

socialism and
planning

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SOCIALISM

ATTENTION

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1. lack of information

I wish to reply to the arguments of Brian Abel-Smith in his pamphlet *Labour's social plans* and Peter Townsend in *Poverty, Socialism and Labour in power*, and so render an interim account of what the Government has, and has not, achieved, particularly in dealing with the problems of poverty. In doing so I cannot forget that my education in this particular problem was largely carried out by Richard Titmuss, Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend. In 1956 I was made chairman of the working party on social security at Transport House and at once made one of the most useful decisions of my life by inviting the three to become members of it. As a result we worked together very closely for quite a time—and in the course of those years we not only did the detailed research work on which *National superannuation* and *New frontiers of social security* were based : we also evolved what was then a new critical attitude towards the whole Beveridge philosophy. The more we reflected on the social security legislation which resulted from the Beveridge plan, the more we realised how backward looking it was. Everything was conceived in terms of the concentrated areas of mass unemployment and the grey climate of working class poverty which hung over the 1930s. Flat-rate contributions and flat-rate benefits derived from the notion of flat-rate equality—the pessimistic determination to ensure that since poverty was endemic, poverty must at least be fairly shared. ✓

From this critique of Lord Beveridge we moved quite naturally to a critique of another personality whose philosophy has come to dominate his epoch, J. K. Galbraith. In many ways we took *The affluent society* as the basis of our discussions; but we realized that he had made one profoundly serious mistake—to suggest that, as the modern community grows steadily wealthier under technological advances, poverty ceases to be a significant problem. Since then, of course, in America there have been plenty of witnesses to indicate the width and the depth of poverty even in that most affluent society; indeed the President largely won the last election by promulgating his plan for abolishing that poverty. But what we were trying to do was not related to the United States. We were working out a policy for the British Opposition, preparing for a change of government here which then seemed pretty remote, and trying to ensure that if ever that change came a Labour Government would have the policies at hand to deal with this problem. It is, therefore, right and proper that we should discuss in these autumn lectures how the policies we developed in that working party have stood the test of time; how far they have been implemented by the Labour Government, and, in particular, whether it has shown itself equipped to cope with the problems of poverty in affluence.

the indictment

In a sense the reader is the judge and jury here. I represent the defendant while the three professors are the prosecutors presenting their indictment. For there is no

doubt about it, their pamphlets, taken together, form an indictment of Government policy. Though we have only been in office two years and have got four more years to run, they have come to the conclusion that as a Government we have already failed to carry out the policies with which they are specially concerned. Despite the shortness of the time they have written us off and ask you to deliver your verdict upon us.

Let me remind you of the terms of their indictment. Peter Townsend says we have abandoned our long-term strategy, if we ever had one, and he adds that we have also failed in the short term. This is what he says about our short-term programme. "Whether these proposals were indeed sufficiently far-reaching and sufficiently integrated to meet the problem can of course be disputed. They were at least constructive and implied a shift of resources from rich to poor and from private to public sectors. But it must be emphasised that in the event the Labour Government has so far failed to implement some of the most important of these measures and has implemented others in a much milder form than originally intended. Let me be specific. In some instances the situation is clear. Measures like improved family allowances just have not been introduced. Measures like the Land Commission Bill, the Rent Act, the Capital Gains tax, the Corporation tax and the Social Security Act seem to be small in their effects." (p20)

Just a moment's pause here for reflection. I shall have something to say about the Rent Act in a moment. Meanwhile it is not my impression that our opponents—the people whose economic interests are vitally affected—regard these measures as "small in their effects." It seems to me surprising that our friends should feel so sure of themselves in dismissing them already as trivial and ineffective although it will be a couple of years at least before it will be possible to make any detailed assessment of how the first batch of our legislation, condemned by our opponents as a reckless inroad into private capitalism, is actually working.

Although Brian Abel-Smith was just as vehement I find his essay rather more constructive. I find myself in a good deal of sympathy, for example, with the section "Why limit social spending?" in which he points to the dangers of keeping public expenditure rigidly down to 4½ per cent a year at constant prices "while turning a blind eye to tax allowances and private occupational social security, health and welfare benefits." (p13) He gives a tough warning to Ministers against the danger of letting themselves be straight-jacketed by a system of accounting which strictly rations the increase of state pensions while subjecting occupational benefits to no restraint; or (to take another example) which treats the provision by local authorities of rented houses as public expenditure which ought to be severely rationed, whereas the building of houses for sale is treated as the kind of private sector growth which ought to be encouraged. Programming of this style strangles progress. If we

are to plan our social programme sensibly we must first decide how much of our national resources we devote to each part of the programme. A second, and much more difficult stage, comes when, within each part, we try to strike the proper balance between, for example, houses to rent and houses to sell, or between state pensions and private occupational schemes.

I now turn to his central theme which is equally stimulating. Far too few people bothered to read the National Plan before they condemned it. Brian Abel-Smith read it, digested it, discovered things in it that I did not know were there and drew what, for socialists, must at first sight have been disturbing conclusions. Taking the actual figures for 1958-64 and comparing them with the planned figures for 1965-70 he showed that the gap between private spending and social spending was planned to narrow more slowly under the Labour Government than it actually narrowed under the Tories. *The National Plan*, he commented "makes extraordinarily little provision for narrowing the gap between private affluence and public squalor." (p10) Turning his attention to individual services he expressed his disappointment at the targets set for housing, health, education and, in particular, social security where he extracted figures to show that the planned level of living of pensioners would fall behind that of wage-earners in such a way as to deny them the share of national prosperity to which the Labour Party Manifesto attached so much importance. Finally, analysing the global totals, he came to the conclusion that "the plan gave less than £1,000 million to public squalor and nearly £4,500 million to private affluence." (p11)

Professor Abel-Smith very fairly admits that, in drawing such conclusions, much depends on the period of Tory rule taken in comparison with the period of Labour planning. I would add that *The National Plan* was designed not as something fixed and settled and final but as a rolling programme to be reviewed every year. It may well be that the allocation of national resources to the social wage as distinct from personal incomes was too modest and, as the Plan was gradually accomplished, the Nation would have been prepared to see the increase in personal earnings slowed down in exchange for increased social benefits. The Plan, in fact, was not a categorical imperative laid down for five years ahead, it could always be reviewed and corrected. That a socialist government should, in this respect, err on the side of realism is surely a fault in the right direction.

I have quoted enough I think to give a fair impression of the tenor of the collective indictment. As I studied the lectures, what fascinated me (because in addition to being a politician I have also some training as an observer of politicians) was the width of the gap that had grown up between us in a matter of months. We have been less than two and a half years apart and yet we feel worlds apart. They criticise the Labour Government from a position in which they have little contact with

the realities I experience every day. I look at the same problem from a point of view that so shocks them that they can hardly believe it is one their old friend has conscientiously adopted. How often in the old days we used to say that at all costs we must prevent things developing so that socialist intellectuals would be in one compartment and Labour politicians in another. That has happened already if I am to take what they have said here at its face value.

