

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada Ebook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with an FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: Democratic Control of Foreign Policy

Author: Murray, George Gilbert Aimé (1866-1957)

Date of first publication: February 1916 [Published in the Contemporary Review]

Edition used as base for this ebook: Faith, War, and Policy. Addresses and Essays on the European War. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, August 1917

Date first posted: 13 November 2011

Date last updated: 17 June 2014

Faded Page ebook#20111105

This ebook was produced by: James Wright, Jen Haines & the Online Distributed Proofreading Canada Team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by the Internet Archive/Columbia University Libraries

VI

DEMOCRATIC CONTROL OF FOREIGN POLICY

[1]

EVEN if this book were less good than it is, it would deserve reading for its admirable manners. It does not, indeed, convince my reason, but it leaves me with a profound respect for the tone and method of English politics at their best. No one would ever suspect from these pages of temperate and courteous argument that the author was a man who had just sacrificed his Parliamentary career to his principles, whose meetings were broken up by roughs, his person attacked, and his reputation assailed by gross calumny. This temper of mind is not only fine in itself, but particularly valuable in the present instance, inasmuch as it enables Mr. Ponsonby to clarify and to reduce to its true proportions a question on which political opinion has tended to run wild. Democratic Control has become a flag of battle. A bugbear to most orthodox supporters of the Government, it is a saving ideal to many sensitive and high-minded people who are half-maddened by the horrors that have descended upon us, and wish instinctively to explain them as the chastisement of some obvious sin.

Now, Mr. Ponsonby has really thought out the details of a scheme for securing greater Parliamentary and democratic control over foreign politics. It is not likely that his whole scheme will ever be adopted as it stands; but I think it will perform two public services. In the first place, if the Union of Democratic Control, to whom the book is dedicated, adopts it, it will substitute a definite programme for a vague cry; and, in the second place, I think it will make clear to most reasonable people that a reform which consists in certain far from startling changes in Parliamentary custom cannot possibly produce that transfiguration of international politics for which so many hearts are athirst.

Of course, Mr. Ponsonby's proposals for the future are based on a reading of the past, and, in my judgement, on a very serious misreading. "Diplomacy has failed." This is an outstanding "fact about which there can be no manner of dispute." I fear there can and must be. In a sense, of course, diplomacy has failed; just as one might say that law had failed whenever a burglar knocked down a policeman. But to most of us it seems a strangely shallow reading of events which finds the causes of the war in any mere perversity of Foreign Offices or any awkwardness in diplomatic machinery. It was not any bungling of diplomats that united the Powers of Europe against Napoleon.

Neither can I for a moment accept the statement that, in Great Britain, between 1906 and 1914, "the people's view of international relations was fundamentally different from the traditional view of Governments" (p. 39), or that the House of Commons did not know—and approve—the general line of policy followed by the Foreign Office (p. 58). Mr. Ponsonby himself complains elsewhere that it was impossible to stir up in the House of Commons enough opposition, or even curiosity, in the region of foreign policy to bring about a debate (pp. 48, 90, 99). This shows that there was at least no consciousness of a "fundamental difference." And no one will pretend that the secrecy practised by the Foreign Office was so complete and successful, that the "fundamental difference" was there without any one ever suspecting it. Further, it seems to me quite untrue, indeed peculiarly untrue, to say that, while Ministers are ready enough to make war speeches when occasion demands, no one "ever heard of a Minister going round and making peace speeches" in peace time (p. 29). I can remember not only "peace speeches" by various members of the Government, but what is far more useful, a great many semi-official societies and enterprises devoted to encouraging good relations with foreign nations, especially with Germany. Such movements could always calculate on influential support. Indeed, if Mr. Ponsonby can bring himself to read a book of Mr. Maxse's, entitled—very suitably—"Germany on the Brain," he will see that many persons lived for years in a state of habitual hysterics at the overfriendly tone towards Germany exhibited by all the members of the late Government.

