Ramsay MacDonald and the ILP
A Mutual Ambivalence

Before the 1920s were over, the ILP and Ramsay MacDonald would exasperate and antagonize each other almost to breaking point. Much of the Labour Party, especially many of its parliamentarians, shared its leader’s frustrations with the almost constant criticism from the ILP ranks and the behaviour of those MPs who, in pursuing radical socialist objectives, gave their allegiance in the first place to the ILP. The situation had been very different in the years immediately following the First World War, despite the campaign of the ILP’s Left Wing for Comintern affiliation. MacDonald, who had written many substantial editorials on international issues for the ILP’s Socialist Review, could look with some confidence towards the recruits from the Liberals now entering the Labour Party, who fully shared his concerns with peace and international affairs. As Henry Pelling notes, “In more senses than one they were a ‘Foreign Legion’ as they were dubbed at the time by one of their own number.” From MacDonald’s point of view, as well as sharing his sense of urgency about international issues, these newcomers might also prove to be an antidote to the more insistently socialist elements among the Labour Party membership.

Liberal and Pacifist Recruits
At the end of July 1914, soon after the outbreak of war, MacDonald had been a signatory of the letter that led to the foundation of the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), which campaigned against secret diplomacy, supported peace on the basis of national self-determination and international disarmament, and wanted the war brought to an end by a just peace. An advertisement for the UDC appeared in the ILP’s Labour Leader on Christmas Eve 1914. Among the UDC’s General Council members list were six MPs, three from the Labour Party—Ramsay MacDonald, Arthur Henderson, and Fred Jowett—and three Liberals—Arthur Ponsonby, Charles Trevelyan, and Richard Denman. The three Liberals listed would all later join the Labour Party.
Among the UDC’s other founders, were radical Liberals like Norman Angell and the organization’s secretary, E. D. Morel, who were already on their way to coming over to the Labour Party. Most of these men would play prominent roles within the ILP for at least a few years. Indeed, when Morel died in 1924, the NAC report to the annual ILP conference described him as one of the party’s “heroes.”

Helena Swanwick’s 1924 history of the UDC includes photographs of the most active and prominent UDC members, a large proportion of them were already, or were to become, well-known figures in the ILP. They include, in addition to those listed above Philip and Ethel Snowden, J. A. Hobson, William Leach, H. N. Brailsford, and Charles Roden Buxton. “The Independent Labour Party from the first needed no conversion,” Swanwick wrote of the party’s sympathy for the platform of the UDC. “It had the root of the matter, and from I.L.P. members the Union received some of its best support.”

Twenty ILP branches had affiliated to the UDC by the time of its inaugural meeting in November 1914, and with the end of the war approaching in 1918, thirty branches joined.

Even before conscription was introduced in 1916, Clifford Allen and Fenner Brockway—both conscientious objectors who would go on to become leading members of the ILP—formed the No Conscription Fellowship, which attracted the support of a broad range of pacifists to enter the ILP, many of whom otherwise had little in common with the party’s ideas and objectives. Indeed, some members soon felt the party to be under siege from these newly arriving pacifists. A 1916 letter to the Labour Leader from a reader named Herbert Tracy complained that the ILP had become “an annex of the Peace Movement. Its membership has been swollen by an influx of pacifists who have nothing in common with Socialists save their hatred of war, and whose political convictions may be expressed in the formula that whatever any government does is wrong.” Tracy may well have felt that his point was borne out by another letter on the same page from “a strong Conservative for 30 years or more” who commended the party for “defending the social ideals of Christianity” by its opposition to the war.

From the standpoint of John Paton, writing years later, ILP members like Tracy were right to be apprehensive about such developments:

There were scores of wealthy people throughout the country, many of them Quakers, whose implacable opposition to the war had broken their old attachment to the Liberal Party and brought them into sympathy with the I.L.P. They had little real understanding probably of the more permanent Socialist purposes of the I.L.P. but their over-riding concern made them eager to support the Party that had so abundantly proved the sincerity of its opposition to the war.
In general, however, any doubts among other members about this influx were, Paton writes, soon calmed by MacDonald’s “soothing accents and sonorous rhetoric.” No doubt the fact that many of the new recruits were generous donors also helped.

