Britain in the 20th Century: The Great War and its Consequences

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Ladies and gentlemen, in the last lecture, I finished with the British Government desperately trying to resolve the Irish question. They had a conference at Buckingham Palace in July 1914, and then, after one of the sessions of the conference, a note was brought in which said that Austria had sent an ultimatum to Serbia. Churchill wrote: “It was an ultimatum such as had never been penned in modern times. As the reading proceeded, it seemed absolutely impossible that any state in the world could accept it, or that any acceptance, however abject, would satisfy the aggressor.” Then he said: “The parishes of Fermanagh and Tyrone faded back into the mists and squalls of Ireland, and a strange light began to fall upon the map of Europe.”

Now, at the end of the War, Churchill wrote this: “Then came the Great War. Every institution almost in the world was strained. Great empires had been overturned. The whole map of Europe has been changed. The position of countries has been violently altered. The modes of thought of men, the whole outlook on affairs, the grouping of parties, all have encountered violent and tremendous changes in the deluge of the world. But as the deluge subsides and the waters fall short, we see the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone emerging once again. The integrity of their quarrel is one of the few institutions that has been unaltered in the cataclysm that has swept the world.”

In those comments, Churchill was saying two things: first, the War had changed everything; and secondly, it had not changed anything in Ireland, though that is not quite true. The War had changed something in Ireland, namely that the Irish Nationalist Party was more or less wiped out and that Sinn Fein took its place, winning almost all the seats in Republican Ireland. Sinn Fein, unlike the Nationalists, refused to take their seats at Westminster, and they set up their own Parliament, Dail, in Dublin, and declared Irish independence which the British Government refused to recognise. There was a rather futile guerrilla war, many shocking reprisals, but in the end, the Government settled with Sinn Fein, in 1921, and Ireland outside Ulster became, in effect, independent. Thus, it was not quite true that nothing had changed in Ireland; some things had changed.

However, Churchill was quite right to speak of the cataclysm which affected Britain, and affected Britain more than the Second World War, in many ways. In the First World War, one in 10 men under 45 were killed, and the killing was particularly marked amongst those who had volunteered for war in 1914. A later Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan said that when he looked at a photograph of his fellow undergraduates at Balliol College, Oxford, there were only two other scholars in his year who survived. He said that Oxford, at the end of the War, was “a city of ghosts” and the rest of his year had been, as he put it, “sent down by the Kaiser”. 300,000 of those killed were in unknown graves, and three million families lost a family member – a husband or a son or a father – and it is understandable that people called the War “the war to end war”, and the slogan in 1918 was “Never again”.

At the end of the War, there was a fairly violent reaction against Germany. People said that Germany had to pay for the cost of the War in reparations and German war criminals ought to be tried. That mood gradually disappeared, and by the beginning of the 1930s, there came to be a general feeling that perhaps the War had been a mistake caused by accidental and contingent factors, particularly the building up of armaments and great alliances on each side. It was felt that the War had arisen from misunderstandings and could have been avoided. That atmosphere in the 1930s contributed very heavily to the policy of appeasement followed by the British Government towards the dictators Mussolini and Hitler in the 1930s,

but the main emphasis of the appeasement policy stems from the First World War, the idea of "never again", that no sensible, rational person would ever wish to start another war and therefore British Governments should do all they could to remove causes of grievance and try and achieve settlements so that we did not ever have to fight again. Furthermore, it was felt that certainly, Britain should never have a large army such as had been slaughtered in Flanders again, and therefore, even when we began to rearm in the 1930s, the rearmament was concentrated on the Air Force to deter an aggressor and, to some extent, on the Navy, and not on the Army. When, in 1939, the British Government sought an alliance with the Soviet Union to try and secure collective action against Nazi Germany, Stalin asked Britain how many divisions Britain would be able to put into the field against Nazi Germany, and the British Government said four. Stalin said, "Well, the Soviet Union has five hundred divisions, so that makes five hundred and four," and so it is understandable that Stalin did not take the British Government's protestations of collective security very seriously. This stems back from The First World War which had an impact on international affairs that cannot be exaggerated. I will talk primarily about domestic affairs in this lecture and in that field also the War changed everything.

A snapshot of politics in 1914, at the outbreak of war, would reveal a Liberal Government, a Conservative opposition and an Irish party, which was to disappear entirely from Parliament. This was very important because the Irish returned, at every election, between 80 and 86 MPs, and that meant that, unless one party won a very large majority, they would be dependent on the Irish for their majority. A look at history since 1918 and with the assumption that 80-odd Irish MPs were there shows that the character of Governments would have been very different. For example, in 1979, Margaret Thatcher won an overall majority of 43, but she would not have had an overall majority if there had been 80-odd Irish MPs so their presence made an important difference.

