



## Harold Laski (1893-1950)

P. ADDISON, CHURCHILL AND THE HOME FRONT 1900-1955, 1992

At some point between the retreat from Dunkirk and the start of the blitz, a curtain fell in public life. Conservatism, as it had been preached and practised in the 1930s, began to lose its respectability. The patriotic revival of 1940 led to the repudiation of pre-war foreign policy as weak and shameful. Meanwhile Labour politicians and the publicists of the Left led a powerful assault on the domestic record of the National Government. Never again, it was argued, must the social conditions of the 1930s be allowed to return. There must be, as Harold Laski wrote, 'no more distressed areas, no more vast armies of unemployed, no more slums, no vast denial of equality of opportunity.'<sup>1</sup>

This was a people's war, radicals and socialists declared, and must lead to a people's peace. The working classes, in other words, must be rewarded for their participation in the war effort by the construction of a new social order. The cloudy promises of politicians would not suffice: plans must be ready by the end of the war, and post-war reconstruction treated as an integral part of the war effort. The demand for post-war plans ranged well beyond the Labour party. *The Times* and *The Economist* were consistent advocates of a bold collectivist programme and so was the new Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, appointed by Churchill in February 1942. The movement for social reconstruction was, in fact, diverse in character

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880*, 1989, p. 414.

and certainly included some Conservatives. But the response of the Conservative party as a whole was uncertain.

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Churchill's own conceptions of post-war policy were slowly and reluctantly formed but not as vague as is sometimes thought. It is often said that in his concentration on the war he was oblivious of the future but this is not entirely true. His sentiments were strongly conservative and left to himself he would have continued, with some improvements, the social and economic policies of the 1930s. The course of wartime politics compelled him to commit himself, in principle at least, to a programme of social reform which included employment policy, a comprehensive programme of social insurance, and a National Health Service. But the key to social policy was finance, and Churchill warned that no binding financial commitments could be entered into in wartime. The implementation of post-war reforms would have to depend upon the state of the economy, and the Government's ability to pay for them.

To this extent, the Churchill of 1945 was a social reformer. But he distinguished as sharply as ever between welfare reforms and socialism. The war, indeed, with its apparatus of rationing and controls and restrictions on personal liberty, stimulated his fear of socialism. He was strongly opposed to the doctrine of economic planning and his vision of the future, as the war drew to a close, was libertarian: the restoration of market forces, but tempered by a national minimum

standard of welfare. As [Rab] Butler put it to [Lord] Woolton in September 1944: ‘The Prime Minister’s fundamental idea of politics was a mixture of the old liberal doctrines of cheap food and free trade, combined with the Tory democracy of his father.’<sup>2</sup>

(Paul Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front, 1900-1955*, London: Pimlico, 1993 [1992], pp. 357 & 358.)

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<sup>2</sup> Note by R.A. Butler of 8 September 1944, Butler Papers G16, Trinity College, Cambridge.