But is it the last word they have to say? I am still convinced it is not. Indeed what I am saying to them this evening is that before they finally come to their conclusions they should hear something of the practical problems the Government is facing in the field of social welfare, of the difficulties we have overcome and hope to overcome, and of the reasons why progress has varied on different parts of the front. When they were advising a party in opposition they had to be content to see the blueprints they first put forward radically modified to meet the objections of practical men of affairs. Perhaps something of the same sort has to occur when it is a question of collaboration between the academic and the Government.

intelligence deficiencies in Whitehall

I am going to start my reply, however, by stating my entire agreement with a large section of Peter Townsend's lecture. Indeed I reckon that in more than half of it he was concentrating his indignation on the scandalous absence of information upon which to base policy. Let me say this to him. I took the same view before I got into Government, and I take it far more strongly since I got there.

How I warmed when I read what he said, "It is a public scandal that the National Food Survey Committee has as yet made no effort to establish the numbers and kinds of families markedly *below* the average. A national food survey has been carried out annually at considerable public expense for many years. Its most important conclusion has been buried in statistical minutiae. Although the conclusion was disinterred recently by curious social scientists and brought into public view (for example, R. Lambert, *Nutrition in Britain*, 1950-60, Occasional Papers on Social Administration, no 6, Codicote, 1964) the Committee has not felt it proper either to present the findings in the most revealing form or to undertake urgent inquiries to develop our knowledge about these large sections of the population who are living at inferior nutritional levels." (p18-19) And then you can feel his exasperation with those of us who were once his allies in Opposition when he observes, "perhaps the Ministers for Social Security, Labour and Agriculture can combine to put pressure on the Committee to answer the simple questions that have been waiting to be answered for at least a decade, how many families have diets which are 10 per cent or 20 per cent or more below the minimum levels recommended by the British Medical Association?" (p19)

Of course he is right to be indignant. But is he right to be indignant with Ministers who have failed to put it right—in two years? I can only say that it is much more infuriating for us inside to be denied the information we require than it is for him outside. After all, for Ministers the absence of the essential facts may mean a tragically wrong decision whereas for him it usually connotes only the absence of a footnote.

Everybody knows the story Nye Bevan used to tell. Political power was his grail. He got himself elected to the Parish Council in order to find it but when he got into the Council Chamber it wasn't there. So he got himself elected first to the Urban District, then to the County and at last to Parliament and he couldn't find it anywhere in the Palace of Westminster. He fought his way into the Cabinet and then into the sanctum of the inner Cabinet—and always it had eluded him. Partly, perhaps, because I spent seven years as an Oxford don, my quest has been not so much for the secret place where power is concealed as for the Committee whose decisions are taken in the light of the available evidence. And all my life the vision has eluded me. Wherever I got myself elected, to the Fellows Meeting at New College, to my Faculty Meeting, to the Oxford City Council, to Parliament and, finally, to the Cabinet, the higher I climbed the more certain I was that on the next storey of the pyramid of power I would find a body of people making their decisions not on hunch and guesswork but on the basis of reliable information. Now I know that in Whitehall at least I was searching, not for a will o' the wisp, but for a pot of gold which is extremely difficult to find—except of course in wartime. In Eisenhower's Headquarters I caught sight of it for a year or two before peace broke out.

improvement areas

Of course the information available in Whitehall is still miserably inadequate! But it is a great deal better than it was two years ago. At least we have begun organising the flow. Let me give one example. In his lecture Peter Townsend bitterly complains because we have not yet launched a campaign to clean up the twilight areas of our cities and help landlords and tenants to improve the older houses which are not yet slums but which will, as things are going, become slums within a decade. He is quite right that the campaign has not yet been launched. First of all we had to fulfil our promises to annul the Tory Rent Act, to establish the Land Commission, to provide the local authorities with a housing subsidy which insulates them against rising interest rates, to help the owner-occupier with option mortgages. Because all these were in the programme the Cabinet naturally gave them a priority which improvement policy in the twilight areas did not enjoy. But one of my first actions as Minister of Housing was to call my Central Advisory Council together and get them to set up a working party which would review the situation

and make urgent recommendations. The working party had a big job but its report was published in November 1966—the same month when Mr. Townsend was castigating the Government for dilatoriness. Apparently our crime was to await the information upon which sound policies can be based instead of adopting the usual British practice of deciding on hunch.

Of course a politician shouldn't always wait until all the evidence is available; if he does he may postpone his decision until history has taken it for him. But in this particular case it did seem reasonable to postpone action until we had collected the information. Partly we got it from the working party I mentioned; partly from the Deelish study of Rochdale. To his eternal credit my predecessor had collected a highly specialised group of sociologists, engineers, architects and administrators to study one twilight area of a Lancashire town, house by house, family by family. For the first time both the actual fabric of the houses and the psychological fabric of family life inside the houses has been studied in detail in order to see exactly what happens in a twilight area, which is so far from being a slum that at the present rate of slum clearance it will still be there in 2010. We all have our hunches about the relative merits of a landlord and an owner-occupier when it comes to house maintenance and house improvement. In the Deelish study we can compare those hunches with a set of facts. I won't pretend that either this study or *Our Older Homes* (Ministry of Housing Central Housing Advisory Committee, Report of the Sub-Committee on Standards of Housing Fitness, 1966) reveal anything very startling. What they do is to enable the Ministry to base its policies on relatively well-established fact.

housing statistics

Let me now turn to two other sectors of the Housing front, the first where the information is still miserably inadequate and the second where it is almost uniquely reliable. In his lecture Brian Abel-Smith was very scornful of the Government's target of 500,000 houses a year. He warns us all, that this is both inadequate in the face of the social need and humiliating when compared with the achievements of New Zealand, Switzerland, Sweden or even Italy and Greece which all devote a much higher percentage of the gross annual product to housing than we plan to achieve in 1970.

Of course it would be nice to wave a wand and be sure that in 12 months' time Britain was spending the 7½ per cent now spent in Israel instead of the 3.9 per cent which the National Plan suggested as a five year goal. But in this country even the very modest switch we planned could only be achieved by drastic Government intervention designed to divert a part of a very small construction industry from its present variety of commercial enterprises into less profitable house building.

Before we could even contemplate the enlarged housing programme we had to take powers to control office building and apply them first in London and then in Birmingham. In addition we had to introduce building controls which enabled the Ministry of Public Building and Works to examine any project costing over £100,000 and decide whether to licence it or not.