There was also a very small Labour Party of 42 MPs, and most of those had won their seats through the aid of the Liberals. They had won in seats where Liberals had withdrawn candidates. Very few won against the other two major parties. In every by-election between 1910 and 1940, in every three-cornered by-election, the Labour candidate came third.

A look at the scene 1922 would show a quite different picture. Firstly, there was a Conservative Government in power, after the overthrow of the Lloyd George coalition, but the opposition was then the Labour Party. The Liberal Party is divided and not a party of government anymore, and indeed was not to be in government in peace-time again except in coalitions – in 1931, a wartime coalition, and of course today, but there has not been a Liberal Prime Minister since 1922, and that was a great change.

That change came about in three stages. There were three coups by which that position was achieved. The first came in 1915, about seven or eight months after the outbreak of war, in May 1915, when the last purely Liberal Government disappeared, and Asquith, the Liberal Prime Minister, formed an all-party coalition government to prosecute the war more effectively. That was the first Government that saw the entry of the Labour Party into Government. Arthur Henderson, the leader of the Labour Party became a Minister in that Government, in the Cabinet. Henderson became leader of the Labour Party after the outbreak of war, because he supported the war, whereas the previous leader of the Labour Party, Ramsay MacDonald, who became Prime Minister between the Wars, was opposed to British entry into the war. MacDonald spoke in Parliament against war in 1914, but was repudiated by the MPs, the National Executive and the trade unions of the Labour Party, so he resigned, and there was a deep split in the Labour Party. People talk a lot about the split in the Liberals, but they forget the Labour Party was split on a very fundamental issue: whether Britain should go to war at all. However, the bulk of the Labour Party, and the trade unions in particular, who were the kind of ballast of the Labour Party, supported the war, and they represented the organised working class in that sense, who, from what we know – there were no opinion polls in those days – were even more determined on war, more patriotic than other social groups.

Anyway, there was an all-party Government in 1915, and the Irish party supported the War, and were offered places in the Government, but declined to take them up.

Then the Asquith Government was displaced, in December 1916, by a new coalition government, led by Lloyd George. However, this was not an all-party Government because the wing of the Liberal Party, led by Asquith, did not support it. It had the support of the Conservatives and of the Labour Party, which Labour continued to be represented in it until 1918, when there was an election. The coalition, minus the Labour Party, that is the Lloyd George Liberals and the Conservatives, stood together as a coalition and won the election, on a landslide, and Labour moved into opposition with the Asquith Liberals.

In 1918, Lloyd George's position seemed impregnable. He was, as it was said colloquially, "the man who won the war", and the leader of the Conservative Party at the time, number two in the coalition, Andrew Bonar Law, said, "Lloyd George can be Prime Minister for life if he likes."

However, in 1922, the coalition was destroyed by a third coup and replaced by a purely Conservative Government, led by Andrew Bonar Law, who, in 1918, had said "Lloyd George can be Prime Minister for life if he likes." When Lloyd George went to resign for the King, George V put in his diary, he said: "He will back, I am sure," but he never held office again. He lived for another 23 years, a Member of Parliament, but was never again in office after 1922. So far from being Prime Minister for life, he was only Prime Minister for another four years.

This coalition was set up to meet a new mood, which it was said the War had engendered. This mood had two components, the first being a positive mood, and the second a negative one. The positive mood, understandably, was that Britain was going to be dealing with a new world after the War and that life was going to be very different. It was felt that the old issues on which the parties had fought, like free trade and protection, disestablishment of the Church of England, Irish Home Rule, were somehow moving into the background, and that there would be new socioeconomic issues which required transcending of the old political lines, and people confronting these issues without the old dogmas, with perhaps a fresh mind.

Again, Winston Churchill summed up this very well, in an election speech in 1918. He was a strong supporter of the coalition – he was a Lloyd George Liberal, not an Asquith Liberal. He said: "Why is it, if men and women of all classes, all parties, are able to work together for five years like a mighty machine to produce destruction, why can they not work together for another five years to produce abundance?"

The Cabinet, in 1920, in the minutes of the Cabinet, the Cabinet conclusions, said: "The only justification for the existence of the present form of government was that attempted to hold the balance evenly and fairly between all classes of the community." It seems to me that this has some relevance and resonance for the present coalition government.

One historian has said, and I think there is some truth in this, that the coalition transformed Britain from being an unreconstructed capitalist society into a more regulated one, and that this is a more important change socially than anything that has occurred in the 20th Century. This shift was more important than that achieved by the Atlee Government, which built on those foundations, that what had begun as an unregulated capitalism became more regulated as a result of the Lloyd George government.

In international affairs too, it was hoped to be in a new world in the post-War era, with the League of Nations, and that instead of national conflicts, there would be international arbitration. One supporter of the coalition government of Lloyd George went so far as to suggest that the coalition was a natural corollary to the League of Nations, and therefore, the coalition, it was argued, would give a vision of social harmony, over and above class conflict which would appeal to ideals and create a kind of middle way in politics.