Mr. Ponsonby is on firmer ground when he dwells upon the great power held in foreign affairs by the Executive, whether you regard that Executive as vested in the Cabinet or in the Foreign Secretary. (I think, by the way, that he considerably underestimates the element of Cabinet control. Does he really, for instance, imagine that Sir Edward Grey could have acted without the support of the Prime Minister?) He quotes in his second chapter some weighty opinions on this subject, especially from Lord Bryce and Mr. Austen Chamberlain. The Foreign Secretary has, without doubt, of late years ruled almost like a monarch over his vast domain; that is true, but what is the reason of it? The reason of it is that both Parliament and the country supported and trusted him. Suppose Mr. Ponsonby had been Foreign Secretary instead of

Sir Edward Grey: would he, too, have had that undisputed authority? Or would he have found the press and the House of Commons so apathetic and complaisant? Clearly not. The House of Commons would have bristled with threatening questions and motions of adjournment and full-dress party debates on foreign policy. And, as a necessary result, the Liberal and Conservative associations throughout the country would have been stirred, and the average voter would have formed vehement opinions about Mohammerah or Bunder Abbas or Fez, as circumstances might dictate.

In some passages Mr. Ponsonby sees and even emphasizes the truth of this. He admits that Parliament has not only been "ignorant and powerless," but "has been content to remain so" (p. 48). He complains that constituents have sometimes actually expressed disapproval of their member taking an intelligent interest in the affairs of foreign countries (p. 110). The blame then lies rather with democracy than with diplomacy, but the charge itself is true. Agents often have to warn young candidates against "too much foreign policy." This is partly, no doubt, due to the mere narrowness of interest which always goes with lack of knowledge and weakness of imagination; partly, I think, it is due to a more special and perhaps temporary cause. For workingmen often feel an instinctive, and not unnatural, suspicion of the speaker who seems unduly interested in remote places and peoples. They can be roused, of course, by a full-blooded tale of atrocities; but, short of that, they are either bored or they suspect that the speaker has some axe of his own to grind. And they know that he has led them on to ground where he can easily deceive them.

This attitude is, no doubt, regrettable. In a properly educated democracy it should be impossible. But it has most emphatically its good side, as I am sure Mr. Ponsonby would be the first to acknowledge. It is the outcome of a state of mind which has no fears, no aggressive designs, and no grudges against foreign nations; an insular state of mind which is concentrated on the improvement of our own national conditions, and is disposed to let other people look after themselves. I have often been struck, when conversing with foreigners,—Frenchmen, Germans, Italians, and above all members of the Balkan States,—by the vivid and detailed interest they show in alliances and combinations and possibilities of war, and the ready way in which they accept the fact that some nation or other is "the enemy." The average, moderate-minded Englishman is not at home in this atmosphere. He does not like to talk about wars and intrigues, and he will not calmly accept the suggestion that any nation is, as a matter of course, "the enemy." He has a feeling that the whole subject of foreign politics, as it is usually discussed, is unwholesome. It suggests trains of thought which had better not be in people's minds at all. There is obviously a great deal of somewhat confused wisdom in this feeling; and I am not surprised to find Mr. Balfour saying that, in his opinion, when once people "are fairly confident that the general lines pursued are not inconsistent with national welfare, then, I think, probably the less time given to foreign affairs the better" (p. 122). It is certainly a happy nation that need not think much about foreign affairs; it is probably a wise nation which, if it has to think, does its thinking as rapidly and effectively as possible, and then occupies its mind with safer subjects.

However that may be, Mr. Ponsonby proves his point as to the bare fact. Our foreign policy has, since the settling-up of the Boer War, pursued its way almost unchecked, and to a large extent uncriticized, by Parliament or by public opinion. We are now landed in a great disaster, and Mr. Ponsonby assumes, without any present attempt at proof, that this disaster might have been avoided by a different foreign policy. He does not say what the right policy would at any point have been; that is not the subject of his book; but he believes that it might have been attained if the people of England had exercised a real and active control over the Foreign Office. That is, if I understand him aright, he believes that our policy would have been wiser and our influence for peace greater if the Foreign Secretary had always been compelled to ask himself, at each new step: "What will Parliament, what will my constituents think of this?" or "How will this look under the test of a general election?" He would admit, I presume, that such a policy must involve a certain loss in initiative, in decisiveness, and in rapidity. And he does not pretend that the ordinary mass of electors have more knowledge or more coolness or—I think—higher principles than Mr. Asquith and Sir Edward Grey. But he does believe that, in spite of all drawbacks, this publicity, this constant reference to the plain man, would somehow have resulted in the production of a better spirit, and have let gusts of fresh and wholesome air into the stale corridors of diplomacy. I feel on this subject that the argument of the book fails to convince me.