MacDonald and the ILP: Walking the Tightrope

As we saw in the preceding chapter, the changing balance of forces as regards possible affiliation to the Third International had been signalled early in 1921, when three of the ILP’s divisional councils rejected motions in support of the proposal. These included the Scottish Divisional Council, which, despite its initial enthusiasm for the idea, voted against affiliation by a margin of 93 to 57. The radical Scottish socialist John Maclean, a strong proponent of revolutionary communism who contemptuously rejected “reformism” of all varieties, attributed this dramatic change to “the timely and cunning appeals of Ramsay MacDonald.”

MacDonald had long been unpopular among the most radical elements of the British Left. In 1895, the year he stood unsuccessfully as an ILP parliamentary candidate, he had been attacked in Justice—the weekly paper of the ILP’s more purist rival, the Social-Democratic Federation (SDF), which would leave the LRC after its first year because it failed to explicitly adopt a socialist objective. The ILP had been suspect in SDF eyes from the beginning because it called itself “Labour,” leaving open the question of whether that necessarily meant “socialist.” From this quarter, MacDonald had been attacked for his support of bureaucratic government and his opposition to radical democracy in the shape of the initiative and referendum. Similar criticisms from that quarter continued. The prominent SDF member Ernest Belfort Bax asserted the following year, for example, that MacDonald’s commitment to bureaucracy and his weak support of democratic advance meant that “not only all Socialists, but all Democrats and even Radicals with any respect for consistency, must regard Mr. MacDonald as an enemy.”

But such attacks did nothing to delay MacDonald’s rise to prominence in the ILP, despite some opposition within the party that derived from a similar suspicion of his conservatism. This opposition manifested itself especially strongly after the maverick ILPper Victor Grayson—famed for his unexpected victory in the Colne Valley by-election in 1907—complained in 1909 that the party was effectively controlled by “the familiar quartette,” namely, Keir Hardie, J. Ramsay MacDonald, Philip Snowden, and John Bruce Glasier. Indeed, for a vocal minority within the party’s own ranks, the prewar ILP was insufficiently radical and only questionably socialist. Such members were more or less continuously debating whether to leave the ILP or remain in the
party and struggle to change it. The war was, however, decisive in salvaging the ILP’s radical reputation.

MacDonald’s own position on the war may have been more equivocal than that of many of his comrades. Writing in the 1950s, Emanuel Shinwell maintained, dismissively, that “he was neither for the war nor against it.” When MacDonald spoke, his audiences heard a man who loathed past wars, regarded future wars with abhorrence, but carefully evaded giving his opinion on the basic question of the current one. Despite the ambiguity of his position, MacDonald was pilloried as an opponent of the war during the “khaki election” of 1918. But as the mood of the country began to shift a few years after the war, MacDonald’s position in the eyes of a significant segment of the public would benefit from his association with the ILP and its pacifist reputation.

At the same time, MacDonald had to contend with the fact that many Labour MPs had supported the war—among them J. R. Clynes, who became the chair of the Parliamentary Labour Party in 1921. In addition, many members of the Labour Party’s trade union affiliates were suspicious of ILP “intellectuals,” of whom MacDonald was a prime example. Aware that he was “still detested by trades union and other leaders of influence within the Labour Party,” as Paton puts it, MacDonald found the support of the ILP “essential” during the early postwar period.

Even within the ILP itself, however, not all were prepared to trust MacDonald, especially after MacDonald—despite being a member of the party’s NAC—chose in 1920 to accept a position as secretary to the reconstituted Second International after the ILP had voted to disaffiliate from it earlier in the year. As MacDonald’s biographer, David Marquand, notes, MacDonald was “censured” by the NAC for accepting the position, although he “persuaded it to rescind its decision without much difficulty.” All the same, “he was running a considerable political risk.” Since, at the time, the campaign of the ILP’s Left Wing for affiliation to the Third International was still attracting support, the risk was undoubtedly substantial. Unsurprisingly, MacDonald’s willingness to ally himself with what many perceived as a reactionary organization did little to lessen suspicions among the more radical members of the ILP about his ideological sympathies.