However, there was also a negative element which rather contradicted the positive, and that negative element, which cannot be overemphasised – it is difficult to imagine today. People were very frightened of the left, of the trade unions and of a general strike. Furthermore, they were frightened by what they called Bolshevism, which they equated, this may seem odd today, with the new Labour Party.

Now, to understand this one has to get back to get to that atmosphere. People had seen a Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917, which frightened many people, and then the spread of revolutions at the end of the War in Central and Eastern Europe. People said there was a great danger that Britain might have communism or something similar here, and therefore she needed a strong government which could deal with that. Of course, there was not as much contact between social classes as there is today, and very few people in government knew much about the trade union movement or the history of the Labour Party, for if they had they would not have been so frightened.

There is a very interesting example of this which comes from February 1920. The Deputy Cabinet Secretary, a man called Tom Jones, kept a diary, which may now be illegal. He recorded a meeting of Lloyd George with his advisors, and the Home Secretary said that he outlined his proposals to raise a special temporary force of 10,000 soldiers for the national emergency – strikes - as the existing police force being inadequate. The food controller said, "There are large groups preparing for Soviet government." The First Lord of the Admiralty said, "The peaceable manpower of the country is without arms. I have not a pistol less than 200 years old." Bonar Law, the Conservative leader, summed up the discussion by saying that all weapons ought to be available for distribution to the friends of the government. The President of the Board of Trade pointed to the universities as full of trained men who would cooperate with clerks and

stockbrokers – different then from today I suppose. The Deputy Cabinet Secretary said that during that discussion Bonar Law "…so often referred to the stockbrokers as a loyal and fighting class, until one felt that potential battalions of stockbrokers were to be found in every town."

Now, Lloyd George was very skilful in diffusing what amounted not to revolutionary feeling but to trade union militancy. A key moment in that diffusing of militancy occurred in 1921 in an episode which has gone down in trade union history as Black Friday. I think Black Friday is more important for the diffusing of militancy than the General Strike of 1926.

Three of the main unions had got together in a grouping called the Triple Alliance, and they said that if any one of them went on strike, the other two would join together in a sympathetic strike. These unions were the miners, the transport workers, and the railwaymen. It is clear that if they all got together in a sympathetic strike, it would have a much greater effect than one of them going on strike. In effect, there would be a general strike and there would be great pressure on the Government.

Now, in 1921, the Lloyd George Government decided to de-control or de-nationalise the mines, which had been nationalised during the War for temporary wartime reasons, and they were going to bring them back to private ownership. Now, 1921 saw the beginning of the post-War slump, and the owners said they would not employ the miners at the same wages that they had had under nationalisation. The miners, not unnaturally, said they would resist that, and the owners said, very well, in that case, when the mines are de-nationalised, we won't admit anyone to work except at a lower rate of wages. The miners said that this they would not accept, and they demanded two things: first, a better wage settlement; and secondly, national wage settlements, because the wages of miners differed in different parts of the country according to the profitability of the mines, so that if you worked in an area where the mines were not especially profitable, the wages were lower than where they were more profitable. All appeared ready for a general strike on that issue.

On the Friday, that is Black Friday, the Secretary of the Miners Union, who was a moderate called Frank Hodges, a name that is blackened in trade union history by the left, addressed a meeting of coalition supporters, MPs, in the House of Commons. He was asked: "If we can get a decent settlement for the wages, which you want, would you be prepared to put the issue of national wage settlement on the backburner for the time being – would you be prepared to leave that aside to be settled later?" Hodges, who had no notice of that question, said, "Yes, I think my Executive would consider that."

This was immediately conveyed to Lloyd George, who acted rapidly, and called Hodges in, and said, "We'll settle with you on the wages if you forget about a national settlement." When Hodges went back to his Executive, he was repudiated by one vote, and the Executive said that they were still going on strike.

Now, the other unions, hearing all this said, asked why they were going on strike if the miners could not make up their mind. It is important to note that going on strike in those days was very different from today because, if someone went on strike, they would not necessarily, or indeed very likely on the railways, be reinstated at their old wages, that given that there was a depression and much unemployment, the railway owners would say "We're only going to take you back, since you have gone on strike, at lower wages," so you were actually taking a great risk, more than you are today, by striking. It was understandable that the other unions decided that if the miners could not make up their mind, they did not think that they should we ask their people to risk themselves for that, and so the other unions, led by the railwaymen's leader, JH Thomas, Jimmy Thomas, who was going to be a minister in Ramsay Macdonald's Government, and was known by the left after this as "Traitor Thomas", said that they were not going to join in this strike at all and the miners would have to go on their own. People said to Thomas, "You've sold us out," and Thomas replied, perhaps unkindly, "I tried to sell you but I couldn't find a buyer!"