There are several points, of course, which one willingly concedes to Mr. Ponsonby. If there had been democratic control in Germany, there would probably have been a Social-Democratic Government, or at least a liberal and peace-seeking Government. But in France and England there were already liberal and peace-seeking Governments, and in Russia a Government which, whatever may be thought of its nascent Liberalism, was at least most earnest for peace. The *Entente* Powers possessed already the pacific tone which Mr. Ponsonby's reforms profess to offer them. And it does not seem reasonable to apply a particular remedy to the peace-seekers because it would do good to the war-seekers. Again,

most persons of experience will concede to Mr. Ponsonby that they have occasionally heard individual diplomats and empire-builders talk about foreign affairs in a reckless and intriguing spirit, which would certainly not be countenanced by the House of Commons or an average popular constituency. A great deal of such talk is not to be taken seriously. It is the form in which these people take their romance. But sometimes, no doubt, it represents real opinions, and sometimes the holders of such opinions do acquire a temporary and surreptitious influence over public affairs. But my own experience has been that, though they always dread the "Talking Shop" and the "British Public," they dread "Downing Street" as much or even more. And rightly so, for as a matter of history during the last century the Foreign Office has acted almost always as a drag on these forward or expansionist movements, and a far more effective drag than "the public" can be, for the mere reason that it knows more and is harder to deceive. The Foreign Office is normally engaged on a mass of useful and unobtrusive work, which the public never cares to read about, from the settling of small disputes by small agreements to the clearing of international waterways and the preservation of hippopotami. And international friction is what it most detests.

This shows, I think, that the vital issue at stake in foreign politics is much more an issue between reason and unreason, between prudence and recklessness, between moderation and chauvinism, than, as Mr. Ponsonby insists on regarding it, between democratic and oligarchic sentiment. I suspect really that he and his friends have been misled by a false analogy. A great many abuses in the past have been remedied by a mere extension of the franchise or a letting-in of democratic fresh air. Cases of class privilege and class oppression, of indefensible favouritism or nepotism or traditional abuse, these and many others can be treated by the simple application of publicity and democratic control. These cases mostly occur in home politics, because there the most common conflicts are class conflicts; the facts, if not simple, are at least familiar; the issues to be decided are very largely moral issues, and the people are called in to give, not an expert, but a disinterested judgement. Now, as a general rule in foreign politics the very reverse holds good. The conflicts are seldom or never class conflicts; the facts and the whole state of circumstances surrounding the facts are unfamiliar, and cannot be understood without special study; the issues are seldom plain issues of right or wrong. Furthermore, the people of any one nation is, unfortunately, not disinterested. The disinterested arbitrator, whom analogy demands, is not any single "people," but the Concert of Europe—a different story altogether. Neither the quality of disinterestedness, nor the kindred qualities of reasonableness, tact, self-control, and knowledge, which are specially required for the handling of foreign controversies, can be secured by any mere mechanical method such as the application of democratic control.

Of course, there are sometimes cases in foreign policy where the democratic remedy is indicated; cases where a Government is in some sense conspiring against the wishes of the people, or where a bureaucracy is, for the sake of avoiding friction, tolerating some outrageous wrong. In both types of case I think that our own political practice does insure publicity; certainly any notion that a British Government can really conceal from all eyes the main trend of its foreign policy is the wildest dreaming; but, if Mr. Ponsonby can suggest any method by which to increase our assurance in this matter, he will be working in the spirit of the Constitution as well as forwarding the cause of democracy, and we must listen to his proposal with all sympathy.

