

BOOKS

Practical Government

THOUGHTS ON THE CONSTITUTION. By the Rt. Hon. L. S. Amery. Geoffrey Cumberlege: Oxford University Press.

THIS short book, four lectures recently delivered in Oxford, is a vigorous treatise on practical government. Mr. Amery's own life-long knowledge of the British political system, added to a rich awareness of the moral background of politics, equip him to deal with constitutional problems with a realism and a frank facing up to the need for change which in no way contradict his devotion to tradition. Perhaps the firmest tradition we have is that the constitution is not a master but a servant; it is something flexible and living, not a constricting mould which must be either accepted or broken.

A great change has come over the British Parliament since the 19th Century. Then, every measure could be debated at full length; the nation too could concentrate on a few large themes of political difference and give them adequate attention. The grand difficulty in modern parliaments is the volume of necessary legislation. "The 'best club in London' has become an overworked legislation factory." While Mr. Amery's first lecture brilliantly summarises the spirit of the constitution ("The combination of responsible leadership by government with responsible criticism in Parliament"), his second is entitled "How to Preserve Parliamentary Government," and is preoccupied with the shifting elsewhere of some of the dead weight of hard work from the shoulders of over-driven members, labouring like oxen in the yoke of the party machine. He suggests that the House of Lords, which conserves a valuable independence, would benefit by the gradual change to life peerages and play a stronger role. A third chamber, "A House of Industry," might, in a partly advisory and always subordinate capacity, share some of the burdens of the House of Commons.

The third lecture, "The Machinery of Government," has a valuable analysis of how the British Cabinet actually functions. In sketching its development he cites instances where the 19th Century informality of procedure, discussions without minutes being taken and only the vaguest of resolutions, on occasion produced the ludicrous result of two Ministers leaving the Cabinet room with diametrically opposed notions of what had been decided and thereafter pursuing opposite policies in their own departments. Cabinet proceedings were given a greater formality by that brilliant innovator, Lloyd George, who, in establishing the first War Cabinet in 1916, imitated the businesslike methods of the Committee of Imperial Defence. Mr. Amery feels that the greatest weakness of ordinary Cabinet government under modern conditions is the pressure of business on Ministers: they are obliged to live from hand to mouth, too busy with routine administration to have time to shape the broad development of policy. He suggests a Super-Cabinet of about six, with no departmental duties, bringing into their discussions, whenever needed, the Ministers holding the appropriate portfolios, and also meeting separately to work out future policy.

The last lecture, the "Evolution of the British Commonwealth," will have the strongest interest for New Zealand readers. There is that interesting small sidelight on Ward-Massey relations. The Imperial War Cabinet was an "outstanding success" and "was bound together by a common sense of responsibility for a common cause even if it was not, in the narrower sense, collectively responsible to a single Parliament," being, as Sir Robert Borden called it, "a Cabinet of Governments rather than of Ministers." With a good deal of astuteness Mr. Amery points out how, after the 1914-18 war, the League of Nations drew something of a red herring across the path of the fruitful development of Commonwealth relations: it afforded the Dominions the opportunity "to assert their individual international status without, in fact, incurring any serious individual responsibilities. For, to speak quite frankly, nobody in their heart of hearts took the League obligations too seriously." Some would recoil from this last judgment and regret Mr. Amery's cynical view of the League, a point of view it is easier to hold to-day than was perhaps possible even 10 years ago.

Mr. Amery, who has been constantly associated with Imperial politics from the days of Milner and who in 1924 founded the Dominions Office as a distinct department, speaks with unrivalled authority on Commonwealth relations. He thinks highly of the beneficial effects of the Ottawa agreements. Perhaps he is a little inclined to find the bonds of unity between Britain and the Dominions stronger than we always feel them to be at the perimeter. The unity which meets such an emergency as a war so effectively may hide a quite astonishing degree of incompatibility of temperament which cannot be pushed aside as "the survival of an older anti-Downing Street complex." These lectures were delivered before the New Deal in India. The admission to full Dominion status of Ceylon, Burma, the two Indias, and who knows what other areas in the future, will undoubtedly work profound changes in the scope and character of Commonwealth unity, perhaps, one may conjecture, giving a greater material strength while weakening the older spiritual identity.

This book is strikingly free from a party point of view. Mr. Amery perhaps leans a little towards the political outlook of his opponents, in that he fully accepts the need for governments today to regulate larger and larger areas of what in the 19th Century was still "private life." (True, he does talk with a certain indulgence of some Socialist "vagaries" now "toned down" by the "full responsibility of office.") Few men in modern political life have such a right as Mr. Amery to bear the too-lightly bestowed title of statesman. The large view looking back to remote principles and the firm grasp of the actual political and administrative situation give his opinions unique value. This book will remain important for many years as a realistic statement of how British government works and of the great traditions which mould the present and make of its confusion a coherent form. His keen concern to make British government work better still is prompted by

(continued on next page)

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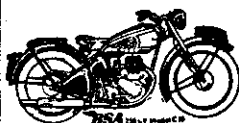
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