The miners then were locked out for some months, in a rather futile struggle, and their wages were duly reduced, and that became a warning in trade union history. It led to the General Strike because the unions said that they would not be betrayed in that way again. However, it diffused trade union militancy at a more serious time of trouble for the Government than 1926.

By this time, the coalition government, understandably, was losing the aura which it had had at the beginning of holding the balance fairly between all classes, being a new start, and all the rest of it. It began to appear as nothing more than an anti-socialist front, a party of the right. However, if that was so, it was wondered why a coalition was needed at all, because surely the Conservative Party would be just as good at representing an anti-socialist. All this time, Conservatives in the country were reacting against coalition, and the revolt which destroyed the Lloyd George coalition came not from the leadership or the MPs but

from the grassroots of the Conservative Party.

Now, Conservative constituency associations were beginning to adopt candidates who were opposed to the continuation of the coalition. They said, “We want a Conservative Government led by a Conservative Prime Minister.” Now, that was not the policy of the Conservative Party at the top which supported a coalition government with a non-Conservative, Lloyd George, as Prime Minister. Lloyd George was called many things in his career, not always complimentary, but never a Conservative.

Now, although these Conservative candidates supported a policy directly opposite to that of the leadership, they could not be repudiated by the leadership because they had been adopted by constituency associations in the perfectly normal constitutional way. They had chosen their candidates, as they are perfectly entitled to do – they were autonomous bodies. By 1922, over 180 Conservatives opposed to the coalition had been chosen as candidates by their constituency associations, and this grassroots revolt ensured the downfall of the coalition because, if the leadership ignored it, it would be the leadership that went and not the grassroots.

In 1921, Bonar Law, the Conservative leader, retired, through ill health, and was succeeded by Austen Chamberlain, the son of Joe Chamberlain, and the half-brother of Neville Chamberlain. Austen Chamberlain, amidst much competition, wins the prize for the most foolish Conservative leader of the 20th Century because he said he was going to face down the rebels and show them who the leader was.

There was going to be a Conservative Party Conference in November 1922, at which the constituency associations would be naturally strong and powerful, and the fear of Chamberlain was that that would mount a demonstration against the coalition, so he thought of a plan to defeat this. He said, “We’re going to call a party meeting,” and a party meeting would be of MPs and not of candidates, “and we’ll tell them bluntly they must either follow our advice or do without us, in which case, they must find their own chief and form a government at once. They would be in a damned fix.” In other words, he took the view that so many leaders in history have taken, that they were indispensable, and that was not the case.

Now, Chamberlain then called a meeting of Conservative MPs at the Carlton Club and if they had voted to continue the coalition, there would have been a split in the Party, as occurred under Sir Robert Peel in 1846, and the Party might have been in opposition for a long time. So the rejection of the coalition was inevitable, and the crucial issue was: could they find a leader who would take up the cause of the constituency associations and the candidates who said we want a Conservative Government with a Conservative Prime Minister?

The cause was taken up by Bonar Law, who came out of retirement to lead the revolt, and by some hitherto unknown, who would be a dominant figure in the inter-War period, Stanley Baldwin. He was a junior Cabinet Minister in the coalition of whom no one took much notice and was seemingly of no great weight.

Now, one of Baldwin’s allies was asked, as they went into the Carlton Club, “What is going to happen at this meeting?” and he replied, “A slice off the top.” What he meant was that the local constituency parties had already decided against the coalition, and therefore, any leaders who did not support their stance would be sliced off the top, repudiated, which was what happened. At the Carlton Club meeting, the coalition was rejected by 187 votes to 87, and every major figure in the Conservative Party organisation – the Chief Whip, the Chairman of the Party – all voted against the continuation of the coalition. It is a very interesting case study, which I hope the present Prime Minister and Leader of Liberal Democrats are studying, that coalitions collapse not from the top but from the bottom, when the followers no longer follow the leader.

Now, interesting, constitutionally, as a result of that collapse, Lloyd George, when he heard of the vote, immediately resigned. He did not wait for any vote in the House of Commons. You may say the party meeting has no constitutional significance. He immediately resigned, and the King, thereupon, called Bonar Law. He could not call Austen Chamberlain because he had been repudiated. However, Bonar Law said, “Look, I am not going to agree to be Prime Minister until I’ve actually got the votes of Conservative MPs who have chosen me as Party leader,” and that did not happen for four days. It was a very interesting constitutional innovation. We were without a Prime Minister for four days, and it was lucky that there was not a terrorist attack perhaps during that period.

Now, Bonar Law survived only for six months. He was already a very sick man, and after six months, he resigned. He was suffering from cancer of the throat and died soon afterwards, and was succeeded by this hitherto unknown person, who had a very rapid rise, Stanley Baldwin.

