

Our Justification

We can all rejoice in the refreshing realism with which the *Times* spoke of the projected mission of the Prime Minister to the United States (says the *New Witness* for July 22). The theatrical indignation in the Government press of this country is the best tribute to the truth of the statement. But except for momentary amusement we need none of us dwell on the talk about "withdrawing" or "substantiating" an incredible and unheard-of attack on the honor of the Prime Minister. And the case for the *Times* is far too strong for us to wish to spoil it by exaggeration. It would be a misunderstanding of the danger to suggest that Americans would see anything entirely new or unnatural about Mr. George, as compared with their own professional politics; or that they would be startled by him as by a monster of political depravity. Mr. George is a type with which the Americans are all wearily familiar; a type which they despise, tolerate, watch, suspect, and use. The friends of the Prime Minister might well point out, with eagerness, that he is no worse than half a hundred Tammany bosses or Republican wire-pullers, the ordinary showy parasites and sham demagogues of the decline of representative government. The Americans are so far a genuine and direct democracy. They have no illusions about their official servants. But the point is that they have had illusions about ours. Up to the Marconi case most of them believed, and even after the Marconi case many still manage to believe, that our politics are more decent and dignified than theirs. Whether this is a sheer illusion, or whether it corresponds to some truth in the lingering legend of genuine aristocracy, it is obvious that the impression or illusion is of very great value to the prestige of this country. So long as a large section of a foreign people honestly feels that the English system, whatever its other faults, specialises in some sort of a strange animal called a gentleman, and has certain scruples and points of honor rather peculiar to itself, our credit is greatly strengthened in moral and even in material things. The embassy of Rufus Isaacs shook that impression; the embassy of Lloyd George would destroy it.

But our own relation to this question is much more practical and particular. It illustrates the advantages of having told the whole truth from the beginning, and the disadvantages of only telling half the truth at the end. In recent days we all owe a great deal to the *Times* for having told far more of the truth than any contemporary paper. Lord Northcliffe will have done a great and good work before he dies; and that is something to say of any man in modern journalism; and especially of any man whom there has been, in our view, so much just reason for reproaching in the past. But it is certain that the things which his papers concealed in the past are the very things which they need for their own justification in the present. The *Times* journalist is like a man who cannot prove his case against an enemy, because he has already burned the documents that incriminated him when he was a friend. When the Northcliffe Press was insisting on the Lloyd George Premiership, it was strictly forbidden to insist on the Marconi Scandal. Now it obviously remembers the Marconi Scandal, but it cannot use the one obvious argument against the Lloyd George Premiership. It can hardly affirm in its hour of repentance what it denied in its day of infatuation. We ourselves believe in the courage and sincerity, in this matter, of the present writers on the *Times*; and we do not believe for a moment that they will "withdraw" their new condemnation. But in logic what they ought to withdraw is their old acquittal. If the *Times* had referred half as plainly to the deeds of a Marconi Minister, at the time when he was actually doing them, he probably would not have survived in politics to do any more. But a newspaper never has sufficient continuity to have real memory or real regret. We take it that the present writers would really be glad to review candidly the meaning of the Marconi type of politics, if they could do it without reflection on the past policy of their paper. And this is what makes it relevant here to remember the past policy of our own. If anybody asks us to substantiate such a personal charge against Mr. George, we could do it in the utmost detail. We could do it now because we did

it long ago. We could describe all the strange evolutions of Mr. George's stockbroker, and elucidate the whole mysterious prosecution of the *Matin*. All the facts can be found in our own files; they have never been answered; and they cannot be answered. But if anybody asks the Northcliffe journalists to justify their generalisation, and if the Northcliffe journalists say that such facts are enough to justify it, it will not be altogether unnatural if Mr. George and his friends answer, "Why didn't you say so at the time?"

Thus we come back to our own original position; that there is no substitute for an independent paper; for only an independent paper can be a consistent paper. Only a free press can act on reasons that remain, and not on motives that alter. Any other paper may be right; but it is right by accident. It cannot be trusted to keep itself right, or even to prove itself right. It may pursue a man with hostility, and even with hatred, but we are never sure that it will pursue an argument with logic and sincerity. It will sling mud to-day and whitewash to-morrow; and it is capable of persecution but not of perseverance. For it is not determined by intellectual doctrines which can endure a continuous appeal; it is determined by individual quarrels, friendships, rivalries, alliances and conspiracies in the world of high politics and finance. Now that Lord Northcliffe disbelieves in Mr. George (probably quite sincerely) his journalists can say anything about American missions. When Lord Northcliffe believed in Mr. George (probably quite sincerely) his journalists could say nothing about American Marconis.

This one incident alone would have justified the existence of *The New Witness*. It is the claim of *The New Witness* that it has been called personal for being impartial. In other words, it has been called fanatical for being impartial. Its denunciations do not start suddenly after a quarrel, nor are they liable to end abruptly with a reconciliation. The most inane and incredible things have been said against this paper: it has been supposed to aim solely at the murder of Jews, or solely at the triumph of foreigners; it has been credited with desiring to combine regicide in the state with wife-beating in the home. But nobody was ever able even to suggest that anybody in our group had any private quarrel to make him quarrelsome. Not only had we no individual interest, but we had no individual enmity. It is because we have no axe to grind that we have no hatchet to bury; or have not the smallest intention of burying it. What we thought of Mr. George when the Tories were told to revile him as a ragged demagogue, that we thought of him when the Tories were told to revere him as a heroic patriot; and that we shall still think of him if the Tories are told to revile him again as a compromising coward and peacemonger. For the true law by which he is to be judged lies deeper than all these labels; and in the light of that law his whole course has been as consistent as it has been calamitous. He is one small illustration of the large fact: that our old political aristocracy has become a plutocracy, and is therefore perishing. He never meant anything more than this, in Criccieth or Westminster, in Limehouse or Versailles. He never will mean any more than this, if his millionaire masters make him President of the League of Nations or Emperor of the World State. He will never be anything worse than what we have always known him to be: a small symptom of decay. The historical truth is that up to the Marconi case the critics of our country said, "England does not know"; and after the Marconi case they said, "England does not care." And it is the failure of all our fashionable journalism that it cannot play a consistent part in history; even in the history of ten or twelve consecutive years. Amid this chaos and fluctuation, there are a few papers which test passing events by a sincere and serious view of history. Very few of them exist; and any one of them is in daily danger of ceasing to exist.

Such a crisis may soon recur in our own affairs, in spite of the generosity with which our friends have supported us; and before there is any question of accepting failure, we wish to record once more the essentials of our justification. It can be found symbolically in this single fact: that men admit in practice, long afterwards, what we have stated in principle long before. Another example can be found in the