Democracy, Foreign Policy, and Parliamentary Reform
The Legacy of F. W. Jowett

If one had to nominate a single figure to exemplify the Independent Labour Party’s enduring allegiance to democratic socialism, it would surely have to be F. W. (Fred) Jowett (1864–1944). Widely known as “Jowett of Bradford,” after the Yorkshire town in which he was born, he would serve on the local council, and later represent as an MP. Bradford was also where the party’s founding conference was held. Jowett would remain an influential figure in the ILP for the rest of his life. Every position he took was infused by a fundamental commitment to socialism, democracy, and the spirit of egalitarianism, which together formed the ideological bedrock of the ILP. Although this commitment would be seriously challenged during the interwar period, it was never totally submerged or abandoned.

The Early Years of the ILP
An emphasis on local autonomy and a firm resistance to centralizing tendencies were enduring characteristics of the ILP. This emphasis on the local was conveyed by the use of the term “council” in the name of the party’s national coordinating body, the National Administrative Council, a choice no doubt intended to underscore that this was not a national “executive.” Likewise, “administrative” suggested that the National Administrative Council was concerned with routine organizational matters rather than making or carrying out political decisions. The party grew out of significant local organizations centred in the industrial areas of Lancashire and Yorkshire—most notably, the Manchester Independent Labour Party and the Bradford Labour Union. Jowett had been a leading figure in the latter, and, in 1892, he became the first socialist elected to Bradford’s city council. After failing to make an electoral breakthrough in the 1895 general election, the new party devoted itself with renewed vigour to the “Labour Alliance” strategy promoted by its leading
figure and former MP, Keir Hardie. This meant uniting ILP socialists with trade unionists—a process that eventually saw the formation of theLabour Representation Committee in 1900.

The Labour Representation Committee achieved a foothold in the House of Commons in 1906, as the Liberals swept to victory in the landslide election of that year, and shortly thereafter changed its name to the "Labour Party." For the rest of the prewar period, there was much criticism from the Left—including within the ILP—of the apparent docility and subservience to the Liberal government of Labour’s parliamentary representatives. In the early years of its existence, the Labour Party had no formal leader, but its leading figures were Keir Hardie (who died in 1915), Ramsay MacDonald, and Philip Snowden.

The most distinctive stance of the ILP was its uneasy, though not entirely consistent, opposition to the Great War, while, on the domestic front, its most original—and controversial—position was its commitment to a complete transformation of the British parliamentary system. The instigator and most persistent advocate of this policy, formally adopted in 1914, was Jowett, who was to become one of the more memorable Labour MPs of the twentieth century. Robert Dowse sees Jowett as “representative of the majority” of the early membership of the ILP. He clearly has in mind Jowett’s background as a largely self-educated working-class man from a northern industrial city who, having started work as a “half-timer” in a weaving shed at the age of eight, rose to white-collar employment as an “overlooker” and, later, a mill manager. But Jowett was anything but typical in most other respects. J. B. Priestley, another famous son of Bradford, wrote that though Jowett may have sometimes been wrong, he was never “stupidly or ignobly wrong.” Always at odds with the Labour establishment, and the wider British one, he was not a charismatic rebel or, as Priestley put it, a “spectacular figure.” But in Priestley’s view, he was “a great man of a new kind, which the history books have not caught up with yet.”

A consistent major theme in Jowett’s political life was his determination to make parliamentary democracy work in a way that brought the executive under the control of the elected representatives and made elected members fully accountable to their constituents. For him, this was an essential condition for socialism. His experience as a Bradford city councillor was a key formative influence, especially in the development of his central idea about parliamentary reform—replacing cabinet rule by a committee system similar to the kind then used in local government.