But that was only the beginning of the job. During that last frantic election year of 1964 the aim of the Tory Government was to get the maximum number of houses built anywhere at any price. This was targeteering with a vengeance. When we took over we inherited a construction industry dangerously overheated, with soaring prices and soaring costs. We decided that targeteering must stop. With only limited resources available for housing we must build the right houses at the right price in the right places and this required precise accurate information about slums, overcrowding and the other factors in housing needs, very little of which was available. It is surely wrong for a socialist critic of the Government to deal solely in the global totals of houses built, without devoting a paragraph to the crucial balance that has to be struck between council houses to let and private houses for sale. And because he neglected this he failed to observe a second area where new research is desperately needed. Something has been done since 1964 but it is still true that neither the Minister of Housing nor the Chancellor of the Exchequer has a really accurate picture of the private sector of housing with the result that the attempt to predict the figures far ahead is like a sweepstake. Until now every Minister of Housing has been presented with an astonishing contrast between the public sector, which can be planned almost like a military operation, and the private sector, where production is at the mercy of market forces and interest rates. At last a serious study of the private sector is beginning. But until it gets a good deal further, Anthony Greenwood will be unable to base the strategy of his housing drive on the reliable statistical predictions available to the Minister of Housing in Sweden, for example.

Allen and Milner-Holland

Now let me turn to two areas of housing policy and two Acts of Parliament where the policy decisions *were* taken in the light of all the evidence available—the Rate Rebate Act and the Rent Act. In both these cases we were very lucky because excellently manned committees of enquiry had been set up by my predecessor. The Allen Committee had been able to base quite elaborate and detailed calculation on the results of an expensive social survey which revealed the incidence of rates on the various social classes and confirmed in particular the insupportable burden they imposed on families relying on small incomes, particularly old age pensioners. On the basis of this excellent report it was not difficult to work out remedies which we could be sure could be applied precisely where the shoe pinched

hardest. Just as important, when it came to getting the bill through Parliament, the evidence provided by Professor Allen and his colleagues made it difficult for any reasonable person to oppose what we were doing. Professor Townsend's only comment on this measure is to complain that "many of those entitled to benefit under the new rate rebate scheme are not applying." (p21) Well the figures show that for the first half of the financial year about a million ratepayers received rebates averaging £7 12s 6d each. Bearing in mind that our rebates are designed, not for the poorest families who have their rates met in full through the social security system, but for the band just above the National Assistance level, this figure seems to me quite impressive.

His attitude to the Rent Act is equally unenthusiastic. "The Act" he remarks, "has damped down the increase in number of extortionate rents but, by leaving initiative with tenants and creating a system of rent assessment which in some ways is biased against tenants it has so far had a surprisingly small result." (p21) I must say I find this criticism curmudgeonly. Quite apart from providing machinery for revising rents the Act at once restored full security of tenure to nearly one million tenants of private landlords as well as providing for the first time in English history a minimum basic security against harassment and eviction for all occupants including those in lodgings and in tied cottages. I would very much hope that academic social scientists, particularly from the new departments in our new Universities, will do the investigation required to ascertain the effects on landlords as well as on tenants of this tenant's charter. I should like them also to give us a detailed study of the Rent Act's effect on the problem of homelessness, particularly in London. Before these researches have been published it would seem to me hazardous for anyone to claim knowledge that the Act "has so far had a surprisingly small result."

Professor Townsend singles out "the system of rent assessment" for special criticism. But since he believes as much as I do in basing policy on ascertained facts he should at least admit that this part of the Act was carefully based on the findings of the Milner-Holland Committee on London Housing. As soon as I read the first draft of that report I realised it was an object lesson of what intelligent and imaginative research can do for the practical politician. It provided us in the Ministry with all the information we required about the physical state of privately rented houses in London, about the levels of rent, about the conditions of the tenants and the behaviour of the landlords. It seemed to us that every one of the relevant questions had been asked by the Committee and that, thanks to the excellence of its expert staff and the thoroughness of the investigation, the picture they gave us was as complete and as reliable as human effort could make it. Moreover in all our main decisions we were able to use the members of the Committee as advisers and consultants, both in policy formulation—for example the definition of a fair

rent—and in deciding on the quite novel division of responsibility between rent assessment committees and rent offices.

If there are faults in the Rent Act they are certainly not due either to lack of reliable information or to a failure to consult the best outside experts. Indeed it was on the basis of their social survey that we based all planning, on what seemed at the time the extremely hazardous assumption that even in London the vast majority of people living in privately rented houses were relatively contented and wouldn't demand a revision of their rent even if we established a tribunal and encouraged them to go to it. When our Civil Servants saw the figures in the survey (88 per cent relatively content, 12 per cent with a sense of injustice) some of them thought it would be reckless to gamble on the conclusions of the social scientists. We took the gamble with our eyes open, knowing our machinery for rent fixing would become completely clogged and unusable if we were wrong and any large proportion of the tenants tried to use it.

And one thing more. The Milner-Holland Committee throughout its report conscientiously attempted to destroy the over-simplified picture of innocent tenants trodden down by extortionate landlords. What they had discovered in London led them to the conclusion, not only that most tenants were living without a sense of grave injustice, but that good landlords who wanted to do repairs and improvements were paralysed by a tax system which denied them the concessions enjoyed by other forms of business. Any system of fair rents, the Committee concluded, would have to be fair to the landlord as well as to the tenant.

In addition to the reasons of common justice for this conclusion there was the glaring fact that vast twilight areas in our conurbations are rapidly and unnecessarily degenerating into slums because under present conditions the small landlord often cannot carry out the necessary maintenance and improvements. A good Rent Act must not provide a further obstacle in the way of overcoming this problem but help to solve it. In so far as the Act did this it is because it was based on the best available evidence.

central intelligence

I have one thing more to say about economic and social intelligence. If lack of it has for years been one of the major deficiencies of Whitehall, it is particularly damaging to a socialist government trying for the first time to introduce full-scale economic planning. Many of the mistakes we have made were due to our being compelled to plan without a sufficient basis of information, and if we are frank we must admit that however hard we work it will be some years before we get over this drawback.

We have, of course, begun to reorganise the work of the Central Statistical Department. When we came into power some eight years had elapsed since Mr. Macmillan's famous speech complaining about having to catch trains by last year's Bradshaw. It was in 1962 that the Tories repented about planning and NEDC was established. In these circumstances, one might have expected that the Government would find a duly strengthened Central Statistical Office tackling the basic problems, difficult as they are, of finding out something about current trends and changes and also about the structure of industry and social conditions. Both are needed to establish a sound tactical and strategical approach to our economic and social ills.

What we in fact found was profoundly disturbing. The most up to date information on inter-industry relationships (input-output tables) related to 1954. Little had been done by way of computerisation to speed up the processing of data collected more recently—for example the 1963 Census of Production. Even now we remain in the dark about even such elementary things as population movements, although the 1961 Census of Population is by now very out of date—even though it has not yet all been published. Balance of payments statistics, crucial for formulating economic policy, were subject to vast amendments years after the time to which they related. The figures of the 1951 crisis, for instance, were completely changed in character by amendments. The national income—a basic figure if ever there was one—is calculated in three different ways which yield three different results. Sometimes these differences are greater than the size of the change one is interested in. Another example is that we did not even have figures for the weekly movement of balances in and out of London, and thus could never catch up with one of the most important problems, that of the capital balance. Employment statistics were months behind and extremely unreliable. So were statistics on earnings.

