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Report From Britain, 6 February 1950

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REPORT FROM BRITAIN
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Aberdeen, Scotland
February 6, 1950

Here goes the beginning of the end of a budding journalistic career! In spite of every apparently sane reason for hedging, I walk boldly out to the edge of a very long limb in suggesting that Labor will be returned to power in Britain on February 23. Not that I'm particularly concerned about my newspaper efforts for I have long since discovered that this jauntily assumed undertaking really consists of a lot of hard work. Southern editors who agonize over these pieces of mine would, for the most part, like to see Churchill win, and if he does, there will be reason aplenty to say that Silver's comments on the situation in Britain make about as much sense as a matinee in a drive-in theater.

You have probably guessed that I have been wrong before: I still think in terms of President Dewey, and I just can't believe that the Japs were foolish enough to attack us in the Pacific.

British polls disagree as to the outcome of the election. The local Institute of Public Opinion favors Labor at the ratio of $45\frac{1}{2}$ to 44, but the "Daily Express" is confident that the Conservatives maintain a lead of $47\frac{1}{2}$ to $42\frac{1}{2}$. Lord Beaverbrook, of course, has pontificated from Jamaica that he is "certain that Mr. Churchill will triumph." The bright lads down in London's financial district have now swung over to the Conservatives in their betting. At least ninety percent of the press is anti-government. The Liberals are seen as probable victors only by the Liberals.

Back in 1945 nearly everyone predicted a Conservative victory; even Labor expected "a small majority either way," and was flabbergasted by the avalanche. Since that time labor has not lost a by-election and until recently political wiseacres have reasoned that a tide that had gone out so far could hardly reverse itself completely in five years. Americans are likely to forget, too, that Churchill's reputation is greater in America than in Britain -- as Roosevelt's is undoubtedly more universally acclaimed in this country than in the United States. In 1945 Churchill was at the height of his popularity and yet the people turned dramatically and overwhelmingly against him; from the standpoint of support of a man, they are more likely to do so now.

On the other hand, the Conservatives have waged a better campaign than they did in 1945. They have lost a certain arrogance; have been moderate in their condemnation of Cripps, Atlee, and Bevin; have emphasized the dangers inherent to liberty in further nationalization; and have repeatedly stated that they would not interfere with present social gains. In some ways they have followed the course of Dewey in 1948 in promising to do much of the same job as the opposition but to do it more effectively. But they have not let assumption of victory ease them into a state of lethargy.

In driving at the middle class vote, Labor has silenced its big guns of the extreme left. Mr. Bevin and Mr. Strachey seem to have disappeared. The emphasis has been on full employment and security. Party leaders glory in Churchill's great war leadership but describe him now as a tried old man.

To an outsider the most amazing thing about this contest is the restraining with which the British approach one of the most important elections in their entire history. There is no mudslinging. Very few personalities are mentioned. All parties apparently strive to keep within the legal limit of expenses. The British Broadcasting Company allots time for 11 20-to-30 minute broadcasts and divides it among the parties on an equitable basis. Between the dissolution of Parliament on February 3, and Polling Day on the 23rd, BBC revises "its programmes so as to exclude any item which might be held to influence the elector in recording his vote."

The Central Office of Information which has been sending me reference material for several months announces that this will be discontinued until the election is over. The Archbishops of Canterbury and York and the authorities of the Church of Scotland entreat their people to refrain from undue emotion during the campaign, to make their decisions on the basis of what is best for the country as a whole; and not to impute unworthy motives to candidates of whatever stripe. All this leads one to the conclusion that Britons are a very mature breed when it comes to government.

Every person with whom I have talked agrees that the outcome will be close, that whoever goes into office will do so by a slim majority. The Liberals could possibly hold the balance of power. But I strongly believe that Labor will come through in triumph, slight though it

may be. Most of my friends over here, outside the ranks of students, happen to be Conservative. Many of them are bitter about high taxation and the various restraints imposed by the present government. Most are honestly apprehensive regarding the alleged destruction of individual initiative. Nearly all, however, have told me in private that they fail to see Conservative victory. Even the overthrow of Labor in New Zealand and Australia doesn't give them much hope. They think that by and large newspapers will have no more success in fighting Labor than their counterparts have had in destroying the New and Fair Deals in America.

I have talked with hundreds of working class people since coming to Britain last September. These are the masses, the great inarticulate backbone of the country who seldom break into print as individuals. Anonymous as they may be, they remember the black despair of the depression years of unemployment. Rightly or wrongly, they blame the Conservatives. When the time comes for marking the ballot, I am convinced that they will go down the line in sufficient numbers to ensure the state planners another crack at office.