Baldwin was a remarkable figure, because, until his mid-50s, he was almost completely unknown. He fought as a Conservative candidate at the age of 40 in 1906, but got nowhere in the Liberal landslide and he entered Parliament in 1908 through a by-election, at the age of 42. In his first eight years in Parliament, he spoke five times, and thought of leaving the House of Commons. He was thought of as a candidate for the Speakership, but that was not pursued. At one time, Bonar Law, who was a widower, was looking for someone who would act as a Parliamentary Private Secretary and do a bit of entertaining. He landed on Baldwin, who was very agreeable, and Baldwin became a strong Bonar Law supporter and rose from there. Really, on the whole, he was quite insignificant until the meeting at the Carlton Club, which rather made him. He said, "Well, the Conservative Party mustn't be this strong anti-socialist front as before, and we really should be a more conciliatory sort of Government." He was very much like John Major, in many respects.

As I have said, the immediate post-War years were dominated under the Conservative Government, as much as the coalition Government, by the theme of labour militancy and the seeming challenge from the trade unions and the left.

I have mentioned the threat of a general strike in 1921, but there was an even earlier one, which came to nothing, spearheaded again by the miners, in 1919. At that meeting, Lloyd George summoned the miners' leaders to Number 10, and he said this: "I feel bound to tell that, in our opinion, we are at your mercy. If you carry out your threat and strike, you will defeat us. But if you do so, have you weighed the consequences? The strike will be in defiance of the Government of the country, and by its very success will precipitate a constitutional crisis of the first importance, for if a force arises in a state which is stronger than the state itself, then it must be ready to take on the functions of the state, or withdraw and accept the authority of the state." He said, "Gentlemen, have you considered, and if you have, are you ready?" He got up from the Prime Minister's chair and offered to the miners' leader, who of course did not take it. Lloyd George was making an interesting point, because he said this, the implication was this: that the miners, no doubt, had a claim against the employers, who at that time were the Government. However, the miners were threatening a general strike, of other groups, like transport workers and railwaymen and others. Now, these other groups had no dispute with their employers. What they were doing was disputing against the Government. In other words, what they were doing was going on strike so that the Government should change what it deemed its correct policy, a Government which had been, after all, elected, and what Lloyd George was saying is, if the trade union movement can determine the policy of the Government, against its wishes, then that is, de facto, the Government of the day. In other words, the strike was not against the employers in the transport area or the railway area; it was actually a strike against Government policy, and that was the issue raised in the General Strike. The unions were not just extending collective bargaining, they were moving it beyond a trade dispute into a dispute with the Government, and that was the issue that Lloyd George was raising and which was finally settled by the General Strike.

There is one sense in which Lloyd George was perhaps speaking in a misleading way because, firstly, no Prime Minister was willing to accept defeat from organised labour and the country would not let them do that; but secondly, and perhaps most important of all, anyone who had studied the history of the trade union movement or the Labour Party knew that they were not going to make that kind of challenge that Lloyd George suggested, and that they were not interested in overthrowing the state. That was not their role. The trade unions had a very different function.

Now, it is certainly true that the trade unions were the key element in the Labour Party in the inter-War years. For example, in 1930, the Labour Party's income was £45 million, but of that, £35 million came from the trade unions. The trade unions were dominant on the National Executive, and the trade unions had a block vote at the Party Conference which meant they could outnumber, easily, the constituency party delegates.

This was strongly supported by the Fabian theorist Sidney Webb, who in 1930 said this: "The constituency parties were frequently unrepresentative groups of non-entities, dominated by fanatics and cranks and extremists, and if the block vote of the trade unions were eliminated, it would be impracticable to continue to vest the control of policies in Labour Party conferences." In other words, the unrealistic people in the constituency parties would be kept down-to-earth by the trade unions. That was a much truer picture of the unions than the Lloyd George one of a group of revolutionaries threatening to take over the Government. The trade unions were very slow-moving, defensive, cautious and thoroughly committed to democratic procedures in their actions. They were fighting, in the Twenties, as much a defensive and conservative, with a small "c", battle as a radical battle. In other words, what they were trying to do, as you have seen from the examples I have given, was to try to stop wages falling rather than asking for an increase. Far

from making revolutionary or radical demands, they were making a demand that their position not be worsened, and the trade union negotiators were very conservative in that sense.

Now, they were attacked throughout, oddly, in the light of what Lloyd George had said, by the left wing of the Labour Party, who said that the reactionary leadership of the unions was selling out a radical working class. However, those who were closest to the working class in the 1920s saw them as even more conservative and cautious than their leaders, and they said that the members stood not to the left of the leadership but to the right of the leadership. The leaders declared themselves to be socialists, but not too many members of the unions were actually socialists.

Ernest Bevin, the leader of the largest union, the Transport & General Workers Union, said, "The most conservative man in the world is a British trade unionist when you want to change him." He said, "You can make a great speech on unity, but when you are finished, he will say, "What about the funeral benefits?"." He wrote to a left wing trade union leader in 1928, he said: "It is all very well for people to talk as if the working class of Great Britain are cracking their shins for a fight and a revolution and we are holding them back. Are they? There are not many as fast as we are ourselves."