Jowett was elected as Labour MP for Bradford West in 1906; he retained the seat in the elections of 1910 but lost it in the “khaki election” of December 1918—a fate that likewise befell other prominent members of the ILP who
opposed the war or at least failed to offer sufficiently unequivocal support for it (notably MacDonald and Snowden). Re-elected in 1922, this time for Bradford East, he served under MacDonald in the minority Labour government of January to November 1924, as First Commissioner of Works. In spite of his determined opposition to what he called “cabinet government,” Jowett had accepted MacDonald’s invitation to join the government while apparently not expecting to be included in the cabinet. But he was. Like another prominent ILPer, John Wheatley, the new Minister of Health, Jowett refused to wear the customary morning dress and top hat to receive his seal of office at Buckingham Palace. In the same egalitarian spirit, he insisted on including the less elevated members of the ministry staff in his inaugural reception.

Defeated at the October 1924 election, Jowett was once again elected for Bradford East in 1929, losing the seat in the Labour debacle of 1931. In the meantime, he had not been invited to serve in MacDonald’s second government. Arthur Marwick, in his book on Clifford Allen, characterizes Jowett as a “traditionalist.” In that particular context, this may, arguably, be justified, but plainly, this characterization can hardly be applied to Jowett’s approach to parliamentary government.

Jowett’s Campaign for Parliamentary Reform

Besides the refusal to wear court attire and the inclusive reception at his ministry, a more substantial way in which, according to his biographer, Jowett defied tradition during his brief period in government was by bringing his departmental estimates forward to early April. Fenner Brockway explains that the normal practice was to save such matters until late July in order to limit the time available for parliamentary discussion before the summer recess. Jowett was motivated not only by the desire to help provide employment but also to ensure adequate time for discussion of his proposals in Parliament. To attempt to avoid or limit such discussion, says Brockway, “did not suit Jowett’s democratic principles.”

Jowett’s democratic principles, while by no means unique, were distinctive, above all in the single-minded doggedness with which he pursued them throughout the early decades of the twentieth century. Unlike some radical socialists of the pre-1914 era, he did not wish to replace representative government with “direct democracy” in the form of the referendum and initiative, though he conceded that there was a case for such procedures replacing the House of Lords, or any second chamber, as an ultimate expression of the sovereignty of the people. Nor, after 1917, was he an enthusiast—as many in the ILP were, especially in the years immediately following the Russian Revolution—of
“soviet democracy.” Jowett’s democratic principles centred on making parliamentary government as genuinely democratic as he could conceive.

Jowett did share with critics of parliamentary government the belief that “the first bulwark of the propertied classes is the House of Commons,” and, like them, he asserted that the “old Parliamentary hands know that even if the majority of members of the House of Commons were Socialists, the forces of reaction could prevent rapid progress being made with the help of the ancient machinery now in use.” But, unlike those on the Left who believed that the parliamentary system—or “bourgeois” representative systems of all varieties—were beyond repair, Jowett advocated radical reform. Soon after becoming an MP in 1906, he rejected the then current system of British government. “It is not Democracy, it is not even representative government—it is something different from either,” he wrote in the Clarion, a popular socialist paper.8

Jowett’s formative political experience occurred during his years on Bradford city council. At that time (and indeed until relatively recently), local government in Britain operated quite differently than did its national equivalent. Local authorities—essentially administrative bodies set up, defined, and regulated by statute—used a system whereby each department, staffed by council employees, was controlled by a committee whose membership reflected as accurately as possible the proportion of each party represented on the full council. Jowett wished to see many changes in the national system, but his central idea was to extend the committee system to the House of Commons as a substitute for cabinet government.