MacDonald as Socialist Theoretician and Constitutional Conservative

No one could say that MacDonald was slow to put forward his own ideas about where the ILP—and the Labour Party—should be heading. Quite apart from his virtually countless speeches and articles, his output of books was truly prolific for so prominent and active a politician. In the decade preceding the outbreak of war, Socialism and Society (1905) was followed by Labour and
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_the Empire and Socialism_ (1907), the two-volume _Socialism and Government_ (1909), _The Socialist Movement_ (1911), _Syndicalism: A Critical Examination_ (1912), and _The Social Unrest: Its Cause_ (1913). The most central idea put forward by MacDonald was what became known as his “biological analogy.” Socialists should, urged MacDonald, have a positive view of the state and recognize that “communal life” is as real “as the life of an organism built up of many living cells.”

MacDonald initiated and edited the ILP’s Socialist Library series, of which _Socialism and Society_ was the second volume. He was a constitutional conservative, and it was not just Social-Democrat critics, such as the ones quoted earlier from the 1890s, who recognized this trait. In the ILP’s own _Labour Leader_, the reviewer of MacDonald’s _Socialism and Government_ in 1909 had concluded that “where the political democrat insists on popular rights, Mac-Donald insists on the citizen’s duties . . . where the one insists on equality the latter insists on qualifications. In a word, in politics, the advocate of Social-Democracy (using the word in its broadest sense) lays stress on ‘Dem-ocracy’ [while] the author of _Socialism and Government_ lays stress on ‘Social.’”

The reviewer also saw MacDonald as striking “across the current democratic opinion” in rejecting proportional representation and the referendum.\(^{20}\) This rejection was a perennial theme in MacDonald’s political thought. In the chapter of _The Socialist Movement_ titled “The Immediate Demands of Socialism,” he begins his discussion of democracy by making it clear that, for him, “the watchword of Socialism is Evolution not Revolution and its battlefield is Parliament.”\(^{21}\) With respect to the institution of Parliament, however, he goes on to disclaim any “abject allegiance to representative government.” Rather, representatives need to be “checked”—and it is “the people themselves” who must exercise this function. But, he cautions, while the referendum and proportional representation may “present themselves to the Socialist in alluring garments,” these are not appropriate to Britain. “Undoubtedly in countries suffering from corrupt legislators and from gross injustice from an inequality of constituencies,” he writes, “these proposals may be entitled to the term ‘reforms.’ In our country, however, the name cannot be given them.” The referendum, he claims, is “clumsy and ineffective” and always more likely to result in a reactionary outcome, while proportional representation would increase “opportunities for the manipulating caucus managers” and make governments’ majorities “more dependent upon stray odd men.”\(^{22}\) For MacDonald, the “Socialist machinery of democracy” consisted of “shorter parliaments, payment of members, [and] adult suffrage.” Beyond that, checks and safeguards on abuses of power had to rely on “a higher political intelligence on the part of the majority of the electors.”\(^{23}\)
In MacDonald’s vision of socialism, the scope of any sort of industrial democracy was also very limited. With regard to the topic of “workshop management,” he told readers of *The Socialist Movement* that, under socialism, there would be “an industrial organisation, which will have a very decisive influence on public opinion, and also act as a check upon the political organisation.” At the head of this industrial body would be “the ablest business men, economists, scientists, statisticians in the country all having risen through the lower grades of the particular departments to which they belong.” Trade unions would, “in all probability, be utilised for advisory purposes by the central authorities,” but whether they would “appoint, or have any voice in appointing, workshop managers and business directors” was a matter upon which “no definite opinion can as yet be formed.”

When one considers MacDonald’s view of democracy, it is not difficult to see why, on the eve of the outbreak of war, *Labour Leader* was able to quote Professor Gilbert Slater’s judgment that MacDonald was “on the working of the Constitution the very strictest of Conservatives.” During the first few postwar years, however, a seemingly more radical—or at least less conservative—MacDonald emerged. This was nowhere more evident than in the position he took on “direct action” during the debate on the new *ILP* program in 1920 and 1921.

