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Report From Britain, 18 February 1950

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REPORT FROM BRITAIN
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Aberdeen, Scotland
February 18, 1950

What may prove to be Britain's most decisive election is slightly less than a week off and many of the heavy weights have begun to slug in the clinches. Churchill's implied promise of more petrol if the Conservatives are returned and his suggestion that the temporary de-rationing of candy last summer may have been framed for failure are thought by some to have come pretty close to the belt. Others claim that the masterly manipulation of figures by the Chancellor of the Exchequer has broken every rule in the financial books.

Americans who hope for Britain to follow the course of Australia in the expectation of becoming gleeful spectators at the funeral of the welfare state should realize that to a considerable degree the Tories have duplicated Republican strategy of recent years. They have even claimed, somewhat belatedly, parenthood of a semi-socialism and have certainly promised to carry out most of Labor's program but to do it more effectively. This means that whoever comes into power will not attack the social services (including nationalized medicine), farmers will continue to be heavily subsidized, controls will be kept as long as necessary, and there will be no alteration in Britain's foreign policy.

Throughout the campaign Labor's emphasis has been on its record of full employment and fair shares. It never tires of describing the sorry history of unemployment and despair in the 30's and claims that the masses have never been so secure. With great gusto it compares the present stage of Britain's industrial recovery with that of the continental nations.

In contrast the Conservatives suggest that full employment would have been impossible without Marshall aid. They insist that security is an illusion that will be dissipated long before 1952 if the opposition remains in power. Their chief war cry, however, has to do with inefficiency, lack of housing, and inflation. They will, if returned, lower prices and restore the value of the pound. Tory leaders constantly refer to losses in nationalized industries, the African peanut fiasco, the Palestine mess, and the crime of devaluation.

The significant question to be settled by the election is whether nationalization will be

stopped or accelerated. Both sides agree that 80% of industry is still in the hands of free enterprise. It might be argued that so far most of the businesses which have been taken over have consisted of natural monopolies or those which were on or close to the rocks -- such as coal. The Tories couldn't do much to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. But they could prevent the nationalization of steel which has already been accepted by Parliament. Steel is probably Britain's most highly successful industry, the backbone of her whole economy. Labor's success means the socialization of steel and sugar, insurance, and cement will come tumbling after. Britain would then be on a road from which there could be no turning back. That is, as I see it, the whole point of this election.

In the several hundred speeches that I have heard and read I have found little discussion of relations with the United States. That is not a point of disagreement in spite of Churchill's plea for a mandate to deal directly with Stalin. The Truman administration has been wise in keeping strictly out of the election. There was some agitation in the United States to furnish Marshall aid on the condition of Britain's giving up her trend toward socialism. No British political party could have tolerated such interference. To have done so would have meant suicide. And it would have indicated a lack of realism on the part of the United States; in the main, Marshall aid is based on the idea that British-American cooperation has been mutually beneficial in the past and may do so again. Whether the struggle with Russia be cold or hot, American economic aid is a small gesture compared to the potential assistance in time of need of fifty million stalwart Britishers.

I'm afraid that I have had to revise my estimate of the staid inhabitants of this island. Their insistence on everyone having his two cents worth has developed into the great national institution of heckling. Neither Churchill nor Attlee is immune. In the meetings that I have observed, the opposition files silently into the hall but at every opportunity breaks into the program with catcalls, mock laughter, or cries of "no! no!" Occasionally, as when Food Minister Strachey spoke in Aberdeen, an obstreperous individual has to be carried out bodily. But it is in the inevitable question period after the main speech that the embryonic orators have their fling. They hurl loaded questions by the dozen at the poor creature on the platform. This is

his true test. If he can handle his hecklers with poise, maintain his temper; and, preferably with humor, down his opponents one by one, the voters will take to him. Nye Bevan is a supreme practitioner of this art. The press takes more pleasure in presenting his devastating wise cracks than his principal arguments. Such procedure is a variation of the old stump speech of American frontier days.

There are other political practices peculiar to the natives of these shores. Here you need not reside in the district in which you run for Parliament. For instance, a lady barrister from London is the Labor nominee for South Aberdeen. Which is roughly the equivalent of Minnesota's Humphreys putting himself up from the capital of Mississippi. Some English candidates for Welsh areas can't even speak the language of their prospective constituents. Every British nominee has to put up a deposit of about \$400 which will be forfeit if he polls less than one-eighth of the votes in his district. This means, of course, that a good many of the hundred or so Communist candidates will make a contribution to the treasury. But not only the incumbent, all official nominees get free postage on a certain quantity of "literature" which they may desire to send out to the voters.

A couple of weeks ago I predicted a Labor victory. I'm beginning to think that I should have stuck to teaching history or describing the flora and fauna of the Outer Hebrides. (This morning an Aberdonian free enterpriser forecast for me a Conservative landslide.) There is no doubt about it -- the Tories have put up the more skilful campaign. It may be because they haven't had the cares of office, but they seem to have been better organized, to have been filled with the grim determination of the gambler who puts his all on a single cast of the dice. The punch and pep in their crusade is reflected in the difference in personality between Churchill and Attlee.

Labor's record of not losing a by-election has been illusory and a creator of over-confidence because it succeeded with an average six per cent drop in votes. This would not be fatal on a country-wide basis. Most everyone admits that the race will be close, close enough perhaps for the Liberals to have the balance of power, which would probably mean another election within the year.

On the other hand, the calm and plainspoken Attlee has once broken the spell by humbling

the great war leader. The working classes are undoubtedly better off relatively, and perhaps actually, than they were twelve years ago. Whether for good or evil, there is something abroad in the land which is occasionally interpreted as an unwillingness to shoot Santa Claus. I can't help feeling that the overwhelmingly Conservative press has been misleading us again, and that the same general groups which kept Truman in the White House will speed Churchill back to the completion of his war memoirs.