This was not an entirely new idea. Back in 1884, H. M. Hyndman, the leading figure in the then recently formed Social-Democratic Federation (SDF), had called for committees to be elected “to conduct our Foreign Affairs, our Commerce, our Legislature, our Railways and other departments of State.”9 In 1901, H. Russell Smart, a prominent ILP activist, had urged the Labour Representation Committee to contest “the tremendous power vested in that close oligarchy known as the Cabinet.”10

Jowett began his own critique of cabinet government before his election in 1906. His “I.L.P. Letter” appeared regularly in the Clarion, and in March 1905, he described the theory of Cabinet responsibility to the House of Commons as “one of the most mischievous delusions that constant repetition has ever succeeded in foisting upon the public.” It should, he urged, be broken down by the Labour Party at the earliest opportunity.11 Jowett’s Clarion contributions became regular “Notes on Parliament” following the election in 1906, and a few weeks after becoming an MP, he repeated his attack on cabinet government and argued for its replacement by a system of committees composed of members
of all parties. This would, he claimed, bring an end to both “bureaucracy” and “Party Government.”

In order to promote his agenda of radical reform of parliamentary procedure, Jowett submitted a motion in 1908 for the setting up of a committee composed exclusively of new MPs who had not become familiar with the “unbusinesslike” practices of the Commons. Its role would be to propose changes in parliamentary procedures. Probably more effective than this motion, however, at least in getting his ideas before a wider audience, was his contribution to the Clarion’s “Pass On Pamphlets” series, titled What Is the Use of Parliament? Here, he explained in greater detail his proposal to replace the cabinet with a committee system. He had no time for maintaining tradition at all costs, taking the view that “ancient machinery which is obsolete and beyond repair should be thrown out.” For Jowett, it was clear that “whoever else . . . can afford to tolerate the present system of conducting the business of the country, the Socialist and Democrat is not of the number.”

Like virtually everyone on the Left, Jowett wanted to see an end to the House of Lords, arguing that, with regard to important national issues, it was, even at its very best, functioning only as a clumsy, and in some cases misleading, substitute for the referendum. But Jowett believed that above all a radically reformed House of Commons was what was desperately needed. As long as procedures in the Commons remained unchanged, the position of the House of Lords in the State would be “buttressed and strengthened,” Jowett argued. Effective publicity was essential to accountability, but such accountability was impossible “under a system of single Ministerial control, checked only by an annual discussion” and could not possibly cover even “one point in every hundred on which Ministers should be cross-examined, and, if necessary, over-ruled.”

According to Jowett, the key change needed for a fundamental reform of the parliamentary system and the establishment of genuine representative government was the replacement of cabinet rule with a committee system. Committees of a sort had been introduced but were “cursed by a system of procedure similar to that of the House of Commons itself.” Jowett was particularly dismissive of committees of the whole House, in which “a body of 670 members is supposed to be engaged not only in deciding between the alternative issues presented by each clause of a complicated Bill, but in selecting the fittest words to express the objects of the Bill and its clauses.” For the most part, MPs did not even pretend to be following the proceedings.

In 1913, in response to the government’s statement of its legislative program for the coming parliamentary session, Lord Robert Cecil, an Independent Conservative MP, moved an “amendment to the address,” expressing his regret that no mention had been made of “proposals for the improvement of the procedure
of this House.” Jowett made a substantial speech in support of this motion, claiming that “the great county councils do their business in a far better way and with far more sense of responsibility than we do.” He supported Cecil’s proposal to have the committee stage of legislation carried out by an actual committee rather than by the entire House, with members hardly listening to the debate. It was “a scandal,” he said, “that encouragement should be given to the rushing in of Members to vote upon points which they have never heard discussed.”

That same year saw the passage, at the ILP’s annual conference, of a motion hostile to single ministerial control of government departments and supporting the creation of select committees of the House of Commons whose members would be drawn from all parties.

Following the inconclusive elections of 1910, the minority Liberal government was dependent in part on Labour Party support in order to remain in power. Were the Liberals to sustain a defeat on an important piece of legislation, a failure that could be construed as evidence of a lack of confidence in the government, the party would have little real choice but to abide by convention and resign, thereby triggering an election. In this situation, Jowett was concerned that Labour MPs would be tempted to compromise, voting in favour of legislation that in some way ran counter to Labour’s own agenda rather than risk a potentially fatal Liberal defeat that might pave the way for the return of the Tories. More generally, as part of his strategy to make Parliament more democratic and more effective, Jowett sought to put an end to the convention whereby governments were bound to resign when defeated on a matter of confidence.