### The Debate on Direct Action

What turned out to be the protracted process of drafting a new *ILP* program began after the party’s 1920 conference, at a time when the Left Wing still enjoyed considerable support. The task of devising this new program fell to the *NAC*’s Program and Policy Committee, which in turn delegated the task to a drafting committee. On the question of direct action—meaning essentially political strikes—its members were divided. One wording of the draft program would have had the *ILP* saying that it “realised” that because elections “frequently result in false and inadequate representation” and enable governments “to manipulate and thwart the national will, it may be necessary on specific occasions for the organised workers to use extra-political means, such as direct action.” This was, however, insufficiently radical for some members of the drafting committee, among them the guild socialist G. D. H. Cole; Leonard Woolf, better known as a member of the Bloomsbury Group; and C. H. Norman, who had chaired the first meeting of the Left Wing. They wished to have the party recognize that “the organised workers’ might be driven to secure their aims, as set out in the program, “by extra-constitutional means, such as direct action or revolution.”
At the end of 1920, the *Labour Leader* invited readers’ comments on these proposals. One correspondent objected in principle to even the more guarded endorsement of direct action. Direct action always led to the use of force by those in a minority, he argued. If the ILP accepted the legitimacy of direct action, then how could the party object to the actions of the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force, just prior to the war, or to the more recent activities of the Sinn Fein “extremists”? Here was an argument that one might have reasonably expected such a “constitutionalist” as MacDonald to endorse. But this was far from being the case.

In fact, MacDonald had already distanced himself from such arguments the previous year. In *Parliament and Revolution*, he had been surprisingly blunt. “With some of the statements of those who oppose ‘Direct Action’ today, I am in profound disagreement,” he wrote. “They are false in their conception of democracy and feeble in their conception of Parliament,” and their views were “evidence of the blight of political respectability upon the democratic spirit.” MacDonald wanted to “offer no hospitality to the views of a Leviathan State whether based upon the will of a monarch or that of a Parliamentary majority.” His support for direct action was not without its qualifications, however. In order for direct action to gain popular support, he argued, it must be taken only rarely. “Therefore,” he wrote, “the only conditions under which an agitation for ‘direct action’ to secure political ends can ever become a serious thing are themselves a safeguard against the habitual use, which would be the abuse, of the weapon.” And direct action should “only be used to support representative government.”

In his brief political biography, Austen Morgan notes that MacDonald “toyed with the idea of ‘direct action’” after the Labour Party conference in 1919 but implies that he then became a firm opponent of it. Clearly, though, his “toying” went on for some time. In his 1921 study course for ILP members on the history of the ILP, MacDonald recognizes the danger of armed resistance to socialism by supporters of capitalism and notes that, in view of this possibility, “the idea of a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ crept into Socialist theories of action.” However, this “dictatorship” had as its purpose the defence of “a democracy that had declared itself constitutionally” in the face of “a revolutionary capitalist minority opposing, by arms or otherwise, the majority will.” The dictatorship of the proletariat, MacDonald continued,

was never meant to imply that a minority, by seizing political or military power, could force society to become Socialist. Be clear about this (because your Communist sections of the I.L.P. are not at all clear) this is purely the action of a majority wishing to establish Socialism of its
own will, and not a minority forcing it on a country. It has nothing to do with "dictatorship."³⁰

The breadth of MacDonald’s interpretation of what was “constitutional” was evident in his defence of the Council of Action set up by the Labour Party and the TUC in 1920, when war with Russia seemed imminent.³¹ “When people talk of the Council [of Action] being unconstitutional they talk nonsense,” he wrote in a Socialist Review article. “Everything necessary to protect the constitution is constitutional, if constitutional means anything at all except obedience to any outrageous acts done by men who happen to be Ministers.”³² As Dowse points out, in this respect, MacDonald shared the nearly unanimous view held in the ILP.³³

A Shift Towards the Left: MacDonald as Tactician

In 1895, Justice, the SDF weekly, had referred to MacDonald as “that trimming gentleman.”³⁴ There are certainly signs of “trimming”—or, more kindly, of the adaptation of ideas to circumstances—in his pronouncements in the period after the war when he was absent from the House of Commons. As Dowse points out, MacDonald’s outlook changed considerably between the “khaki election” at the end of 1918 and his return to Parliament almost four years later, in November 1922. During what Dowse describes as this “brief period of revolutionary grace and virtue,” MacDonald voiced ideas that were “quite different from those he held in the prewar period or in the post-1922 years.”³⁵

In Socialism After the War, published in 1917, MacDonald conceded that socialism “must be rid completely of the idea of the servile political and military State.”³⁶ This statement reflected both MacDonald’s reaction to the war and his concerns about the concentration of power in the hands of the government. The idea of “the servile state” derived from Hilaire Belloc’s book of that title, published in 1912. A strong proponent of distributism, the idea derived from Catholic social teaching that advocates for widespread property ownership, Belloc argued that state-sponsored capitalism or socialism, whereby certain individuals were obliged by law to labour for the benefit of others, threatened a return to slavery. Although Belloc was not a socialist, coming to his views from a very different place on the political spectrum, his book generated much interest among socialists at the time, especially those wary of state-controlled forms of socialism and of the possibility that the nationalization of industry would lead to the loss of workers’ control over the terms of their labour.