We have begun to tackle all this. The number of high posts in our statistical services has been substantially increased. We have shifted the Social Survey into a central department so as to be able to make full use of it. A new head of the Central Statistical Office has been appointed. Though it takes years to improve census reports we are urgently strengthening the personnel and we are on the way to getting more speedy and accurate facts.

What about departmental as distinct from central research? In the Ministry of Housing I found a great deal of research going on, some of it by mixed teams of sociologists, architects, administrators and planners. The personnel was excellent but the more I saw of their work the more dubious I became about Ministries running anything but short term investigations. For one thing, when it comes to drafting a report the conclusions are nearly always emasculated by the time it gets anywhere near the Minister. But it was not only the conclusions that suffered under the pro-

cess of editing and re-editing which took place as the document climbed up the hierarchy. The report itself was bound to lose the provocative cutting edge of the first draft. As it ascended the ranks of seniority, each Civil Servant decided that on balance it was safer to leave out this troublesome passage, that graphic phrase. I am inclined to believe that while Whitehall certainly needs greatly improved methods of collecting and ordering information, most medium term inquiries are best produced by Universities and outside research institutions working for Ministries under research contracts. In long term research I am sure this is the relationship we should normally encourage.

That is why, in the Ministry of Housing, we managed, with the help of the Ford Foundation, to get somewhere in the region of about £1 million for the establishment of a new Institute of Environmental Studies. This body, though it will have representatives of Whitehall on its board, will be completely independent. Its task will be to have an oversight of the research that is going on, particularly in British Universities; to be aware of the research requirements of the Ministries concerned with the built environment and so to feed out, particularly to our new social science departments in the new Universities, research contracts. These will relate not to the short term problems of the Government (these are best covered by Governmental institutions) but to medium and long term problems. The Institute, I am glad to say, is established and its trustees are on the point of appointing its first Director. It should form a model for a number of similar institutions providing the right nexus between Government intelligence requirements and the world of research.

Of course, it will take time before the changes I have described yield concrete results. What I can claim is that more has been done since 1964 to cope with the shortage of information of which Professor Townsend complains than was achieved in the whole period of Conservative rule.

2. problems of change

I now turn to the second problem which a Labour Government faces. How to employ the Civil Service and the Government machine as instruments of social change. This, of course, is a hoary topic of debate in socialist circles. During the long years of opposition we saw it from outside government. Now we are looking at it from inside, and I think we can see rather more clearly the problems involved in using Whitehall as an instrument of social change.

Some of the difficulties we foresaw are very much smaller than I at least anticipated. Take for instance the fear that many socialists still feel that the Civil Service will resist socialist legislation. Broadly speaking I would say that it is quite untrue to believe that Whitehall, if you are firmly committed to anything, would try to stop you doing it. It is my experience that if they know you are determined to do any simple, easily understood, specific measure—they will do it for you with knobs on. Civil Servants are careful people. They have re-insurance policies, they study the Opposition as carefully as they study the Government and that is why they are always ready for you when you cease to be Opposition and become Government. My Ministry had been at work for months on a contingency plan for carrying out the section of our manifesto relating to housing.

So what most socialists still imagine will be the main problem facing the Labour Government simply is not a problem. Of course your Civil Servants will argue about the exact way of putting your plans into practice. That is their job and any politician should be grateful. But as for the idea that Whitehall is afraid of the jolt caused by a change of Government and is against the prospect of new men with new ideas. I can only give my impression that Civil Servants not only acquiesce in the inevitable—some of them are glad at the prospect of a political shakeup and quite often complain that the new man does not have enough new ideas.

So in the areas of what you might call legislative change the limiting factor is certainly not any resistance by the Civil Service. A far more important limiting factor is the chronic shortage of Parliamentary draftsmen. This is certainly the worst bottleneck we experienced in 1964 and it still remains far the most powerful brake on legislative reform. The Parliamentary draftsman is the rarest and most valuable species of human being in Whitehall. It takes many years to mature them and each is a unique virtuoso and a law unto himself. The men responsible for drafting the Bills can be counted on the fingers of both hands. And it is this chronic, desperate shortage of draftsmen which is the biggest obstacle delaying a Government intent on legislating social change. That so little attention is paid to this fact, in books written about the Constitution and the working of politics shows how remote the academic student of politics often is from the life of Whitehall.

So far I have talked exclusively about legislation—the area where change is easiest

for a reforming Government. If reform were merely a matter of passing laws and issuing Orders in Council then a socialist government would find most of the obstacles in its way not in Whitehall but across the road in the Palace of Westminster. But, of course, legislation is only a part, and in modern life the less important part, of Reform. Whether we look at the problems of change from the point of view of the Cabinet, as a corporate unity, or of the individual departmental minister, it is obvious that the extent of change and the rate of change depend far more on administration than on legislation and it is in this field—the management of departments, the control of the nationalised industries, the supervision of local government—that the fate of any reforming government, and of each individual reforming minister, is decided.

When you have studied Whitehall and written and talked about it for years it is fascinating suddenly to be inside. I would like to mention four of the sharpest impressions made upon me in those first months.

circulation of the elites, stratification and hierarchy

Before the election I wondered whether Dr. Balogh in his contribution to *The Establishment* had not exaggerated the importance of the Lloyd George minute in 1918. Now I am quite sure he did not. That minute under which the head of the Treasury became the head of the Civil Service, and all appointments of Permanent Secretaries and Deputy Secretaries were transferred to him and the Prime Minister, really did begin the administrative revolution in Whitehall. Under the old rule Permanent Secretaries were normally bred in their own departments. Since they were specialists the difference at least at the top between the administrator and the professional was far less marked. The Lloyd George minute not only centralised power and patronage thus beginning the development towards Prime Ministerial Government; it also produced a new kind of Permanent Secretary—a professional administrator ready to cope with any department at a moment's notice and nearly always wearing that demeanour which connotes a period of service in the Treasury. The one expertise which these new Permanent Secretaries all share is skill in operating the Whitehall system and handling politicians. It is for the historian and the social scientist to study this change and to tell us whether the circulation of elites which produces this new breed of mandarins has improved the flexibility and efficiency of Whitehall. For the incoming politician there are advantages in having their peculiar expertise available. But this is offset by the difficulty he finds in avoiding being altogether cut off by the administrative embrace from specialists and professionals who know and care about the causes he has at heart.

