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Harold Butler

THE death of Harold Beresford Butler at the age of sixty-seven has bereaved the International Labour Organisation of a friend whose record of service to it was unique. An active participant in the preparatory work which led to its creation, he became the Secretary-General of its first conference, Deputy Director of the Office and associate of Albert Thomas until the latter's death in 1932, successor of Thomas as Director until 1938 and since then one of the elder statesmen whose advice and assistance were always at its call.

Butler's service to the International Labour Organisation, though constituting an essential unity, falls into three main periods—the period of preparation, the period of organisation and the period of direction.

I

When the British Government was considering in 1918 the attitude it would take on labour questions at the Peace Conference, Butler, though young in years, was already, after a brilliant career at Oxford, a senior official of the Ministry of Labour. One of the Sections reporting to him was the Foreign Intelligence Section, the head of which was Edward Phelan, who afterwards became Director-General of the I.L.O. Under Butler's general direction, this Section produced the first draft of the document which was submitted in Paris as the British draft for the establishment of the International Labour Organisation. In December 1918 Butler was appointed one of the members of the labour section of the British delegation to the Peace Conference, and on 11 January 1919 he arrived in Paris where he prepared the first draft of the Preamble to the Constitution and took an active part in the

preliminary negotiations with other national delegations, which resulted in the setting up by the Peace Conference on 31 January 1919 of the Commission on International Labour Legislation, of which Butler was appointed Deputy Secretary-General. On 11 April 1919 the Peace Conference accepted the proposals of the Commission, gave its approval to the scheme for the International Labour Organisation and decided that an Organising Committee should be set up to prepare for the first International Labour Conference. The Organising Committee held its first meeting on 18 April and appointed Butler as its Secretary. The first International Labour Conference met in Washington on 29 October and appointed Butler as its Secretary-General.

This mere enumeration of the official duties with which Butler was entrusted in the preparatory work connected with the establishment of the International Labour Organisation bears eloquent testimony to the importance of the role which he played in bringing to fruition the hopes and aspirations of those who in many countries believed in the international realisation of social justice. At Washington it was his duty as Secretary-General of the Conference to put into practice for the first time the principles embodied in the Constitution of the Organisation, which, as Deputy Secretary-General of the Commission on International Labour Legislation, he had helped to formulate. At Washington, the ideas and the constitutional devices for realising them which had been incorporated in the Constitution of the Organisation were subjected to their first practical test. Whereas in the preparatory work in London and Paris Butler's responsibilities had been shared with others, at Washington the essential responsibility for the success or failure of the Conference rested upon him alone.

The difficulties with which he was confronted, writes Edward Phelan, constituted a test of his qualities and character which few have had to undergo. The peace treaty had not been ratified and the I.L.O., having as yet no legal existence, had neither funds nor staff. This problem, grave in itself, was, however, small in comparison with those presented by the political situation. The whole question of the peace treaty, and particularly of the League of Nations, had become the subject of violent controversy in the United States, and before the conference was due to open President Wilson was stricken with paralysis. Fears were expressed in Europe that the whole League idea might well be compromised by the holding of a conference under the aegis of the League in America in such inauspi-

cious circumstances. Harold Butler refused to be dismayed. The Washington Conference met and successfully disposed of its agenda; the I.L.O. became a going concern. But even more important, under Harold Butler's leadership the conference faced and solved innumerable problems of procedural technique for which experience afforded no guide. . . To Harold Butler belongs the credit of a pioneer achievement little noted on the crowded international scene of the time, but which should now be recalled in tribute to the exceptional courage and vision which he then so remarkably displayed.

II

When the Governing Body of the new Organisation at its second session in Paris in January 1920 appointed Albert Thomas Director of the International Labour Office, the latter's first act was to appoint Butler Deputy Director.

For twelve years Thomas and Butler were intimately associated in implementing the principles laid down in the Constitution. Their partnership was destined to be of incalculable value to the Organisation. Like Thomas, Butler had an intense belief in the mission which the Organisation was called upon to fulfil. He was profoundly convinced that the mechanism which had been forged for carrying out that mission was essentially sound, and he gave every assistance to Thomas in creating the maximum of effectiveness in the practical functioning of that mechanism. He was like Thomas in the versatility of his gifts; unlike him in the way in which those gifts were expressed. Thomas was by nature a fighter, with a volcanic personality; he was an enthusiast and an inspirer of enthusiasms. Butler sometimes seemed to take pains to conceal his innate enthusiasm and attained his ends by less spectacular and dynamic methods.