MacDonald was an opponent of “direct democracy”—the initiative and referendum favoured by many in the British socialist movement—as well as of Jowett’s ideas of parliamentary reform. All the same, he favoured strengthening
the accountability to MPs of the executive, and, even if he did not share the views of those who wanted to see an end to “cabinet government,” he would still go some way in their direction regarding the role of House of Commons committees. “The representative assembly must be the seat of power and not the handmaiden of Ministers,” he insisted in *Socialism After the War*:

> For some time Parliament itself has been sinking into a state of feeble servitude to the Cabinet and Executive. It has no real control over finance, it has absolutely no control over the Foreign Office, and about international affairs it does not know enough to suspect when it is being lied to; it cannot introduce its own legislation or express its own mind in the division lobbies.

It might therefore be “wise,” he continued, to set up new forms of control by having parliamentary committees attached to “the great departments of State, especially those of Foreign Affairs and Finance.” That sounded not unlike the case that Jowett had been making since before the war. Was MacDonald coming around to his point of view?

While he reiterated his opposition to proportional representation, which he saw as the preserve of the “superior oddity,” he seemed to modify his position even on this issue. He would never advocate proportional representation, he declared, “but if the tyranny of uniformity and conformity cannot be broken by the intelligence of constituencies, let us have the evil of Proportional Representation, with a chance that a few adherents of independence may be returned to break down the iron ring of party obedience.”

MacDonald’s *Parliament and Revolution*, written in the summer of 1919, when enthusiasm across the British Left for the Russian soviets was at its height, was reviewed in *Labour Leader* by John Bruce Glasier, the one member of Grayson’s “quartette” who was never in Parliament. In Glasier’s estimation, “perhaps the most surprising thing in the book” was MacDonald’s proposal “for a sort of Soviet Second Chamber of Parliament.” This was particularly surprising, he wrote, coming from someone “who has implacably opposed all devices calculated to lessen the responsibility of the popularly elected House of Commons.”

In the book, MacDonald defended a territorial system of constituencies based on residential areas and representing individuals as citizens, rather than one based on trade or profession—a system of representation sometimes called “functional” democracy. He also argued against a parliament composed of representatives of constituencies founded on such narrow interests. At the same time, he conceded that Parliament was “moved by class interests and class assumptions” and urged the need for “a reform of the governing machine” that
would bring the country’s “industrial life” into “more direct and certain contact with its political life.”

To this end, the House of Lords should be replaced by “a Second Chamber on a Soviet franchise,” one that was democratically elected by members of specific groups:

Guilds or unions, professions and trades, classes and sections could elect to the Second Chamber their representatives, just as Scottish peers do now. It would enjoy the power of free and authoritative debate (no mean power); it could initiate legislation, and it could amend the Bills of the other Chamber; it could conduct its own enquiries, and be represented on Government and Parliamentary Commissions and Committees.

At the time that *Parliament and Revolution* appeared, in 1919, a number of currents, on the Left in general, and within the ILP, were moving in a similar direction. Many on the Left were attracted to the Russian idea of soviets—perceived as councils controlled by the workers and elected in the workplace—and faith in soviets as a brave new form of democracy was central both to the appeal of the Bolshevists and to the case for ILP affiliation to the Third International. Others, including some of the younger members of the ILP, were drawn to guild socialism, which attempted to combine both “geographic” and “industrial” representation for citizen and worker.

David Marquand argues that *Parliament and Revolution* was “in many ways the most effective polemic MacDonald ever wrote.” Certainly, MacDonald’s apparent change of heart and accommodation to at least some of the views that were now so popular on the Left was more likely to win him friends among ILP socialists than a simple reiteration of his commitment to parliamentary government. That commitment still remained, of course, but it was now presented in a way that took account of the attraction of the alternatives now so popular on the Left. He did, however, urge caution: “It is not good enough for us to fly from the State to the National Guilds, or from Parliament to Soviets, because public opinion has so often baffled us and because dishonest men are elected to the seats of princes.”