I entered Whitehall with a strong prejudice against both these phenomena. That prejudice has not been eased. I never thought much of Plato's idea of a three

class state divided into *Guardians* at the top, making all the wise decisions. *Auxiliaries* in the middle, administering the decisions, and *Craftsmen* at the bottom, doing all the donkey work. If I dislike that system even as an idea laid up in the heaven of Platonic dialogue, I like it no more when I find it enmeshed in the mundane realities of Whitehall. You do not get the best out of human beings by any kind of administrative apartheid. As for the hierarchy of responsibility within each department, I am only going to say that it puts severe limitations on an active minister wanting to move forward along the whole of the front that he controls. The extreme centralisation of the hierarchy is, of course, a direct result of the theory (or is it a myth?) of ministerial responsibility. In order to keep the monarchy constitutionally responsible for everything, we arranged that it could do no wrong—and thereby made it impotent to do anything at all. Under our present system in Whitehall there is a danger of ministers going the way of monarchs. Indeed we already have a fantastic degree of bureaucratic centralisation without the compensating advantage of an effective ministerial responsibility to Parliament.

Certainly centralisation has its very considerable practicable disadvantages. As Minister of Housing for example I felt I had to answer the very large number of letters sent to me personally which enter the Ministry each day. I was told that this was not the normal practice and when I insisted I was warned that it would impose an unbearable burden on me since every letter I signed constituted a decision for which the Department as a whole was responsible. After many months a compromise was achieved which the Department found tolerable. It was only some time later that I discovered the reasons for its tenacious resistance to what seemed a commonsensical ministerial request. If most of the correspondence directed to the Minister is taken over by the Department the answers can be dealt with by an Executive Officer. But if the Minister insists on dealing with it himself then the draft, which starts at the bottom, must pass right up the hierarchy with officer after officer doing his best to improve it. And that means a lot more work not only for the Minister but for everyone else. I very soon discovered that if a minister tries to do more than a certain amount the whole hierarchical structure is in danger of breaking down. As at present constituted Departments can only tolerate a limited amount of simultaneous change. I very much hope that the Fulton Committee (which has undertaken the most important survey into the Civil Service since Stafford Northcote in 1866) will look into these twin issues of stratification and hierarchy very carefully and ask whether either of them is essential to the organisation of a modern Department of State.

the platonic idea in Whitehall

The third factor I want to mention derives from the previous two. Most of us, I suppose, know in private life the feeling that a letter which has been unanswered

for two days may as well stay unanswered for two weeks, and once it has been unanswered that long it can surely stay there for ever. Because Whitehall is a closed system which combines the highest standard of integrity with a passion for procedures (as distinct from the results that derive from them) it is always bound to be in danger of succumbing to this kind of timelessness. I soon found it very difficult to eradicate from my mind the impression that everything in my red box would remain outside time until I had signed the document and my private secretary had then put the date on it and let it back into the world. In this closed society of dedicated administrators, problems very soon become detached from the real world where they originated. What was once a desperately urgent problem is snatched out of tempestuous reality into the calm of Whitehall and stays floating there until, in due course, it is picked up, dealt with and re-enters time again. This kind of timelessness makes it difficult sometimes to get the pace of action in government departments required in an age of rapid social change.

new ministries for old

During our years of opposition we spent a great deal of time and trouble discussing Government structure and deciding how the departments could best be re-organised in order to serve the interests of *The National Plan*. Our main decision was to create a brand new Ministry of Planning and so the Prime Minister announced the formation of the DEA. When you introduce major changes of this kind into a Civil Service as hierarchical as ours they cause a gigantic disturbance. Indeed one of the lessons of our first Parliament was that in view of the short-term damage you do by any change of Government structure you must be very sure of the long-term returns before you start it. I am one of those who is completely convinced that we had to set the DEA alongside the Treasury. How else could we hope to achieve either a National Prices and Incomes Policy or a National Plan. Of course the creation of the DEA caused acute tensions because it shattered old prejudices and upset the old balance of prestige. But if you are going to introduce effective overall planning you are going to cause problems anyway; and the Department you specially create for this purpose will be detested and distrusted if officials feel that it deprives them of power. In Britain two years is a very short time in which to get a brand new central Ministry working well.

Another example of these difficulties is the Ministry of Technology. I was sitting beside Harold Wilson when he made his announcement about the future of the Ministry of Aviation. Suddenly I remembered my first speech as shadow Minister of Science. We had all got together in the Bloomsbury Hotel and after lengthy arguments with our scientific and technological advisers we had agreed that under the next Labour Government the Ministry of Aviation must be split up; the defence aspects should go to the Ministry of Defence and the production side to the new

Ministry of Technology we were determined to create. Well it has taken two years hard fighting in Whitehall to achieve the formal announcement of the change we had so gaily decided on. Even now the main job is still to be done.

Professor Abel-Smith is sure we ought to have done all this much faster. All I can say is that if it has taken time at least we haven't been deflected by all the obstacles from the vision we had in those far-away days of opposition. If we had more difficulties with the Ministry of Land and Natural Resources, at least it launched the two important pieces of legislation consigned to it—and that would have been impossible without a special ministry. Reforming Government structure is a tough assignment. If you do it directly you arrive in Whitehall, fresh from opposition, you may well find efficiency has been decreased by some of your efforts to improve it. But if you wait and test your ideas in Whitehall the prevailing inertia will soon dampen your initial impetus into a spent force. That is why it was right to make these changes early.

reform of parliament and local government

I have spoken so far as if, in shaping the instruments of social change, our only difficulties were in Whitehall. But we had difficulties elsewhere. In the House of Commons for example. Since Parliament is hardly an ideal instrument of social change we had to work at a strategy of parliamentary reform. In the first Parliament we didn't get very far. Even now, with a splendid new intake of young Members (they started at least, enthusiastic for reform) we are not getting very far very fast. However we have now opened a first modest package of parliamentary reform, including the first two Specialist Committees one on agriculture and the other on science and technology and a trial run of morning sittings.

Some socialists are still deeply convinced that the kind of Parliamentary reform we require consists of strengthening the executive and weakening the legislature still further. I believe they are wrong and that it will stimulate the executive and improve its quality if we remove some of the myths which at present conceal the weakness of Parliament and the power of Whitehall in order to equip the former with strengthened powers of investigation. But I also feel that if the Parliament's authority should be revived, the executive's ability to obtain essential legislation speedily also needs strengthening. I am frankly sceptical whether the present method of examining Bills in Standing Committees achieves results justified by the days and sometimes nights of word-spinning often involved. I wonder whether the Finance Bill, which stifles each summer session into protracted boredom, should not be dealt with in Committee and not on the floor of the House. But I am also profoundly aware that a really comprehensive reform of Parliament (including the House of Lords as well as the House of Commons, and knitting the two to-

gether) will take time. We shall be lucky if by the end of this Parliament the job is three-quarters done.

