4. CURRENT POLITICS AND THE SOCIETY'S DEBATES

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It was the fashion in the past—and the not so distant past at that—to raise for debate questions of current political importance. On looking through case-books of the early decades of this century one finds such matters coming up for discussion perhaps three of four times each year. It was also the fashion to treat those questions with more directness and simplicity than is true today. For some reason, which we shall consider later, serious political debate is at present rather rare in the Spec., at debate time at any rate (perhaps it is even thought to be rather dull), and questions relating to current affairs do not often appear in modern case-books.

The editor of the last volume of the *History* (1905 Edition, p. 23) recorded that "the whole modern political history of the country is reflected in miniature in the Society's minute books". Of the years 1900-39 this has remained true, and it is fascinating to dig into case-book or minute-book and to discover not only how questions were answered but also what questions were asked. Since the Second World War there have been fewer topics of transparent interest, but the absence of political questions tells its own story.

It was at one time the practice on the last night of each session to debate the question: "Is the present government unworthy of the confidence of the country?" These motions of censure were continued regularly during the period under review until 1930, and provide a fairly accurate guide to the political bias of the Society's members during those years. In general the majority has remained solidly conservative, but not, one imagines, so far to the right that its allegiance to the

Tory Party, in or out of office, has been automatic; let the division figures for and against the Government of the day, speak for themselves:

1900	(Conservative, Lord Salisbury)	for 7— 2
1901	(Conservative, Lord Salisbury; "Khaki election" in December 1900 after the end of the Boer War)	for 11— 4
1902	(Conservative, Lord Salisbury)	for 10— 8
1903	(Conservative, A. J. Balfour; Lord Salisbury retired in July 1902. Balfour was made an Honorary Member of the Society in the following session)	against 6— 5
1904	(Conservative, A. J. Balfour)	for 8— 4
1906	(Liberal, Campbell Bannerman; elected in January 1906 with a huge majority)	against 11— 6
1907	(Liberal, Campbell Bannerman)	against 16— 3
1908	(Liberal, Campbell Bannerman)	against 16— 6
1909	(Liberal, Asquith)	against 11— 4
1910	(Liberal, Asquith; returned in January 1910 with much decreased majority after General Election following on the rejection of the 1909 Finance Bill by the House of Lords)	against 9— 3
1911	(Liberal, Asquith; after a second General Election before the passage of the Parliament Bill which was to restrict the House of Lords' powers)	against 9— 4
1912	(Liberal, Asquith)	against 9— 5
1913	(Liberal, Asquith)	against 11— 3
1914	(Liberal, Asquith)	against 12— 6
1920	(Lloyd George Coalition)	for 14— 2
1921	(Lloyd George Coalition)	for 13— 4
1922	(Lloyd George Coalition)	for 8— 7 (President's casting vote)
1923	(Conservative, Bonar Law; elected in November 1922)	for 14—12
1924	(Labour, Ramsay Macdonald; elected in January 1924)	against 17—11

1925	(Conservative, Baldwin; elected in November 1924)	for 18— 5
1926	(Conservative, Baldwin)	for 14— 3
1927	—	
1928	(Conservative, Baldwin)	for 15— 2
1929	—	
1930	(Labour, Ramsay Macdonald; elected in June 1929)	against 10— 5

In short, no left wing Government ever won a vote of confidence from the Society during this period, but the Conservatives lost once (1903) and in 1923 came near to doing so. The 1903 vote came in a period of low political activity, the lull before the storm of Free Trade, and that it was not entirely representative of the Society's leanings is shown by the voting against the Free Traders when the storm broke. The most remarkable voting was in 1924 when, although the vote went against the new Government, the Labour Party, which had at last come to power, clearly won acceptance as a viable political entity for the first time; only three years before the Society had thought, 10—3 the Labour Party incapable of forming a Government. This administration was, of course, really a Lib-Lab coalition, the Labour Party not having won a clear majority; nevertheless, it was a triumph for the socialists, and serious doubts as to their capacity as a party to compete for the right to govern have not been raised since—in the Society or the country. Similar debates have been held only twice since 1930; in 1953 Mr Churchill's Conservative Government was supported by 8—7, and in 1965, on the casting vote of the President, Mr Wilson's Labour Government was disapproved of by 4—3. The striking difference between these later debates is the low voting figures; the earlier regular motions of censure seem wholly to have been well supported.