Jowett and his Bradford ILP branch had therefore begun, in 1911, to advocate what became known as the “Bradford Resolution”—which, if adopted by Labour, would instruct members of the Labour Party’s parliamentary group to vote on each bill according to its merits from Labour’s point of view, ignoring any effect on the government’s prospects for survival. The hope was that this policy, if consistently pursued, would eventually undermine the existing convention, to the point that it would be abandoned. Especially in view of the present fragility of the Liberal government, however, the proposed policy caused great controversy. It was, in particular, fiercely opposed by Ramsay MacDonald, then the chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party, who believed that it was vital to keep the Liberals in power at all costs.

Put to a vote at the ILP conferences in 1912 and 1913, the resolution was twice defeated, although with substantial minority support. Not so in 1914, however, when the policy was emphatically approved. This shift in fortunes owed much to the fact that MacDonald was suspected of participating in discussions about an alliance of the Labour Party with the Liberals—a prospect that was
anathema to most ILPs. The motion was carried decisively by 233 votes to 78, and Jowett was elected as chairman of the party for the second time, having held the office in 1909–10. There seemed to be at least an outside chance that the Bradford policy would be adopted by the Labour Party, but before that could be tested, war intervened.

The Great War: Democracy and Foreign Policy
Foreign affairs and, above all, the question of military alignments and alliances was an area of particular concern to Jowett—and to many others in both the Labour and Liberal parties. If proper accountability was lacking in government generally, it seemed virtually nonexistent in these crucial areas. In 1908, Jowett complained about Edward VII being “encouraged to meddle in affairs for which he cannot be called to account” in relation to the formation of the Triple Entente with France and Russia. In 1911, in the House of Commons, he asked Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey whether, “during his term of office, any undertaking, promise, or understanding had been given to France that, in certain eventualities, British troops would be sent to assist the operations.” Hansard records the reply of Thomas McKinnon Wood, then Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs: “The answer is in the negative.”

Several months later, writing in the Clarion, Jowett attacked “secret diplomacy and the overpowering influence which experts and permanent officials exercise over successive ministers in turn”—a clear case, in his view, for establishing parliamentary control through a committee system.

Jowett continued his attack on secret diplomacy in a local Bradford paper, the Bradford Daily Telegraph: “People may desire peace, but secret diplomacy, inspired nobody knows how, intriguing nobody knows where, often working in close touch with great financial magnates, whose interest is to cause States to incur debts and pay them tribute in a hundred different forms, weaves its net of intrigue and keeps nations in mortal dread of each other.” What was urgently needed, Jowett argued, was a House of Commons committee with full access to all the necessary information to explain issues such as “why we should build more Dreadnoughts”—the powerful new battleships that had revolutionized naval armaments since the launching of the first, HMS Dreadnought, in 1906. He concluded, “Let us have all cards on the table—the diplomatic cards as well.”

Jowett continued to be among the most persistent critics of Grey’s foreign policy. The foreign secretary, unsurprisingly, rejected any suggestion of setting up a foreign affairs committee. But Jowett was not easily deterred. Soon after the beginning of the 1914 July Crisis, which would end in the outbreak of war, he wrote in the Bradford Pioneer that “what Sir Edward Grey and others
cannot prove, nowadays, is that the secret tortuous ways of the old-fashioned diplomatists really succeed in the long run.” If a major objective of diplomacy was to avoid a disastrous war, Jowett certainly had a point.