The Labour Party, if you leave out the unions, had around a million members through most of the inter-War period. The main left wing attack on the Labour Party, from the Communist Party, in 1921, had 10,000 members. At the height of the slump in 1929, its membership had fallen to 3,500 members, so there was not much sign of a great radical movement to the left of the Labour Party. The trade unions, in the '20s, were militant only when their interests were threatened and when they were trying to preserve the status quo. Otherwise, they tended to be very defensive and cautious in their approach.

Although the trade unions and the Labour Party were part of the same labour movement, there was not much love lost between them, because the Labour Party took the view, understandably perhaps, that strikes were damaging their electoral prospects and that frightening middle class people, whose votes they needed, as well as the working class, was preventing the rise of Labour. They felt that the best way to deal with the problems of the working class was not by striking or trade union action, but by getting a majority for the Labour Party in Parliament.

In 1924, Henderson, one of the leaders of the Labour Party, said the epidemic of strikes reminded him of what was happening in Russia against the Kerensky Government, which was damaging to a liberal-minded Government. Ramsay Macdonald called Bevin a swine for going on strike and damaging Labour's electoral chances.

Now, the trade unions themselves thought that the collective weight of the working class in the industrial sector was where the strength of Labour lay - not in the political sector. There were battles, and the big battle came in 1931, when the Labour Cabinet wanted to reduce unemployment benefit, but the unions would not agree, and that led to a great split in the Labour Party.

The split was masked at the end of the War because, for during this brief idealistic period, the Labour Party took the view that the War had actually destroyed the capitalist system and that people could move on fairly quickly into a new socialist system. The Labour Party's programme in 1918, which was called "Labour and the New Social Order", said that: "The individualist system of capitalist production may we hope indeed have received a death blow. With it must go the political system and ideas in which it naturally found expression. We of the Labour Party, whether in opposition or called upon in due time to form an administration will certainly lend no hand to its revival. On the contrary, we shall do our utmost to see that it is buried with the millions it has done to death."

Now, the inter-War years, which were a bleak period for all concerned, were perhaps bleakest of all for the Labour Party, because that diagnosis proved wholly faulty. Instead of the inter-War years seeing a steady march towards socialism, you can see it as a great defeat for the left: the General Strike in 1926, a defeat for the trade union left; the formation of the national government in 1931 with a vast majority, a great defeat for the political left. These were really historic defeats. The General Strike showed that the left could not force the Government to meet the demands of the unions. The national government showed that the Labour Party could not preserve working class living standards – unemployment benefits and so on – in the middle of a slump. In addition, the left was to suffer another blow in foreign policy in the 1930s, because the left's hopes that collective security through the League of Nations could prevent a war was also shown to be futile.

Oddly enough, the Labour Party recovered at the worst time of the War, in 1940, when they were brought into the Government, by their most bitter opponent in the inter-War years, Winston Churchill. He brought

them into power and helped perhaps to create a period of Labour Government after the War, when the age of the Conservatives gave way to the Age of the Labour Party. The left recovered in 1940, and the central theme of the inter-War period is the defeat of the left, partly because the Labour movement and the unions exaggerated their strength and what they could achieve in the years of slump.

Their first doctrine, as I have said, was that they could bring about socialism through industrial action, and it was shown that you could not in 1926, despite the labour militancy. We have already seen that, in 1921, there was a threat of a general strike, which came to nothing, but that threat was renewed in 1925, when, again, the mines had been in private ownership for some time, and the miners again said that they would not accept wage reductions. The owners were saying that they could not keep the mines open at the current rates as they could not make enough profit to stay in business so they would have to lower the wages. The miners refused to support this.

They went to see Baldwin. There is some dispute over what Baldwin said – Baldwin denied that he said it, but I think he did say that "All the workers of this country have got to take a reduction in wages to help put the country back on its feet again." That was a foolish thing to say, because it united the other unions behind the miners, so the miners could say that it was not just their wages that are going to be reduced, but that they were in the forefront of the labour movement, and if their wages were reduced, then everyone's wages would also be reduced, and therefore it was in everyone's interests, even apart from working class solidarity, to join them in a strike.

In 1925, it looked again as if there would be another general strike, because the TUC said that if the miners were locked out because they would not accept lower wages, everyone would go on strike, and then there would be a general strike. The miners went to see the Government again, and they said that the Government had to give a subsidy to the mines so that they could maintain the wages currently paid. Baldwin, the Conservative, said that he would not do that as it was inconsistent to pick up the mines rather than other industries that were also struggling. Baldwin asked the miners what they were going to concede, and the miners said, "Nothing – we've got nothing to concede," and they had the slogan, "Not a minute off the day", in other words, no longer hours, and "Not a penny off the pay", so they were not going to concede anything at all.