And then there is local government where the need for a complete overhaul, a re-constitution in fact, in newer and bigger units, is now virtually uncontested. Three years ago it was commonly said that one thing no Cabinet could dare to commit itself to was local government reform. Today those who care most about local government, officials and elected representatives, are keenest in recommending drastic policies to the Royal Commission. I think we can claim some credit for the creation of this atmosphere. But again the reform will take time. Even if things go well we can hardly expect the Bill to be presented before the first year of the next Parliament; and after it is on the Statute Book there will probably be at least two years before the appointed day. So the modern dynamic local government we all desire is maybe five years off and meanwhile in carrying through our social reforms we must make do with the jostling chaos of county and county boroughs, the medley of efficiency and inefficiency which was accepted as inevitable and unalterable until this Labour Government was elected.

So my first reply to the central criticism contained in the first three lectures is to say that two years is too short a period in which to judge a Socialist Government's record of social reform. After thirteen years of opposition we were bound to find our programme held up by quite a number of formidable obstacles. These obstacles do not include resistance by the Civil Service to legislative change. Quite the contrary! What they do include is:

1. the need to make good deficiencies in the collection, assessment and dissemination of intelligence throughout Whitehall.
2. the need to reform the structure of Whitehall even at the cost of short term delay.
3. the need to adapt anachronistic Parliamentary procedures to the pace of modern social change.
4. unavoidable reliance in all the main services on a structure of local government almost unchanged since the horse and buggy age.
5. the necessity, while reshaping all these basic institutions of democratic life, to deal with immediate economic and social problems even though this means using the old blunt instruments we inherited from our predecessors.

3. which socialist priorities?

In the first part of this essay I described some of the problems which faced us when we took over in October 1964 after nearly 13 years of opposition. Committed to an ambitious programme we were bound to spend much of our energies on legislation and administrative reorganisation of which the benefits could not be felt for some years. But while we were fashioning the new instruments of social change we also had to grapple with the emergency we inherited as well as introducing a whole series of short term rescue operations which were bound to embarrass or retard our long term reforms.

These short term measures have received some rough handling in the previous lectures. In dealing with these criticisms I must start by making explicit a basic disagreement about socialist strategy. "The Government . . . has allowed itself to be diverted from giving priority to poverty into giving priority to redeployment." (p24) Peter Townsend remarks and Brian Abel-Smith elaborates the same theme. "While it is undoubtedly true that correcting the balance of payments is an essential aim and failure to do so could lead to mass unemployment, it is by no means certain that social justice welfare and better social capital depend upon rapid growth of the economy. The ugly gap between private affluence and public squalor could be corrected without economic growth." (p10)

Let it be quite clear what our critics are saying. They censure the Labour Government for giving first priority to industrial growth and relating its plans for expanding the social services to the planned expansion of the national wealth. If I understand it aright, their contention is that though it is obviously convenient to have a growth rate sufficient to ensure that social services can be improved without increased taxation it is not essential, since a Socialist must regard social security mainly as a means of economic re-distribution. Not only must we strive to alter the balance between the public and the private sector to the advantage of the public but we must also use pension schemes and family allowances, for example, in order to redistribute income between the social classes. If this is not given a high priority in socialist planning, they argue, the gap between private affluence and public squalor may actually widen during a period of successful expansion.

Of course the danger they point to is a real one especially in prosperous democratic societies where poverty is frequently concentrated in the poorly organised and electorally less significant sectors of the population. Of course, it is also true that a socialist government must constantly strive to achieve a fairer distribution of the national wealth. Nevertheless it seems to me that the strategy recommended in the earlier lectures is both unrealistic and completely inconsistent with the Labour Government's Election Manifesto. If there was one theme central to that Manifesto it was the contention that higher living standards and improved social services could only be achieved by obtaining a steady and continuous expansion

of the national income. So, well before we took office, the Labour Party was committed to giving planned expansion top priority, and relating the speed with which we introduced our social reforms to the rate of growth we achieved.

It seems to me rather absurd to attack the Government because it has not abandoned the central theme of its election programme. Indeed it would be more reasonable to attack us for departing from our strategy and accepting the critics' view that poverty must be dealt with whether the economy is expanding or not. One of the first acts of the Government in November 1964 was to finance a large increase in old age pensions and abolition of the prescription charges out of increased taxation. In terms of the defence of the pound and economic expansion these concessions to the old and the sick were dangerously large. We made them because we agreed with Abel-Smith and Townsend that our first big attack on poverty could not be postponed however strong the economic reasons.

Nor was this a single isolated action. First in July 1965 and then again in 1966 the Cabinet decided that the restrictions and cuts required to overcome our economic difficulties should not be permitted to affect our priority social programmes. It is interesting to see how this decision was treated by our critics. Brian Abel-Smith says that he appreciates that "social expenditure has on the whole been kept as planned, with the result that the cut is falling on private investment and private consumption. But it is hardly satisfactory to define as a socialist someone who preserves the social services when times are hard." (p11) Well, well! I should have thought it was the mark of a socialist to make sure that the sacrifices required in an economic crisis do not fall on the weakest sections of the community and do not affect the Government's social priorities. In fact what distinguishes our discriminating socialist deflation from Tory stop-go is firstly that the squeeze was accompanied by an overall freeze affecting prices as well as incomes, and secondly that our squeeze was selective sparing all our priority social programmes whereas theirs was across the board. Fair shares in adversity is as relevant a definition of socialism as fair shares in affluence.

overcoming the crisis

In the last paragraph of his essay Brian Abel-Smith remarks quietly "It is true that the present economic crisis has been ignored in this discussion. But with luck the crisis should be over in a few months." (p20) That he can write in this way illustrates clearly enough that gap I mentioned between the socialist academic and the practical politician. Throughout our first two years the balance of payments crisis—sometimes in the background, sometimes in the foreground—was with the Government day in, day out and its solution accepted as priority number one. I am not going to waste time arguing who was to blame for this crisis; but since Professor

Abel-Smith has compared the proposed rate of spending under the National Plan with the actual rate of spending in the last period of Tory rule I must call attention to one relevant aspect of the crisis. We not only inherited the external consequences of an election spending spree of quite inordinate proportions. Even more serious we took over Departments geared to a Conservative four years spending programme to which the country had been committed without any proper consideration of the relation between public sector growth and private sector growth. Local authorities were encouraged to work out ambitious expansion plans—more roads, more houses, more hospitals, more schools—combined with fantastic projects of central redevelopment. The Army, the Navy and the Air Force, not to mention the aircraft industry, were equally firmly committed to fantastic plans of expansion, worked out apparently without any consideration of the amount of the national income that would be absorbed year by year. One of the first and most painful tasks of the Government was to bring these gigantic plans of public expenditure under control, to assess their relative priorities and to relate them rationally to the national income. It was not an easy task—especially for a Labour Government. In order to give a fair judgement one must surely measure our economy measures against the background of the chronic balance of payments crisis we have had to overcome and the Tory electoral spending jamboree which was its cause.

the role of the prices and incomes policy

In overcoming it we have been forced to experiment in quite novel socialist measures—in particular the prices and incomes policy. I needn't dilate at length on what happened. The attempt to work a voluntary policy on which we embarked was obviously not succeeding last summer and we were forced into the temporary expedient of an absolute standstill. Without doubt the most important task we face in the coming year is to do our utmost to work out a method which will, if possible, be acceptable to both sides of industry for keeping increases in income in line with the increase in real national output.