Generally speaking, the voting figures show that the Society was equally right wing in matters of general politics. In 1900 the question "Should a state system of Old Age Pensions be introduced in this country?" was answered in the negative, 8—3; although in the same year, 8—4, the idea of state-controlled railways did find favour, by 1908 the idea had lost its charm, 10—6. By 1933 the Society was asking itself whether the railway companies were getting a square deal, and by 12—7 thought that they were not. In 1925 the Society decided that agriculture in the United Kingdom should not be subsidised, 11—3, and as late as 1962 the idea that lawyers should be nationalised had still not caught on, 7—2. Nevertheless, in 1907 the Society decided by 5—2 that it did not view the rise of the Labour Party with alarm, and in 1911 still thought that socialism was not a practicable idea, 7—3. In 1920, as we have already noted, it decided, 10—3, that the Labour Party was incapable of forming a Government; yet only three years later the first Labour Government was formed and 11 votes out of 28 were cast in its favour in the end of session debate.

The House of Lords has, on the whole, found support in the Society's Halls. Indeed in 1908, not long before the crisis of the 1909 Finance Bill, and at a time when the predominantly Tory peers were standing out with increasing boldness against the Liberal Government, it received unanimous support (a rare occurrence) when the Society answered the question "Should the House of Lords be abolished?" in the negative. In 1931 the same question was, it is true, answered in the affirmative, 7—5; but in 1952 the Society showed, one imagines, its true colours, if in a slightly patronising tint, by answering the question "Do we love our House of Peers?" in the affirmative 10—5. An equally generous view towards Trade Unionism is detectable. Although by 6—5, a narrow enough majority, the Society thought in 1912 that Trade Unionism had outstepped its proper function, in 1921 it was, by 8—4, against curtailment of the Unions' powers, and by 8—5 in 1924 against declaring strikes illegal. The Society has remained in favour of the preservation of public schools as private bodies, 6—4 in 1903 and 7—4 in 1957. In 1938 it gave the Oxford Group a

unanimous vote of disapproval; one suspects that the M.R.A. movement would still find small support in the Society's Halls.

Up until 1933, since when the colour problem has, strangely, not been formally discussed by the Society, a segregationist view was taken. In 1910 the Society thought, by 7—2, it impossible for white and coloured races to live together on terms of social equality. In 1926, by 5—3, it decided in favour of barring coloured immigration to the Dominions, and in 1933 a large majority, 13—4, was given in favour of the question "Should a colour bar be maintained?" In this as in other matters of public morality the Society shows itself to be conformist, representative of the right of centre thinking of its age. Capital punishment is an old favourite—although every member knows how young Weir in *Weir of Hermiston* failed to find a seconder to the question "Whether capital punishment be consistent with God's will or man's policy?" The very same question was debated in 1964 and was answered in the negative, 15—3, an overwhelming majority in favour of the abolition of hanging; but abolition was already imminent, and passed into law only eighteen months later in November 1965. Previously, in 1909, it had been thought, 9—2, that the death penalty for crime was not immoral. Although in 1912 a vote of 7—5 was given in favour of retention, in 1929 the death penalty was thought justifiable by 12—4. The see-saw of opinion altered after the Second World War, to 9—8 in favour of abolition in 1947. In 1929 birth control was hotly debated and approved of, 19—16, in one of the largest voting figures ever recorded. Sterilisation of the wife was considered in 1938 and, 14—3, thought desirable; this subject, rather offensive to post-war ears, has not been raised again. In 1961 the question whether abortion should be legalised was discussed; again, the matter was finding wide favour in the country, and the Society answered, 9—4, in the affirmative. The enfranchisement of women was rejected in 1907, 8—5; by 1912 it was acceptable, 7—5. But the Society has stood out strongly against the admission of women to its proceedings, 1939, 11—1, and in 1964 refused even to discuss the subject.