And here I will make my largest concession to him in the matter of our recent history. I think it is true, as he says, that owing to some extreme reticence in Ministers and other leaders of the nation, there grew up before the war a great divergence of expectation between the mind of the Foreign Office and that of the country, between those behind the scenes and the mass of outsiders. This divergence, I admit, was regrettable; but I do not think it arose from the cause which Mr. Ponsonby assigns. It was not because the Foreign Office was secretly aggressive and dreaded peaceful opinion. It was almost exactly the opposite. It was because the Foreign Office was straining every nerve for its twofold object, and it dreaded outside disturbance. Its object was, if possible, peace; if peace failed, security. It was trying to appease the sensitiveness of all reasonable Germany and at the same time to guard against the intrigues of militarist Germany. It was negotiating with a half-declared enemy, armed to the teeth, demanding world-power and ready to spring, muttering demands which seemed vague and sinister and which yet were well worth satisfying if they were capable of being satisfied; a half-declared enemy who had once been a friend and might still by supreme tact and patience be reconverted to friendship; and in that crisis it did not want the cooperation of any one it could not trust. It told no falsehood and practised no intrigues. But it hid its difficulties; it spoke with a smiling face; it pretended always that things were less terrible than they were. And when at last the storm broke, we who had not been fully warned were amazed and angry, and some of us thought we had been cheated.

Let Mr. Ponsonby look again at the writings of the Haldane-hunters and the other wolves of Jingoism. What is it that

they complain of? It is that again and again there were dangerous situations out of which they could have made capital, and Lord Haldane and the rest of the Government did not give them the opportunity. German agents worked up sedition in India, German money corrupted the gendarmes in Persia, German diplomats committed breaches of diplomatic honour; and the Government kept it all dark! All the yellow press was waiting outside the door, longing for information, only too anxious to help; all the people who wanted to turn out the Government, with civil war or without civil war; the schemers who wanted militarism for the sake of reaction, the lunatics who wanted trouble because they thought it fun. I quite admit that they would not have had entirely their own way: the other side would have had its say also. But would there be much safety in that? Mr. Shaw would have rushed to preserve the peace with criticisms the reverse of sedative. Some Syndicalists and some Irishmen of extreme views would have expressed their preference for the foreigner over the English capitalist. Mr. Ponsonby himself ... I would not for the world attack him. I believe he would have used all his influence absolutely and disinterestedly for good. But would he and his group, in a crisis like that, have supported the Government with real and effective friendship, have strengthened their hands and tried to show them that they could firmly count on the wholesome part of the nation? I believe they would; but I cannot blame the Foreign Office for doubting it. The nation as a whole would have been behind the Government. I have no doubt of that. But I believe that during those years the more thoughtful part of the nation actually preferred not to be consulted. And if any reader feels vehemently otherwise, I would ask him to look up the citations from the English press quoted in Reventlow's important book, "Deutschlands Auswärtige Politik," and then ask himself whether he would care to have such allies talking beside his Foreign Secretary when negotiations were peculiarly delicate.

"Then," Mr. Ponsonby may reply, "you confess quite frankly that you do not trust the people?" Trust is a limited, not an unlimited, quantity; but I could answer that question better if I knew exactly what it meant, if I knew whether Mr. Ponsonby was referring to an actual or an ideal people. For he, like the rest of us, varies between the two conceptions. At times he admits that the mass of the people is ignorant, indifferent, apt to be swayed by gusts of passion and deceived by interested newspapers, and that the good of its participation in active politics chiefly depends on the extreme danger of trying to keep it out. At others he still speaks of that ideal people whose lineaments have really come down to us from Shelley and Godwin; which looks straight at all questions without prejudice or personal interest and, therefore, with universal good-will and unclouded moral judgement. When we think of "the people" as controlling our politics, do we mean a sort of residue which remains after removing all special classes and all persons of outstanding character or knowledge—a people which reads the yellowest type of newspaper and finds its heroes on the race-course and its politics in the music-hall? Or do we mean the sort of people which rises to the mind's eye as one returns from a meeting of the Workers' Educational Association or a particularly good trade-union discussion? And can Mr. Ponsonby see any way whereby the first people shall not snatch the decision out of the hands of the second? In nine cases out of ten, doubtless, the common sense of the nation will assert itself. I have no doubt of that. But in the tenth case, in the critical and exciting and specially dangerous case, with organized bad influences ready to play on public opinion? No; undesirable as secrecy is on a multitude of grounds, I cannot see that perpetual publicity, as such, is any safe road to the keeping of peace.