But what, you may ask, has the prices and incomes policy got to do with the war against poverty with which our three critics are almost exclusively concerned? My answer to this question is that Prices and Incomes Policy is not merely an essential tool of socialist economic planning; it also has a vital role to play in the battle against poverty. Though the Tories announced their belief in a policy of this kind and, indeed, made some efforts to introduce one, they were completely unsuccessful because they failed to realise that it cannot be considered solely in terms of economic criteria. The social programme of the Government, as expressed particularly in its budgets, forms an essential background to any prices and incomes policy. If it disregards social justice and redistributive justice it will not carry the trade union movement. And the converse of this is true. Our war against poverty cannot

be waged in isolation from the rest of our economic policy. Indeed it must be regarded as a carefully balanced part of the total overall plan (including the prices and incomes element) which we present to the nation. It is because the three preceding essays completely overlook this connection that they seem so curiously remote from everyday reality.

waging the war against poverty

Let me now turn to what is really the hub of the critics' argument. Have we done enough since we took over to improve the living standards of the poorest section of the community? As socialists, of course, we realised that the inequalities in income and wealth which we found when we took over two years ago, are far too wide. True, the overall extent of poverty has been enormously reduced by economic expansion since the war, but the intensity of poverty in the midst of affluence has probably actually increased. We cannot rely on economic forces to reduce the gap. We have to take deliberate action. It won't happen by itself. Indeed the present degree of inequality is the direct result of market forces being left to determine wages, salaries and profits throughout the whole period since the Tories took over in 1951 and "set the country free from socialist controls."

What kind of decisions are these which have to be taken? Partly they are governmental decisions about the distribution of the tax burden. But there are limits to the amount of redistribution which can be achieved over the short-term by taxation. It is right, therefore, that the prices and incomes policy should be developed so that it plays a part in achieving our goal. This involves working for the reduction of prices which yield excessive profits. It also requires that better paid workers should be willing to let the lowest paid workers get a better share in rising productivity, even if this narrows the differential. As we have seen, an effective prices and incomes policy ultimately depends on the self-discipline of both sides of industry. In fact we can neither contain inflation without stop-go nor yet wage the war against poverty in affluence, without a social and moral revolution in our attitudes to collective bargaining and a free market.

That is yet another reason for dismissing as unrealistic the Townsend, Abel-Smith assertion that "the gap between private affluence and public squalor could be corrected without economic growth." In war time it is just possible to persuade democratic communities to accept the fair shares of a rationed siege economy and even to welcome the drastic restrictions and heavy sacrifices involved. But this readiness to share is only "for the duration." As the Attlee Cabinet discovered, a Government suspected of prolonging rationing and restrictions further than necessary courts electoral defeat. Indeed I am prepared to assert against our critics that in peacetime the gap between private affluence and public squalor *cannot* be cor-

rected without a fairly rapid rate of economic growth. In an economic crisis people will be prepared to accept restrictions, self-sacrifice and even a degree of redundancy. But there is a severe limit both in time and in extent to the restrictions which are acceptable.

haphazard skirmishes—or reform by stages

I now turn to the detailed criticisms of our social programme. Peter Townsend writes "What was planned to be a consistent and concerted attack on poverty has turned into haphazard skirmishes on a wide front" and he goes on to complain, "The Government has given little impression from its actions that it has adopted an overall strategy. By increasing benefits along conventional lines early in 1965 it took the edge off demands for reform. By then introducing a redundancy payments Act and later earnings related benefit in unemployment and sickness for the first six months, it allowed itself to be diverted from giving priority to poverty to giving priority to redeployment." (p24) Professor Townsend then asks "What has happened to . . . the wage related scheme of social security incorporating national superannuation? I believe it can be argued that with a little more determination on the part of the Government we might have had this on the Statute Book by the end of 1965." (p23)

Let me deal with this point by point. Were we wrong to give the flat rate increase in November 1964? Of course we realised that this would "take the edge off demands for reform" that is it would reduce the amount of misery which we inherited. Surely it is a little cold-blooded to suggest that we should have deliberately preserved this misery in order to keep an effective demand for radical reform. It may be true that the flat-rate increase "took the edge off the demand for reform" by making the introduction of national superannuation appear less immediately urgent. But in any event a scheme of the size and nature which we contemplate could not by any stretch of imagination have been on the Statute Book by the end of 1965. I still think we were right to give the immediate relief we had promised priority over our long-term reforms.

Professor Townsend also rebukes us for our decision to move from a flat-rate system to a graded system by stages—for introducing redundancy payments and unemployment and sickness benefits first and leaving earnings related pensions for a second stage. I disagree with him profoundly. If we had failed to provide the redundancy payments and the earnings related benefits before this winter began, we should have been guilty of making no provision for those who have suffered redundancy as a result of the July measures. Even though the unemployment figures have not soared to the heights predicted so confidently by our critics, we all of us detest the level they have reached. Personally I am thankful that instead

of trying to reform Beveridge in one single huge leap forward we decided to do it in stages. By so doing we have made life a good deal less intolerable for those who have taken the knock. We have also, by another of our measures, namely the introduction of the supplementary benefits scheme, set non-contributory benefits on a new course and provided additional help, particularly for old people. Finally on this I would like to remove any suspicions our critics may have that national superannuation has not only been postponed but abandoned. This Labour Government keeps its pledges as the last one did. We promised to reform the Beveridge system by introducing earnings related social security including old age pensions. We shall keep that promise and have the reform on the Statute Book in the lifetime of this Parliament.

family endowment—the gaping hole

I now turn to the second main social problem they discuss—the disturbing concentration of poverty today among large families. And here I must make a confession. In our long period of opposition we failed as a party to grapple with this problem nearly as thoroughly as we grappled with the rest of social security. The working party of which our three critics were members, did start on the discussion of how to reform the family allowances. But we never got our ideas into a form workable enough for presentation to annual conference. That, of course, is why the subject was scarcely mentioned in the 1964 election programme. Our experience in Government brought home the seriousness of the situation so that in the 1966 Manifesto we got a bit further, “We shall establish a Ministry of Social Security . . . It will deal with the whole range of social security questions and ensure a rational single system of paying benefits. The Ministry will also head a drive to seek out and alleviate poverty, whether among children or old people. Finally in the interests of greater equity we shall seek ways of integrating more fully the two quite different systems of social payments—tax allowances and cash benefits paid under the National Insurance.” (*Time for decision* p15)