Of particular interest are the topical questions. The topicality of some questions is not easily recognisable today, but the significance of several is clear enough. Free Trade was, of course, a burning issue in the early years of this century, and the idea did win support by a narrow vote in 1902, 7—6. But the real crisis came in 1903, and it was the colours of protective tariffs that were hammered to the Tory mast by Chamberlain from May of that year. In September he resigned from the Government in order to campaign for protective tariffs more widely; Churchill had already espoused the Free Traders' cause. By November Chamberlain had captured the backing of the party and the Conservative press. So it was, on 10th November 1903, that the subject set down for debate on that night was replaced and the question put "Should Free Trade be abandoned?" The result was a large majority against Free Trade, 10—3, and the Tory character of the Society is, in this dramatic moment, revealed. By December 1903 Churchill was, to all intents and purposes, a Liberal. In 1923 the Society was again to vote in favour of protective tariffs, but by the narrow majority of 10—9.

International affairs were regularly discussed, with the emergence of the U.S.A. as a participant in European affairs being particularly noted and welcomed. This was, of course, the period of two world wars, and in this context the Society, never pacifist, discussed several interesting questions. In 1900 the Society supported Germany rather than France, 6—5, as did the majority in the country; by March 1913 it still did not think that Germany was a menace to the United Kingdom. By November 1913, however, it recognised that compulsory military service was necessary should the country require to be defended. In the late 'twenties and early 'thirties Bolshevism was always regarded with mild disapproval, and Fascism with mild unconcern; by November 1937 the Society thought that it

preferred the Russian to the German policy, 9—4. In 1936, not so long after the famous Oxford Union Debate on the motion "That this House would not fight for King and Country" (when it decided that it would not) the Society voted 8—5 against conscientious objectors. Appeasement and the Munich Agreement were both regarded with disfavour in 1938-39, 18—3, 10—7. On reflection after each war, the Society thought in 1946, 8—3, that the Second World War had been worth while, while in 1920, significantly enough, it thought that the First had done more harm than good. In 1958 the Society was still all for showing the flag; the question "Should Britain renounce the Nuclear Bomb?" was rejected, 8—2. At that time Britain, the U.S.A., and the U.S.S.R. were the only nuclear powers, and the early C.N.D. campaigns had begun to make themselves felt.

Edinburgh features rather rarely in the case-book. In 1925 the Town Council, it was decided, 7—6, on the President's casting vote, did not have the confidence of the Society. The Edinburgh Festival was greeted in 1948 with overwhelming approval, 21—1; while the passing of the Portobello tram was, if not greeted with approval, at least not received with great regret, 8—7.

In recent years political and current affairs debates have fallen out of fashion; it is more witty and entertaining to talk about something else. Indeed, it could be argued that by and large political differences are so narrow in these days that the Society would find it hard, in some years, to find a suitable question to argue. Furthermore, the increasing rapidity with which event succeeds event decreases the suitability of the Debate—set, by custom, for all but two nights, before the end of the previous session—as a medium for the discussion of current affairs. A *History* is not the place for pious hopes, perhaps, but we allow this one to slip from our pen—that the raising of questions of national importance will not entirely disappear; the mechanism adopted in 1903 could well be used again.

5. AN EVENING AT THE SPECULATIVE SOCIETY

Sir Derrick Dunlop

In retrospect the evenings spent at the Speculative Society over forty years ago seemed to have been entirely enchanting—"about the best thing in Edinburgh" as R.L.S. wrote nearly a hundred years ago; but then memory plays such tricks upon one—usually kindly tricks, for the recollection of pleasure is so indelible and that of pain so mercifully evanescent. Thus, in retrospect all summers appear to have been an unbroken series of gilded days most lovely and most temperate and even the winters of our discontent are mostly remembered as sunshine scintillating on frost or snow. Likewise the activities of one's youth as they are surveyed through the rheumy and cataractous eyes of age appear in a golden light, and as slippered senescence recalls the young comrades who shared these activities they seem to have been more vigorous, amusing, gifted and virtuous than contemporary youth. The same wail that men are not what they were has gone up since the night of time—in the histories of Herodotus, in the writings of the late Roman republic, in the works of Montaigne and in the books of our own day.

It was, therefore, with feelings of some trepidation that I revisited the Speculative recently after an interval of very many years. Would it be a terrible bathos to great expectations? Would the absence of the old familiar faces provoke a maudlin nostalgic sentimentality? Would the essay, the speeches in the debate and the conduct of private business, all of which had seemed so interesting, witty or uproariously funny long ago, appear now to be ludicrously simple, pompously meretricious or pathetically puerile? I remembered that for a few years at