The war reinforced the arguments against secret diplomacy. Whether or not Jowett himself had a hand in drafting the 1916 ILP leaflet *Democratic Control*, it certainly put forward his view. The war had starkly revealed the inadequacy of the existing system of cabinet government, the leaflet declared, and every department had “failed in the current crisis.” It continued:

> If the men who played this disastrous game at the expense of hundreds of thousands of British lives had been under the necessity of meeting regularly, face to face, at a Committee of Foreign Affairs consisting of members of Parliament representing different parties, ideals and points of view, the criticism of foreign policy during the years preceding the war would have been based on knowledge, and it would have been almost impossible to carry out the policy which came to such a disastrous conclusion in August 1914. The people would have been warned beforehand, and not faced with a fact accomplished.  

The leaflet concluded with a statement of the ILP’s intent to seek a radical change along the lines of the policy it had adopted at its last prewar conference: “The Independent Labour Party seeks to make the system of representative government real and effective by the establishment of Committee Control, not only over foreign affairs but also over all departments of State. Only then will there be a system of Parliamentary Government representative of the will of the people secured by democratic control.”

In March 1918, the ILP’s weekly paper, the *Labour Leader*, printed the text of the speech that Jowett had delivered during a House of Commons debate on the role of the Foreign Office initiated by Liberal MP Charles Trevelyan. A long-term critic of secret diplomacy and a staunch opponent of Britain’s involvement in the war, Trevelyan had been instrumental in the founding of the Union of Democratic Control, set up in December 1914 to campaign for democratic scrutiny of foreign policy. Jowett supported Trevelyan’s motion for the establishment of a Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and emphasized the urgency of democratizing the Foreign Office. Another Liberal dissenter and outspoken critic of the war was MP Arthur Ponsonby, who, like Trevelyan, was among the founders of the Union of Democratic Control. Destined to join the ILP soon after the war, Ponsonby made what Jowett called “a splendid speech” during the debate. Jowett further related that, in 1911, when he asked Grey about commitments to France, he had been referred to the Anglo-French Convention, which dealt merely with maintaining the status quo in Morocco.
and Egypt. As he had said a year earlier, in his address as chairman to the ILP’s annual conference: “The country had been deceived. I had been deceived.”

Two ILP pamphlets by J. W. Kneeshaw in the immediate postwar years reinforced the attack on the lack of accountability in foreign affairs. In *The Hidden Hand in Politics*, in 1919, Kneeshaw characterized the Foreign Office as “the last remaining citadel of aristocratic privilege in the country. It secretly and autocratically juggles with the lives and treasure of our whole population, and great as are our democratic powers, we have no power to check its adventures, or even to know in what they consist.” Parliamentary sanction should be required for every decision involving international affairs. “To be rid of war, democracy must banish the dark-hand diplomats and establish its complete authority in the Foreign Office as in all other governing departments.”

The following year, in a second pamphlet, Kneeshaw looked back to the origins of the recent conflict. The “decision that ultimately landed us into the Great War was secretly made in 1904, not by Parliament, but by the Foreign Office,” he wrote. He ended by making the more general plea for the extension of accountability in all areas of governance while stressing the particular case of foreign relations. The chief business of democracy was, he argued, “to push out the boundaries of its power” to embrace not only local and national politics but foreign policy as well.

As for Jowett, he would continue, long after the war, to take every opportunity to remind his audiences of the iniquities of secret diplomacy. In his speech as chairman at the Edinburgh conference of the Labour Party in 1922, which the ILP published as a pamphlet, he drew attention to “the steadily accumulating list of official documents disclosing the pre-war arrangements of the victorious States and Czarist Russia; along with the published statements of one after another of men who filled responsible posts and took part in the events leading to the war.” Sir Edward Grey’s assurance to the Commons on 3 August 1914 that the House was free to decide whether to go to war or not was true in only the “formal sense,” said Jowett. “In reality his assurance was a lie. For in the same speech he disclosed the existence of an agreement with France which bound the Prime Minister and himself along with the Government to which they belonged, in an obligation of honour—or rather dishonour—to go to war.”