“War is always destructive of the social status quo,” MacDonald wrote, and “to-day we are in revolutionary times.” As a result of the war, “capitalism as the ruling power in Society” had been challenged. The working class had had “to be made a national co-partner,” the “national control of mines and railways” had proved necessary, and the “wholesale pillage of national wealth by landlords and capitalists” had been revealed to the public. The question was whether “intelligent labour” could seize the revolutionary moment before it passed.

MacDonald was well aware of the sympathy of most ILP members for the Russian Revolution and the Bolshevists, a sympathy made uneasy, in many
cases, by doubts about the latter’s authoritarian methods. In *Parliament and Revolution*, he shrewdly appealed to both these sentiments which can only have helped to take some of the steam out of the “Left Wing” campaign for Third International affiliation:

We repudiate the right of the capitalist critics of the Russian revolution to condemn the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia, not only because their speeches show the most idiotic ignorance of the subject, but because their own actions and methods deprive them of the right of criticism. But Socialists ought to maintain a wider and higher view than that of capitalist subjection. A proletarian democracy dependent upon a mass, the political function of which is to receive the stamp of some governing minority is unthinkable. The prospects of such a state are indeed deplorable.

The notion that “capitalist methods of repression and force can be used by socialists” and that “a rule of tyranny is necessary as a preliminary to a reign of liberty” was, he warned, like the “parrot cry” of recent years that the war would put an end to war.46

The injustices of capitalism were all too evident but MacDonald went on to point out that the Bolsheviks had “not applied a single principle” other than those that “governing orders all over the world” had themselves applied nor had they “committed an atrocity” that these regimes had not also “committed or condoned.” It was merely that the tables had been turned, which capitalist critics of the revolution hypocritically viewed as reason for outrage. “When the masters murdered the slaves,” MacDonald wrote, “no one troubled; when the slaves murdered the masters the world was shocked.” But only those who rejected all such double standards had the right to criticize: “Those of us to whom murder and starvation are always murder and starvation whoever may be the victims are alone entitled to condemn.”47 A revolution founded on dictatorship could not be sustained. The “Moscow Government” would either fall or, abandoning its inflexible program, would “commence the work of evolutionary revolution and democratic education,” MacDonald predicted.48

Within the ILP, views on Bolshevik Russia covered quite a wide range. There were, of course, the enthusiasts of the Left Wing of the ILP, some of whom did not defect to the CPGB after the decision in 1921 not to seek Comintern affiliation. There were early ILP critics of the Bolsheviks such as Dr. Alfred Salter, the well-known and distinguished Bermondsey medical practitioner, pacifist, and, as of 1922, Labour MP. After a much more equivocal start, critics also included Philip Snowden and, especially, his wife, Ethel, after her visit to Russia as part of the Labour Party/TUC delegation.49 But the largest body of
opinion in the party was, almost certainly, those who felt that, although Bolshevik methods and institutions might be necessary and worthy of support, at least in the short term, in the case of Russia, they were inappropriate for Britain. MacDonald played to this part of his audience with great skill: “The Russian Revolution has been one of the great events in the history of the world, and the attacks that have been made upon it by frightened ruling classes and hostile capitalism should rally to its defence everyone who cares for liberty and the freedom of thought. But it is Russian.”

This equivocal attitude was reflected in his judgement on “the dictatorship of the proletariat”:

A dictatorship to maintain the revolution in its critical eruptive stages may be tolerated; but a dictatorship through the period of reconstruction, a dictatorship from which is to issue the decrees upon which the reconstruction of Society is based, is absolutely intolerable. No Socialist worth anything would submit to such a thing. It can be maintained only in such diffused communities as Russia; it can be admired only by Socialists at a distance.

One objection to “soviet” government that was widely voiced at the time concerned its use of a restrictive franchise, which denied the vote to those deemed to be members of the “bourgeoisie.” But MacDonald would have none of this criticism. Compared to the British situation, the Russian arrangement had “no reason to be ashamed of itself.” The Conservative Party would, after all, “still disfranchise the mass of the workers (except in so far as it has discovered useful tools in them),” while the House of Lords was “frankly a class organ, with power to alter and veto most of the work of the House of Commons.” And, he argued, “the special test which our Franchise Law recognises—the educational one—is as great a failure as could well be, for the representatives sent by Oxford and Cambridge to the House of Commons have been mostly undistinguished and unenlightened.” The Soviet franchise thus applied “no new principle”: it was simply “the disenfranchisement of the rich by the wage-earner,” rather than the other way around. Indeed, a “Second Chamber representative of industrial experience and the wage-earning class” was, MacDonald wrote, “a far more intelligent organ of government than one representing the aristocracy of a country.”