Now, at the last moment, the Government gave way on a date, by contrast with Black Friday, happened to be another Friday, which was called Red Friday. That was a victory for the unions. They said they would give a subsidy to the mines of £10 million for nine months – it turned into 23 million, in the end – and they said that they would set up a Royal Commission to consider what should be done about the mines, and that Royal Commission would report before the nine months were up and hopefully that would achieve a settlement.

Now, there has been dispute about why the Government gave way. Some people say they were being very cunning, that they were waiting to fight on better ground, as it were, when public opinion had been properly prepared. I do not myself believe that. I take the view that Baldwin was a genuine conciliator and hoped that a strike averted might be a strike avoided. It is important to remember that, although you had Conservative Governments throughout most of the inter-War period, those Governments could only win power with the support of a minority at least of organised labour, of the trade unions. In other words, for the Conservatives to win an election, they needed about a third of trade unionists to vote for them. It was not in the interests of the Conservative Party to have a general strike and to have organised labour against them, and indeed, after the 1926 General Strike, at the next election, in 1929, the Conservatives were defeated and there was a Labour Government. Thus, it was not in the interests of the Conservatives to put the unions against them, so I do not see it as a tactical move. I think Baldwin genuinely hoped to achieve a settlement.

This proved only a temporary truce. The left-wing union leaders in the miners' union said they had the Government on the run and this showed their power, and that, next time, they could stretch them even further. Cook, the miners' leader, who was on the left, said, "We have already beaten not only the employees but the strongest Government in modern times", whereas the right wing of the Conservative Party did take the view we must fight later on when we are better prepared. I do not think Baldwin took that view. The Home Secretary, Sir William Joynson-Hicks, who was to the right, made a speech saying: "The danger is not over. Sooner or later, this question has got to be fought out by the people of the land. Is England to be governed by Parliament and by the Cabinet, or by a handful of trade union leaders?"

The Royal Commission reported in the spring of 1926, and they said that the trouble with the mines was that there were too many units and some of them were very inefficient, and therefore, wages tended to be dragged down to the level of inefficient mines. They recommended a reorganisation of the mines so they became more efficient, perhaps with some degree of Government planning, if not outright nationalisation, to get rid of the inefficient mines and generally rationalise the industry. They said that was their long-term solution, but they said there was no alternative in the short-term to cutting wages, because the mines were uneconomic, and they said, nevertheless, the miners should be persuaded to accept all this on condition that there would be reorganisation, and that hopefully would raise the wages back again by making the mines more efficient. So, in a way, it had something for both sides, but the trouble was that wages were going to fall whatever happened, whereas reorganisation depended on Government action and on the action of the employers. Reorganisation was one of those magic words which seemed to promise great improvements in efficiency, but there were doubts as to whether they would actually occur. It is like the words governments use to save money, "efficiency savings" – which never seem to actually occur.

Now, at this point, the Trade Union Congress was rather hopeful – they wanted to avoid a strike. They thought they could bring the miners along with the government, if the Prime Minister could deliver the owners along with him to agree to reorganisation of the mines. In this way, they wanted to find some formula to paper over the cracks, so that there was not a general strike, which the trade unions did not, on the whole, want.

Now, the Government said, correctly, in my view, that restructuring would take years, and what was going to happen in the meantime – was that there had to be wage cuts. The Trade Union Congress accepted that there might have to be wage cuts, but argued that they should be dependent on reorganisation. They were searching for a form of words that would get them off the hook of supporting the miners. The miners' position was that there should not be wage cuts, but the TUC said that was unrealistic. They accepted the wage cuts on condition that there would be reorganisation. They told the miners that they would try and pin the Government down to try and get a form of words that gets out of all this. The miners refused to agree to anything of that kind, and insisted that the TUC supported them. The trade unions were saying that this was a bit unrealistic because if the miners were asking them to go on strike and risk their jobs then the miners ought to entrust negotiations to them to find the right formula. They thought it daft for the miners to say that there would be unity on the strike yet to take full control of the negotiating position and thus they should hand over control of the strike to the General Council of the Trade Union Congress. The miners refused to do that and so there was a problem.

Now, the Prime Minister, Baldwin, like the Trade Union Congress, wanted to get out of the strike and try and find a formula. He produced the following form of words. He said: "The Prime Minister has satisfied himself that, if negotiations are continued, it being understood that the notices cease to operate," in other words, that there would not be a lockout, "the representatives of the TUC are confident that a settlement can be reached on the lines of the report within a fortnight." Now, the 'lines of the report' meant a reduction in wages, but it was not spelt out, so the TUC could accept it without actually spelling things out too strongly. However, the Cabinet rejected that. They told Baldwin that they thought he was being taken for a ride by the trade unions. They thought that the TUC would say that they would accept this, but that, in reality, they would not and the strike would go ahead. They thought that the formula needed to be tightened and so it eventually said this: "We will urge the miners to authorise us to enter upon a discussion, with the understanding that they and we accept the report as a basis of settlement, and we approach it with the knowledge that it may involve some reduction in wages." Those words, "reduction in wages", spelt out what the Trade Union Congress did not want to be spelt out, because it would not get them off the hook with the miners.