I grant, of course, fully that, in foreign affairs as in all the rest of politics, the will of the people must be supreme, and the ultimate control must be with the citizens of the country acting through Parliament. But I do not believe that increased democracy will serve as a substitute for character and wisdom, any more than an artificially restricted franchise will. Our foreign politics are not below the average standard of the nation; I believe myself that they have been well above it. I believe that, under the present Foreign Secretary, our foreign policy has been conducted with as great care and prudence and with more than as great high-mindedness and resolute honesty of purpose, as that of any nation in modern history. But, if we are ever to rise to a foreign policy which shall be still higher, more daring and idealist, more ready to run risks for great ends, and more brilliant in meeting perils as yet far off and scarcely discernible, it will not be by any mere democratization of machinery; it will only be by some enormous change of heart, in which the masses of the nation must take part fully as much as their rulers.

I need hardly assure those who know Mr. Ponsonby that his concrete proposals are in no way either unpractical or revolutionary. In part, he merely calls attention to those reforms in the Foreign Office which have been recommended by the recent Civil Service Commission. Here every one will agree with him. Further, he proposes two changes in what we may call political procedure and one important, but not unreasonable, change in the Constitution. There is to be (1) an

annual debate, occupying at least two days, on the Foreign Office Vote, in which the Foreign Secretary shall expound his whole policy. Besides this (2) it shall be the recognized duty of the Foreign Secretary to make periodical pronouncements in the country on foreign affairs, especially when Parliament is not sitting. These proposals could hardly be made compulsory, but they both seem desirable, so far as an outsider can judge. The country would certainly be glad to have both the debate and the periodical speeches, and it is difficult to see that anything but good would in normal circumstances accrue to the Government. The sort of Foreign Secretary whose speeches would be a public danger would be sure to make them in any case. The change in the Constitution falls under three heads, and presents great difficulty. At present, as we all know, Parliament is a deliberative and legislative body; the executive power is vested in the Sovereign, acting through his Ministers. In practice, this sharp distinction is in many ways softened. A Government can be questioned about its executive acts, and cannot continue in existence if those acts are definitely disapproved by the House of Commons. The Home Secretary, for instance, can decide whether a particular condemned criminal shall be hanged or pardoned. If he knows the House wants the man pardoned, he can still hang him, but he does so at his peril; because, though the man will remain hanged, the Home Secretary will not remain Home Secretary. Consequently, he will never hang a man against what he believes to be the general feeling of the House, unless he has very strong reasons and is confident that he can justify his action.

Similarly, the Government has at present the power of (1) making a treaty, (2) making an agreement or alliance with a foreign country, and (3) declaring war. Mr. Ponsonby wishes to make all these powers dependent on previous consent of Parliament. The question is difficult and merits a full discussion. The case for Mr. Ponsonby's reform is obvious. There is certainly something anomalous in the conception that a Government, which cannot pass the smallest bill without full Parliamentary debate, should be able to negotiate a treaty or form an alliance or even declare war without saying a word to any one. The case on the other side appears to rest on two arguments. First, there is a constitutional argument. Parliament is the Legislature, not the Executive. It is from every point of view unfitted for executive work. It contains the executive body and can dismiss it, but it must allow that body to do its own work in its own way. True, Parliament may have to allow many small things to be done against its wishes rather than take the drastic step of turning the Government out; but, it is argued, that arrangement just gives the Executive sufficient elasticity and power of real initiative. The discretion, no doubt, is larger in foreign affairs than in home affairs, but it is not different in quality. And foreign affairs, as a matter of fact, require that larger discretion.