As his title might suggest, MacDonald did have proposals for parliamentary reform. As an appendix to Parliament and Revolution, he included his “Memorandum on House of Commons Business Presented to the Advisory Committee of the Labour Party on the Machinery of Government” of August 1917. Here, he had complained that “a Private Member has become a mere follower and supporter of the Government, with little initiative, little
independence, and little power." In addition, there was the time-wasting that resulted from the “notion that it is the business of an Opposition to obstruct,” which had “brought subservience to the Cabinet in its train, together with closure rules that destroy discussion.” MacDonald proposed a legislation committee that would “take a wider survey of national needs” — a committee able to summon ministers for consultation and liaise with any Commons committees.53 He criticized the role of the Whips, arguing that there was “perhaps no greater scandal in the whole procedure of the House of Commons,” and he argued for a Commons resolution to “put an end to the practice of considering every trifling amendment as a declaration of want of confidence in the Government.” Turning to the idea of departmental committees, he considered their possible roles in some detail and concluded that they should consult with ministers and represent Parliament in keeping in touch with departmental policy. But, he added, “these committees will not supplant, but supplement the Cabinet.”54

In the main text of the book, MacDonald presented other proposals for change, among them devolution, which had very strong support in the ILP. In April 1920, the ILP conference unanimously agreed on the demand for Scottish home rule, while the agenda for the meeting of the Scottish Divisional Council early in January 1921 included motions from twelve branches demanding a constituent assembly for Scotland. Glasgow’s Partick branch wanted a Scottish Parliament based on adult suffrage, with elected representatives limited to one session in office and granted “delegate powers only,” that would function in tandem with procedures for a “form of initiative” allowing constituents to propose legislation to be decided by referendum.55 For MacDonald, devolution encompassed the transfer of important powers not only to Scotland and Wales but also to English regional government: “There are many powers which Yorkshire and Durham could exercise without interference from Whitehall, and if greater districts than counties arranged in natural groups determined by old historical differences and more modern economic ones were created which made their Councils really important, new life and reality would be infused into politics.”56

MacDonald concluded Parliament and Revolution with his view of the role of the ILP. It was a product of British history and British conditions, he declared, situating the provenance of the party at a junction of several different traditions: “It found the Radical movement as one ancestor, the trade union movement as another, the intellectual proletarian movement—Chartism and the earlier Socialist thinkers like Owen, Hall, Thompson—as another; the Continental Socialists—especially Marx—as still another.” MacDonald did not hesitate to claim the mantle of Marx for the ILP. The party had come into
being, he wrote, “after the Liberal political revolution, and it therefore joins democracy to Socialism, carrying on in this respect the work of Marx.”

At the same time, MacDonald was adept at wrong-footing would-be revolutionaries in the ILP. In April 1920, in an open letter addressed “To a Young Member of the I.L.P.,” he managed to associate them simultaneously with the “cataclysmic” socialism that he claimed had existed in Britain before the ILP came on the scene and with the elitism of the Fabians. “At that time there was no word of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat,” he wrote, “but there was the corresponding Fabian idea that by clever manipulation you could capture the Government and thus give an innocent nation the benefits of the rule of an enlightened Junta.”

It was this polemical dexterity, no doubt, that led John Maclean to blame MacDonald’s “timely and cunning appeals” for turning ILP opinion around on the subject of Third International affiliation. While his comment probably credited even someone as influential as MacDonald with rather too much in the way of powers of persuasion, given that other factors were at work, Maclean did have a point. After all, MacDonald’s constitutional conservatism and his preference for gradualism—for “evolutionary revolution”—had been readily apparent even before the war.

MacDonald’s Socialism: Critical and Constructive, which appeared in the second half of 1921, might seem to include a certain retreat from his support, in Parliament and Revolution, for a functional approach to representation, at least in the form of “a Second Chamber on a Soviet franchise.” Clement J. Bundock, reviewing the new book for Labour Leader, observed that MacDonald’s “resistance to the functional theory of the Guildsmen” was noteworthy “at a time when the Sovietists stress it as the ideal form of representation.” By way of evidence, Bundock pointed to MacDonald’s “assertion that a guild of school teachers controlling education to the exclusion of all other members of the community is a vilely reactionary and subversive proposal.”