Vague as it was this was the first commitment the Labour Party made to a revision of children’s allowances and the first recognition of the thesis Professor Titmuss has so brilliantly argued that tax allowances are middle class social security. The commitment to deal with the family problem was made considerably more specific in the recent White Paper, *Prices and Incomes*—The period of severe restraint (HMSO, 1966) Paragraph 28 runs, “Lowest Paid Workers. Improvement of the standard of living of the worst-off members of the community is a primary social objective. As in practice the needs of individual workers are largely determined by the extent of their family commitments, the Government will continue to give a high priority to measures specifically designed to meet family needs.” I needn’t tell our three friends that these words were put into the White Paper very

carefully. The significance of the paragraph is that the problem about which they feel so passionately is fully recognised by the Government. I only wish that in those long years of opposition we had got round to working out a blue-print for family endowments because now it is obvious that this is the yawning gap in our social security system: the area of greatest poverty is covered with the least adequate social provision. They are right to launch a crusade with the object of rousing the public conscience in the face of the poverty so widespread among large families. They are right to urge on the Government the need for imaginative new policies which grapple with this complex issue. Where they are wrong, I am pretty sure, is in the oversimplified device which they provide as an answer.

Well that is the end of my reply to the specific complaints of our three critics. So let me return in conclusion to their main contention that we have lost our way, our strategy has collapsed and our short-term rescue measures are largely ineffective. My first reply is that it is just too early to judge. We have been two and a half years in office and we have four more years to run. I hope they won't think me complacent, but when I look back at the 1964 Parliament I am still genuinely surprised that with a majority of three in Parliament and a major economic crisis to cope with, we achieved as much progress as we did in carrying out the programme of our election Manifesto. In order to demonstrate this I have selected in this lecture two sections of the Manifesto—one, in which I have been particularly concerned, housing, and the other, in which the critics were particularly concerned, social security. On both these sectors of the front I have shown that in fact we have made far more progress than the tone of their criticism suggests.

On other sectors, the Health Service and education, for example, I could have told a similar story. The main area of disappointment was one they hardly mentioned, the voluntary Prices and Incomes Policy to which we were pledged and which we were compelled last July to supercede temporarily with a total standstill. This is the one sector where we have been compelled to depart from our plans and resort to methods not included in our electoral Mandate. But on the sector which they care about most, social security and the war against poverty, there has been, not a failure of a policy to which we were committed, but the postponed implementation of a long-term plan in order to carry out a short-term relief operation. Stage by stage we are carrying out the policy we worked out in Opposition as well as filling in the gaping hole left by our failure to work out a blue-print for family endowment. I would not have thought that, with this new Parliament only one year old, this is the situation where old friends outside in the Universities should start wringing their hands and jumping to defeatist conclusions. I myself feel no doubt that we shall, in the lifetime of this Parliament, complete the task we set ourselves in Opposition of breaking away from Beveridge and creating a system of social security which abolishes poverty in affluence.

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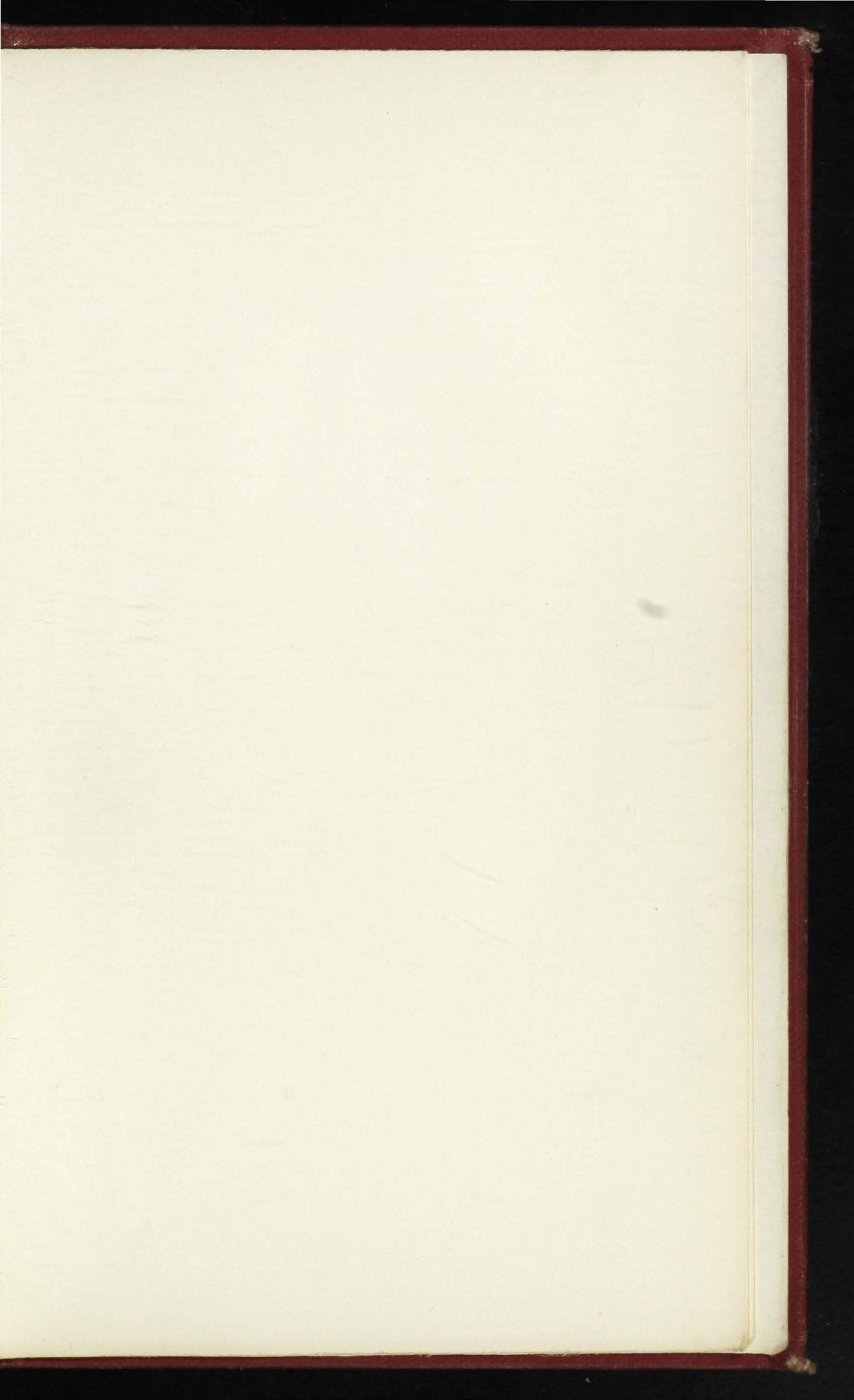
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