**Cabinet or Committees? The ILP Debate Continues**

In 1917, the ILP’s National Administrative Council (NAC) set up a small committee, which included supporters of both the cabinet and committee systems, to report on how best to achieve effective public control of both Parliament and national government policy, as well as to allow MPs greater individual responsibility for choosing how to vote. But this effort seems to have died on
the vine. Jowett himself returned to the question of parliamentary reform at the 1919 ILP conference, however, moving a motion on behalf of the Bradford branch asking the party to endorse a program that would place the machinery of government on “a sound democratic basis.”

The motion demanded both reform of the electoral system so as “to secure Proportional Representation of Parties” and “abolition of the Cabinet system and the substitution of Departmental Committees elected by, and representative of, the various groups in Parliament, the representation being in proportion to the numerical strength of parties in the House of Commons.” Jowett’s aim was to reaffirm the ILP’s policy. Parliament, he charged, was living on its past reputation, bureaucracy was flourishing, and MPs were virtually excluded from administering the affairs of the country and had no contact with the departments of state. “So long as Parliament was organised as a mere debating assembly,” Jowett argued, “there was no possibility of the electorate exercising sound judgment because the facts were not disclosed, and the information was not there upon which to base judgment.”

The two proposed amendments to Jowett’s motion reflected competing notions of what constituted “real democracy.” One advocated for the referendum and initiative approach and was attacked by H. Stenning of the Tottenham branch as “democracy run mad.” The second amendment supported the soviet system, a system that Jowett commended as an “experiment” suitable for Russia and Hungary but not appropriate in Britain, with its “deep rooted Parliamentary institutions.” He added that the indirect nature of the soviet delegation system meant that electors lost touch with the elected even more than was the case with Parliament. The amendment’s seconder, A. J. Thatcher of the Blyth branch, pointed out that the ILP was based on that same system. The amendment was later withdrawn.

Opposition to the main motion came from C. H. Norman, who would become one of the leading figures of the ILP’s Left Wing, a group that pursued affiliation to the Communist International the following year, and—ineluctably—from Ramsay MacDonald, who said that the motion was “at least four years old, as far as time was concerned, and so far as the state of mind was concerned, it was 100 years old.” He regretted the withdrawal of the soviet amendment, claiming that there was “nothing more critical for the Party to discuss.” The debate was brought to an inconclusive end through a procedural device that ended it without a vote—a most unsatisfactory outcome from Jowett’s point of view.

Yet Jowett was nothing if not persistent, and the following year, at the 1920 ILP conference in Glasgow, he moved that the cabinet system be abolished, now with the support of both the NAC and his Bradford branch. He told the
democracy, foreign policy, and parliamentary reform

Delegates that although some believed that representative government had failed—referring to the enthusiasm for “soviet democracy,” then at its height in the ILP—he wanted to “state emphatically that in his opinion representative government had never been tried in national affairs.” Formally seconded by John Scurr, the resolution was carried.41

It was Jowett’s colleague William Leach who moved the Bradford motion at the 1923 conference, declaring that “the Cabinet system demands passive obedience.”42 But whereas in the past, criticisms of cabinet government had been directed at Liberal, Tory, or coalition regimes, a Labour government was now a real possibility. To what extent would Jowett’s critique be reflected in, or survive, the reality of Labour rule when its main critic would be the party leader and prime minister? And how would the experience of a minority Labour government influence debates on the issue?

Jowett Advocates for Committees—and Cabinet

There were some in the ILP and the Labour Party, even before the defeat of the 1924 government, who sought to radically change the way the Labour Party approached parliamentary politics. Others were determined to resist this. In early October 1924, shortly before the defeat of the government in which he had held the post of under-secretary at the War Office, Clement Attlee, the future Labour Party leader and post-1945 prime minister, wrote a New Leader article titled “What Is Democratic Control?” He rejected the ideas contained in motions for the Labour Party conference that sought election of ministerial appointees by the parliamentary party. The government had to be “a team,” he argued.43

He was even more scathing about the demand “to subordinate the Government and the Party in the House to the fullest control of the Executive Committee of the Labour Party.” This was not a move towards greater democracy, he contended, since that committee was “an extreme example of indirect election.” Moreover, the “same people who would curb the Parliamentary Party by subordinating it to the General Committee will be found attacking the members of the General Committee. They believe in the dictatorship of the proletariat, but in their own opinion they are the only proletarians.”44 But at least one member of that first Labour government still sought major change in the way the House of Commons operated.