The TUC, nevertheless, said that they would take it to their members and report back to the Government on the Sunday – these negotiations were carried on over the weekend when the notices were coming out on Monday so the miners would go on strike, so they dispersed into the country. By one of those sad accidents that sometimes occurred, they did not ring back when they promised to ring back, through pure breakdown in communications, and this led the Cabinet to think that they were being taken for a ride, and they said the strike notices for a general strike have already gone out. The unions could reply that these were merely provisional, and after all, the Government had made its preparations, they wanted to make their preparations, and they wanted to get out of the strike.

Then the Cabinet heard news. It must be remembered, through all this time, the Cabinet were very distant from the trade union movement, more distant than Conservatives would be today. They did not understand it very well. Then news came in which really frightened them, because the printers on the Daily Mail had

said they would not set up a headline called “For King and Country” calling on the country to stand firm against a general strike. The Cabinet said that this was an interference with freedom of speech. They were very frightened, and they rang up the King’s Private Secretary to say the Daily Mail will not be printed tomorrow, and the King’s Private Secretary replied, with some insouciance, “We don’t take the Daily Mail here or the Daily Express!”

The union leaders then came back late on the Sunday evening, hoping to continue negotiations, but Baldwin met them and said that he had very serious news. Overt acts have occurred, such as the failure to print the Daily Mail, which indicated that the strike had started and that it was outside the TUC’s control, and that the the government had tried its best “…but, gentlemen, I have to tell you, negotiations are now concluded, and will not be resumed until you unconditionally withdraw all threats or promises of a general strike – good night,” and he went off. The union leaders were totally surprised because they did not know anything about this action by the printers, which was not official, and they then went back to find out what was happening, and then they were going to report back to Baldwin and say that this was all a muddle, but Baldwin had gone to bed. I think what happened was that the Cabinet said to Baldwin, “You’re being taken for a ride here, and it’s about time you stand up the unions.”

The General Council were genuinely astounded when negotiations broke down. No one, in my opinion – some disagree with it – on the General Council wanted a general strike. They wanted to use the threat of a general strike to get the Government to give a fair deal to the miners. Some people in the Cabinet, in my opinion, though not Baldwin, wanted a confrontation and almost welcomed it. The unions call it the National Strike and people on the Union side must not call it the General Strike, they have to call it the National Strike. It was called differently by different people. The unionists said it was a National Strike and this was clearest example of class warfare in the 20th Century. In many countries, it would be thought of as a revolution, but it was fought by those who had built their careers on abandoning the class war which was a great paradox. Baldwin, the leader of the Conservative Party, was a conciliator and right wing union leaders like Ernest Bevin and Citrine, were accused of being class traitors by the left. They were the leaders of the General Strike which was a disaster for the unions.

Five months after the Strike, 200,000 were still on a three-day week and 45,000 were unemployed on the railways, and did not get their jobs back. The trade unions lost a third of their funds. The miners were not helped. The General strike lasted for nine days although the miners’ strike ended in December 1926 after nine months. The unions lost everything they fought for. There were district settlements rather than national settlements, increases in hours, and lower wages which were back to the levels of 1921 so it was a complete defeat.

I shall conclude with a comment made by the Fabian, Beatrice Webb, at the end of the Strike. She said this, very presciently: “For the British trade union movement, I see a day of terrible disillusionment. The failure of the General Strike will be one of the most significant landmarks in the history of the British working class. Future historians will, I think, regard it as the death gasp of that pernicious doctrine of workers’ control of public affairs through the trade unions and by the method of direct action.”

After the Strike ended, she said this: “The Government has gained immense” - and I think this sums up the inter-War years – “The Government has gained immense prestige in the world, and the British labour movement has made itself ridiculous. A strike which opens with a football match between the police and the strikers, and ends in unconditional surrender after nine days, with densely packed reconciliation services, all the chapels and churches of Great Britain attended by the strikers and their families, will make the continental socialists blaspheme. Let me add, the failure of the General Strike shows what a sane people the British are. If only our revolutionaries would realise the hopelessness of their attempt to turn the British workman into a Russian red, and the British businessman and country gentleman into an Italian Fascist. The British are hopelessly good-natured, and full of commonsense, to which the British workman adds pigheadedness, jealousy and stupidity. We are, all of us, just good-natured, stupid folk. The worst of it is, the governing class are as good-natured and stupid as the labour movement.”