thoughts on the forming of the Moderate Party out of the break-up of old traditions, a subject to which he had devoted an article in *Commonweal* the previous year, in which he says: 'True, there is as yet no solid party, but I repeat there is one forming, which I believe will be the strongest which our times have seen, and by whatever name it may be called, it will be the party of reaction grown conscious that firm and serious resistance must be made to the claims of labour for equal rights for all.'

He is talking of the sham of political freedom and the 'new idea that is pushing out the old Bourgeois ideal' and continues:

'The openly seen result of this among our political parties is the break up of old party ties and distinctions, joined to a retention of the old names: the ground is covered by the same troops under the same banners, but the cause of quarrel is different: There is a Tory party still in England which would doubtless be Tory in action if it could be, but that is quite hopeless for it, so it is obliged to clothe itself in Whig principles as the most reactionary vestments which can be worn without tumbling off in hopeless rags: there is a Liberal party also; but it includes the nominal Whigs but little changed from their old estate, and now openly the exponents of that older radical ideal which I spoke of before, the ideal of the sanctity of property and free-contract in a world turned wholly bourgeois except for a race of helots, theoretically incapable and idle people, who it is to be hoped, if the fates are good to us, will become less and less numerous as time goes on—but whom meanwhile we can by no means do without.'

'Besides these logical champions the Liberal party includes, especially among the political working men, the ultra-radicals, who bear with them the germs of the new democratic ideal, very vague as yet, and cumbered by crude

attempts at state Socialism, which are either so insignificant or so impossible to work that they are called *practical*; and there is besides a whole host of betwixt and between people.

'This [is] what has become of the old Conservative and Liberal arrangement of parties. At first sight it seems a very complicated state of things but it is really much simpler than it looks, or at least will result before long in a simple condition of matters political. As far as Parliament and the executive goes, that is to say, as power over the present goes, the real power is the Whig party: a great portion of the Tory party gravitates towards them; almost all the floating mass between the Whigs and Radicals really belongs to them: every Radical who loses faith in democracy or who is scared by the advance of Socialism, or is growing old and cynical is bound to swell their ranks. Nor are they doubtful as to their course of action in trying to realize the Bourgeois ideal. They are prepared to accept any change you please that is merely political, but resist as covertly as possible but also as stiffly, every attempt towards economical freedom: they will not involve the country in war if they can help it, unless the enemy is helpless and his purse worth having; but they must have new markets if it is possible to get them with the help of our present commercial bodyguard: but chiefly and above all it is their business to *spread the middle-class*, to give the more energetic part of the working-classes every opportunity for bettering themselves so long as that can be done at the expense of the working-classes themselves, as they neither will nor dare touch the purses of the rich. On their success in creating a new middle-class out of the present working-class their tenure of power hangs; if they fail there is nothing for it but Revolution. For they themselves have abolished or will abolish all the old aristocratic checks and safeguards of the constitution, they have but one support, the tremendous power of organized capital and its slave: unintelligent cowardly selfishness.

'This great party therefore, the party of Moderation, is

our one real enemy: what are their chances of success? I have just named their supports, in other words they are, commercial success amongst the rich, ignorance and disunion among the workers. But the forces against them are amongst their own camp: their own necessities will overthrow them: capital is their master not their servant: and its very organization, so powerful against revolt while all goes well, will prevent that spreading of the middle-classes which is essential to the life of the Moderate Party, that is to say to the existence of Modern Society. The tendency of all modern production is not towards spreading abroad and dividing, but towards gathering up into bigger and bigger heaps; and the terrible King Competition will sternly forbid any artificial reaction from this tendency. Nor after all can the workers be kept quite ignorant; once more the necessities of the capitalists have forced them to instruct the workers more or less, and instruction breeds education. Furthermore these Moderates have dangerous allies who play into the hands of progress by trying to suppress it openly: I mean the great reactionary party on the continent. You English working-men when you hear the bourgeois as you often will holding forth on the extent to which the revolutionary violence on the continent has hindered the cause of progress, throw the lie back in his teeth. What all that means is the efforts of workers not so corrupted by commercialism as we are to sustain their freedom against direct open monstrous attacks on it. And much as we sympathize with the sufferings of those individuals who have been crushed by this open brutality, most fortunate it is for us and for the world that tyranny has taken that form in countries not so commercial as ours; because it has given the cause an army of men who feel their common interests and aspirations uniting them against tyranny of all kinds, whether the tyrant be dressed in a cuirassier's uniform or a philanthropist's frock-coat. I say that the Moderate Party cannot help allying themselves with the Immoderate Party and so hastening the education of the workers.

'And mind you the lapse of time and the course of events may or probably must force them out of their Moderation. It is their cue at present to give nearly full license to all expression of opinion, which I think we Socialists shall be wise to avail ourselves of while we may. For suppose that opinion to be very widely spread and at the same time to have no Parliamentary outlet, no privileged place to be heard in while it is obviously subversive of the holiness of modern Society, it will be looked upon as immediately dangerous, and will be treated (only more decidedly) all over the British Islands as it has already been treated in Ireland, that is, as a police and prison matter.

'People may say, Well if they do this they will be no longer a Moderate Party. That is true; they will not attempt using the high hand until their failure is obvious. It is the destiny of the Moderate Party to turn into confessed reactionaries, but of course when they do so the Revolution will not be coming, but come.

'To sum up. The old parties who between them held the state in their hands and governed in the exclusive interest of the rich classes are broken up. In their place is a political muddle which is in process of resolving itself into two parties, one sustaining, the other attacking society founded on wage slavery. There will of course in Parliament be an interval during which this will be by no means clear, and Parliament-like poverty will make strange bedfellows. When it becomes clear and the people know at last that the liberty which denies, as a monstrous demand, their right to the full reward of their labour, is a sham, when that happens it will be found that Parliament was not made for the people and that the struggle will be outside it.'

The lecture concludes with an impressive picture:

'Thus I have tried to show you what our enemies are. Changed indeed they are in outward aspect from what the enemies and tyrants of the workers once were, as I have

seen their images many a time, carved by their own slaves; sitting solemnly in their high places, their half-drawn swords laid across their knees, their haughty but eager faces looking into the life of personal energy and contention which were its chief elements. All that is changed now. In no cathedral of the future will the effigies of our present rulers make fair and fitting architectural ornaments: the sword is laid aside and the unseen compulsion of famine has taken its place. The natural mask of hypocrisy cultivated so highly that it does not know itself has supplanted the war-helm; our masters of to-day will not confess the desire of the strong man to enjoy life at anyone's expense; nay they seem almost to have lost all energy, all sense [of] pleasure in their practice of their one necessary virtue, and rule us as if they themselves were dead, their bodies only haunted by the terrible power of capital which has made them and us, which has made the hideous sham peace that is, and the stern reality of the strife which is to be.

'Yet dull as they are, vacant as their lives are, changed as they are in all respects from those lords of the old violent and eager life, their aim is one with theirs: they must live on the labour of others or the reason for their existence is gone. To live like masters is their aim. Nor should our aim be other than mere contradiction to theirs, which embraces the intention of making us live like machines.'

'On their success herein all their political hope is founded; and sometimes in moments of depression one thinks they may succeed; one fears then that the world may become nothing but Bourgeois and machines: yet in moments of depression only: if we are determined to live like men, come what will, we shall foil that monstrous attempt and save the world from that terrible doom—hope always then and work always.'