Jowett’s advocacy of a radical reform of parliamentary procedure, though endorsed at almost every annual ILP conference, must have sometimes seemed to him like a solitary campaign. This was particularly evident in its lack of support among MPs, who, Brockway tells us, all too often dismissed it as “Fred’s obsession.”45 His ideas had more appeal for those who observed the parliamentary scene from outside. In a May 1924 article on proportional representation,
H. N. Brailsford, the editor of the *New Leader* at the time, discussed the likely implications of that electoral system, including the danger that its adoption would lead to “coalitions of the Lloyd George type.” He concluded that another possibility existed:

Place the real power in the hands of Departmental Committees of the House, and it would then be a more bearable evil that party majorities would be rare. Behind P.R. there is a high and difficult ideal of equity. It rejects every impulse of dictatorship. It could work only through a habit of open and fruitful compromise. It would in the end sap the Cabinet system and what is that but dictatorship multiplied?

The debate on the Bradford motion at the 1925 ILP conference generated a pamphlet containing the speeches of the two main adversaries, Jowett and H. B. Lees Smith. Jowett began by saying that it was “peculiarly appropriate” that this debate should follow one on “Labour in Office,” a debate that had demonstrated the existence of “a desire that there should be an outlet for expression in Parliament on points of view not held by the Government.” He rehearsed the familiar arguments about how the government largely controlled what was debated in Parliament. As he further maintained, MPs often faced the dilemma of whether to vote in support of their government, regardless of the promises they had made to their constituents, or to adhere to their principles by voting against the government and possibly turning it out of office.

His solution was to get rid of the unwieldy committee of the full House and to create much smaller, more viable, House of Commons committees so that MPs could “consider business in detail, the departmental committees reporting their decisions to the full House from time to time at the report stage.” But he was no longer advocating the replacement of the cabinet by committees. The cabinet should remain, with the role of coordinating the work of the government. He concluded, to applause, that “the nine months of Labour Government have clinched this conviction more than I could have expected it possible to do.” Lees Smith, reflecting the views of those who feared that all-party committees might act as a brake on Labour Party initiatives in government, supported the idea of advisory committees that would not have the power “to modify or water-down the policy of the Labour Government.” Jowett rejected this as ineffective.

The following year, Jowett dealt in greater detail with the objections to his proposals from both Lees Smith and MacDonald in the pamphlet *Parliament or Palaver?* An introductory note drew attention to Jowett’s experience as a long-serving MP and as a cabinet minister, noting his authority and expertise in the area of parliamentary democracy. The pamphlet endorsed the idea of
departmental committees, which would “take over for all purposes—legislative and administrative—the committee business of Parliament,” carried out by the entire House of Commons sitting as a committee. The threefold purpose was to improve the efficiency of the legislature, enable MPs to take an active part in parliamentary decision-making and permit MPs to be able to take positions on the “merits of the question” rather than as “votes of approval or condemnation of the Government.”

The rest of the pamphlet dealt with the objections of MacDonald and Lees Smith. Jowett rejected the former’s objection that such a change could only be accomplished after a long drawn-out constitutional conflict. No legislation was necessary, he argued. A Labour majority could simply change the procedure and rules by which the House of Commons carried out its own business. This would take no more than a few days. The “abolition of the farcical and inefficient Committee of the Whole House of Commons” would give more time to members with “personal knowledge and experience” who would be able to “cross-examine responsible officials, elicit facts, and put their proposals” without having to win a private members’ ballot or catch the Speaker’s eye in order to be allowed to speak.