The second is a practical argument. It is pointed out that to make treaties dependent on the approval of Parliament is greatly to weaken the bargaining power of the Government. For a treaty is always a matter of give and take; each party has to make concessions. And, obviously, a foreign Power will often be willing to make a concession when assured of a firm bargain, which it would not make if it had to take the risk of having the whole bargain thrown back on its hands. For example, in the Anglo-Russian Treaty of 1907, Russia recognized our right to control the foreign relations of the Amir, which she had always disputed before. But would she have done so if she had known that the treaty as a whole was subject to the approval of the British Parliament, and that she might find herself in the position of having gained nothing, but given up an important point which could never quite be recovered? The proposed limitation certainly weakens the Government's bargaining power; it also makes treaties harder to conclude. For after almost every important treaty, you find the respective Parliaments complaining that their own Minister has not driven a hard enough bargain. The Parliaments would thus be less likely to agree than the Ministers. And, further, a House which wants to quarrel with a Minister about other matters can often show its annoyance by rejecting a treaty; as, for instance, the United States Senate rejected the Arbitration Treaty with England. Considering that most treaties—especially if we remember the host of small but valuable treaties which attract no public notice—are attempts to settle international difficulties and remove causes of quarrel, while every treaty makes some demand upon international good-will, it would seem a deplorable thing to increase the obstacles in the way of concluding them.

Furthermore, it is pleaded that, as a matter of experience, there has been of late years in England no abuse of any of these special powers. Before the crisis of 1914 the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary were able to assure the House that "there was no secret engagement which they would spring upon the House. The House was free to decide in any crisis what the British attitude should be." (Grey, August 3, 1914.) The treaties concluded have mostly been treaties of arbitration or similar clearings-up; the main exception was probably the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, which, curiously enough, was announced to the Duma while still unknown to the British Parliament. As to declarations of war, Mr. Ponsonby quotes a startling statement from Homer Lea to the effect that in the nineteenth century Great Britain embarked on no less than eighty wars with no prior declaration at all. This figure, if in any sense correct, must be obtained by counting every small expedition against a savage tribe as a war. Such expeditions are almost always caused

by incidents which make declarations of war unsuitable. In the case of a war with any civilized nation it is almost unthinkable that a British Government should either begin a war without declaration, or declare war without having made sure of the overwhelming support of Parliament and the country. The whole course of proceedings in 1914, and earlier, shows with what iron determination Grey refused to make any agreement or alliance or promise on his own responsibility, without the support of Parliament, and how carefully the Government explained the whole situation to the House of Commons before taking any of the critical steps. True, if the House had insisted on preserving peace with Germany in 1914, Grey would presumably have resigned. That only shows that a Minister who does not possess the confidence of the House cannot continue in office.

Other countries, which possess written constitutions, have various rules limiting the power of the Executive in treaty-making. We, with our unwritten tradition, are probably in a transition stage. The Executive has in practice made a habit of carefully consulting the House, and, indeed, is attacked by critics both at home and abroad for hampering its own effectiveness by doing so. It is argued that if the British Government had had the courage to contract definite alliances and to announce definite lines of policy, without any reference to public opinion or Parliament, the European situation would have been clarified and Germany saved from the blunder of trading too far upon our notorious indecision and pacifism. I do not share this view; but I incline to think that it is at least as plausible as Mr. Ponsonby's.

In the main, therefore, while believing that all Mr. Ponsonby's recommendations deserve sympathetic consideration, and some of them are almost beyond question right, I am not convinced that they would lead to any appreciable increase in the control exercised by the nation at large over foreign politics, much less that, if they had been put in practice ten years ago, they would have had the faintest effect in saving Europe from its present calamities. I do not wish to say that changes of procedure are not important things. In many ways they are. But the lack of effective democratic control over foreign politics is surely due to larger and deeper causes than these reforms can touch. The masses of the country, as Mr. Ponsonby repeatedly tells us, are not interested in foreign politics and do not want to hear about them. The lack of interest depends on lack of knowledge, and the lack of knowledge on lack of opportunity. The people who are interested in remote places are normally the few who happen to have travelled there,—a few officials, a few traders, and a few rich men with the taste for roaming. Even the countries nearest to us are seldom visited, and their languages seldom spoken, except by the leisured classes of society. It is hard to see any way out of this; the leisured classes must continue to have the interest and the knowledge, and therefore the main control. The working-classes, I fully agree, have every right to be suspicious and to appoint their Parliamentary watch-dogs. They have not been in any way betrayed, but they are quite right to take precautions against being betrayed. I hardly see how they can do more.