In the passage from Socialism: Critical and Constructive from which Bundock quoted, MacDonald certainly does express misgivings about democratic structures based on occupational group. But, rather than outright rejecting such structures, he is cautioning against an uncritical embrace of the soviet-style approach to representation, which, in his view, had the potential to undermine the ultimate aims of the socialist movement:

The Socialist hopes to make mechanical production—the mere toiling part of life—of diminishing relative importance to the cultural part of life, the part that is true living; and as intelligence increases this demand will be made by the workmen with increasing emphasis. Therefore, we must be careful not to construct a political system based on the assumption that workshop differences are to continue to be so important as they
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are at present, or that the divisions created by the antagonisms of capital and labour, or the excessive toil caused by capitalist expropriation and inefficiency, are to last.60

As he had made clear on the previous page, MacDonald’s concern lay with the potential of “functional” democracy to privilege industrial allegiance over citizenship. “He who bases the State on the workshop or the profession,” he wrote, “can never expect to create the civic State.”61

All the same, MacDonald’s critical assessment of the limitations of guilds as the basis for democratic representation does not negate the impression that, in his writings of the early postwar period, he was willing to go at least some way towards accommodating the ideas popular among relatively radical ILP members. Indeed, in *Socialism: Critical and Constructive*, he returns to the notion of an “industrial chamber” of Parliament, one that would “act in the capacity of advisor and administrator in the industrial activities of the community” and serve as “the link between the political and the industrial State.” Such a body, MacDonald declared, “would meet all the legitimate political requirements of the functionalists and the Guild Socialists,” while sparing the community “the confusion which would follow the adoption of their fanciful political structures.”62

MacDonald’s views on a wide range of issues—from parliamentary reform to Russia, from industrial democracy to devolution—might still be far too timid for a Left Winger heading towards defection to the CPGB and, on some points, such as the role of the cabinet or guild socialism, for other radical currents within the ILP. However, from their point of view, he did seem to have moved, and to continue to be moving, in a promising direction. And it was this more apparently radical MacDonald who was to be defeated in the supposedly “safe” Woolwich by-election—the loss that angry members of the ILP and the Labour Party blamed on the Left Wing and their Communist comrades. It was not only the Reverend William J. Piggot who complained about those who “torpedoed their Comrade’s work.”63

In the early 1920s, MacDonald clearly needed the ILP as a sort of political insurance policy, if nothing else. Indeed, he was to remain a member of the party until 1930. That he still had a large degree of ownership of the ILP in the early 1920s is illustrated by his prominent role on the NAC, his frequent speaking engagements, his weekly column in the Glasgow-based *Forward*, and his numerous contributions to *Labour Leader*. It is also evident in his editorship of the ILP’s *Socialist Review* and his confidence in attempting to guide the education of members with his *History of the I.L.P*.

In spite of his apparent shift to more radical positions during his exile from the House of Commons a degree of distrust of MacDonald was certainly
present within the ILP. However, this suspicion was more than balanced by the optimistic support that he was still able to generate. For Robert McKenzie, writing in the 1950s, MacDonald exemplified Weber’s “charismatic leader.”

Few things seem to date faster, of course, than political charisma. But even though MacDonald’s rhetoric might not go down well today, there is plenty of testimony, often from hostile sources, to its effectiveness in its day.

In the aftermath of the war, the Labour Party was swiftly replacing the Liberals as the alternative to the Conservative Party, as well as rapidly approaching the point where it might form a government. At least to a degree, the hard edges of radical socialism within the ILP had been softened by some of the pacifists and former Liberals who had joined the party. And, for a while, the ILP was gaining both prestige and numbers through its association with the Labour Party’s electoral advance—and through MacDonald’s own close association with the ILP. With its radicalism muted in concession to the Labour Party mainstream, the ILP might have found a role as a support group for MacDonald. It would be the experience of Labour in office that finally closed this route of escape from the ILP’s dilemma. Meanwhile, there was one more escape route to be tried and tested—one that did not necessarily conflict with the role of providing support to MacDonald.