MacDonald’s objection that the Tories would reverse any such reform on returning to power assumed the continuation of “pendulum politics,” Jowett argued. Furthermore, there were “rank and file members of other parties as well as of the Labour Party. Is it too much to assume that some of them, too, will want to be something more than mere followers and voting machines? Public representatives, when they have first got powers, do not easily relinquish them.”

Similarly, Jowett rejected Lees Smith’s contention that the result of applying the policy would be “to destroy the Cabinet system and put every department in the hands of a committee consisting of capitalist representatives as well as Socialist representatives.” On the contrary, a Labour cabinet would still provide the driving force. The only power the cabinet would be deprived of under his proposals would be the “threat of resignation to prevent cross-voting in committees.” He dismissed the alternative of advisory committees: they would simply add to the existing complexity and would “leave untouched that absurd, futile and time-wasting medley miscalled a committee . . . the committee of the whole House of Commons.”

A New Leader editorial by Brailsford in August 1926 strenuously supported the proposals articulated in Parliament or Palaver? He reiterated that the cabinet would remain, with a leadership and coordinating role. This would not be the last time that Jowett’s radical idea of parliamentary democracy would play a part in the course taken by the ILP. As we shall see later, his objection to the standing
orders of the Parliamentary Labour Party—and, consequently, his support for disaffiliation—was based on the same underlying principle. If MPs were forced to support policies put forward by their party leaders in government, even when these policies were clearly at odds with the platform on which they had been elected, how could democratic representative government become a reality?

Jowett would maintain a defence of parliamentary government throughout the period following disaffiliation, during which the proponents of a “revolutionary policy” aspired to replace it with so-called workers’ councils. But even when the ILP began to drift back, slowly and cautiously, towards Labour, he remained opposed to reaffiliation. With a special conference to decide the issue scheduled for September 1939, the NAC—with Jowett among the minority opposing the idea—recommended rejoining the Labour Party. The outbreak of the Second World War, which would delay further consideration of reaffiliation, was just over three weeks away when the New Leader featured Jowett’s attack on the current system, titled “The Sham of Our Parliamentary Democracy.” In his article, Jowett looked back thirty years to the beginning of his “lone agitation” for the committee system reforms that he advocated. He noted that although Labour Party advisory committees on the “Machinery of Government”—made up “mainly of members who were then, or had been, connected with the Civil Service”—had supported such changes, they had been ignored in both 1923 and 1928.  

Jowett had been a leading ILP member, serving regularly on the party’s NAC not only for the entire interwar period but for the best part of the preceding three decades, beginning with the party’s foundation. ILP conferences had approved his proposals on numerous occasions, and, as we have seen, other influential figures such as Brailsford and Brockway had given him their support. One suspects, however, that for many in the party, his advocacy for parliamentary reform had little to do with socialism. The point had been made early on by Labour Leader in 1912. “Abolishing the Cabinet system of government,” the paper maintained, would require as much effort as “abolishing the capitalist system of industry, and we think it would pay us much better to put our energies into the latter channel.”  

For Jowett, this was missing the point entirely. The socialist objectives of eliminating poverty, oppression, exploitation, and inequality could only be achieved via the most democratic of means. After all, inequality of power underlay and reinforced so many of inequality’s other forms. Jowett’s real service to the Left lay not so much in his particular proposals and positions as in consistently arguing this broader case and, by doing so, promoting the cause of democratic socialism at a time when it truly was under siege.
In the next chapter, we return to the years following the First World War. The split in the Liberal Party, formerly the recipient of so many working-class votes; the contrast between Lloyd George’s promise of “homes fit for heroes” and the reality of life for the majority in postwar Britain; and the hopes and enthusiasms ushered in by the revolutionary events in Russia all contributed to the emergence of new possibilities. The ILP would face new and intractable problems. The political situation was changing fast in the postwar world, and the continuing existence of the ILP itself was threatened by the Labour Party’s new constitution.