Except, indeed, in one way: the way frankly recommended by Mr. Bertrand Russell in a little brochure published by the Labour press. His remedy is deliberately to make foreign policy a party question, and surround it with that exciting and inflammatory atmosphere which can be trusted to make the average voter attend. For the dullest or most abstruse subject becomes interesting as soon as our acquaintances begin fighting about it.

Of course, Mr. Russell has a theory which justifies his gospel of strife—the theory that our recent policy "represents merely a closing-up of the ranks among the governing classes against their common enemy, the people" (p. 70). But not being able to share that view, I confess that this proposal repels me. If the party fight comes about because of a real and grave difference of belief, then by all means let it come. There are cases where silence and acquiescence might be a greater evil than any strife of parties. But a deliberate encouragement of strife for the sake of attracting popular interest seems to me a deplorable thing even in home matters, and considerably worse in foreign. The inflammatory atmosphere may engender the necessary passion for overturning some obvious wrong; but it does not make for truth or understanding or justice, or the other qualities that are most needed in diplomacy. If the party in power is engaged on a policy which the party out of power considers really iniquitous, of course the latter is bound to protest and oppose, and to announce that when it gets into power its own policy will be different. But the fact of so violent a divergence between parties is in itself a misfortune. It drives both parties into dangerous courses, and it clearly weakens the nation as a whole. For a nation's enmity becomes less formidable, and her friendship less attractive, when both are liable to be reversed at the next general election.

As a matter of fact, the continuity of our foreign policy since the South African War has been due, not to the special desire of the two parties to be amiable with one another,—they were singularly free from any such weakness,—but simply to the facts of the situation. After a difference which rent the nation in two, and which was settled on definitely Liberal lines, there arose a situation in Europe about which most well-informed persons, whether Conservative or Liberal, took more or less the same view. This is the fundamental fact which has ruled our whole policy. No doubt each

of the two parties abandoned something of their special predilections. The imperialists accepted frankly the principle that the Empire must not be increased; the Liberals reluctantly agreed to enormous naval estimates. It is quite possible, now that the disaster we dreaded has come upon us, for each to imagine that if he had had his complete way, things might have been better. Personally I doubt it. And I think that, even if a slight twist in one direction or the other would have been an advantage, that lost advantage was more than compensated by the fact that our policy was known to be permanent and our word could be trusted by friend and foe.

"Then you are content, are you?" a reader may say to me. "The policy of our Foreign Office was ideally right, and the end to which it has led us is quite unobjectionable?" No; the end has been disaster. It has been shipwreck. But not every wrecked ship was wrecked by the fault of its captain. I imagine that since August, 1914, almost every human being in Great Britain has tried, with whatever knowledge he possessed, to think what differences in our policy would have averted this war at some cost not greater than the war itself. And, so far as I have been able to read, no one has found a credible answer. Minor faults have been pointed out, odd lacks of information or energy or tact or initiative, such as are to be expected in a service containing vast numbers of men and spread all over the world; but no fundamental wrongness, no evil intent or folly. The fact seems to be that, if, some years ago, an angel had set himself to the task of saving Europe, he would not have begun by altering British policy. He would have begun by something quite else.



FOOTNOTES:

[\[1\]](#) Review of *Democracy and Diplomacy: A Plea for Popular Control of Foreign Policy*, by Arthur Ponsonby, M.P. (Methuen, 1915.)

[End of *Democratic Control of Foreign Policy*, by Gilbert Murray]