As Deputy Director, Butler's special assignment was internal organisation, administration and finance. To all the multitudinous details of administration which in an international organisation are so time-consuming he devoted himself with characteristic energy. He concerned himself specially with the problems of personnel and recruitment, always emphasising the importance of creating a genuinely international staff. As Secretary-General of the Washington Conference he had introduced an important innovation; the secretariat of that Conference was distinguished from those of previous international conferences in that, while the higher

officials were all drawn from different nationalities, the secretariat was organised not on national but on functional lines. Experience gained at Washington had convinced Butler that it was possible to obtain loyal co-operation and a high standard of performance from an international staff. In collaborating with Thomas in organising the staff of the Office, Butler spared no effort to ensure that, in spite of the enormous difficulties presented by different languages, different systems and methods of organising and carrying on work, and even different ways of thinking, the polyglot group of newly recruited officials should be as rapidly as possible transformed into a unified, homogeneous and loyal staff of international civil servants. He ably seconded Thomas in implementing the conception of the Organisation as an essentially international body, demanding in its staff international allegiance irrespective of their individual nationalities.

Butler's work as Deputy Director extended, however, far beyond the sphere of internal administration. Thomas rarely took a decision on any important question without consulting Butler; and in the daily " Rapport " which he organised, at which were present the senior officials of the Office, it was often a suggestion from Butler which pointed the way to the solution of the knotty problem under discussion. During the frequent absences of Thomas on mission, Butler was left in charge of the Office, subject to such consultation with Thomas as telephonic, telegraphic and other communication could afford. Although during this period Butler carried out certain individual missions with real benefit to the Organisation, his best work was done behind the scenes. The full value of the services he rendered was known to Thomas alone. He was self-effacing to a degree. To Butler results were always the important thing. So long as results were achieved, he was not concerned to receive personal credit for them.

III

When Butler was appointed Director of the International Labour Office in 1932 after the tragically sudden death of Thomas, it was clear that troubled times were ahead for the Organisation.

In the economic sphere the world was under the cloud of the Great Depression. The depression overshadowed every human activity and inevitably exercised a profound influence on the International Labour Organisation. Every department of trade, industry and commerce was affected. International commercial transactions became more hazardous as currency fluctuations were added to price fluctuations and customs barriers were raised. Restrictions on trade and foreign exchanges were multiplied by Governments in their efforts to safeguard their balance of payments. Economic warfare and the political antagonisms which it engenders were intensified. Unemployment mounted steadily and ominously. Financial, economic and social security were progressively undermined.

In the political field the clouds were no less lowering. It was already obvious that the Disarmament Conference, on which such high hopes had been founded, was doomed to failure. Events in Manchuria showed that the authority of the League of Nations could be flouted with impunity. In many countries there was acute political unrest, in some cases verging on civil war.

It was in these circumstances that Butler began his work as Director. While he never abandoned his belief that another world war was not inevitable, he considered it to be elementary prudence to do everything possible to strengthen the Organisation with a view to equipping it to weather the storm if the storm should burst.

It was clear to Butler that the greatest single reinforcement that could be looked for was the entrance of the United States into the Organisation. Butler had been associated with representatives of the United States in the work which led to the adoption of the Constitution of the Organisation at the Peace Conference. He had worked with them at the first International Labour Conference in Washington and he had subsequently visited the United States to make special studies of industrial relations and of manpower problems. He realised fully what a source of strength the membership of the United States in the Organisation would constitute and he worked unremittingly to facilitate its entrance. It was a matter of the greatest satisfaction to him when the United States joined the Organisation in 1934, and in the following year he appointed as an Assistant Director of the Office John Gilbert Winant,

who was destined to succeed him as Director and in that capacity to take the necessary steps when war broke out to preserve the life, spirit and freedom of action of the Organisation.

Butler also turned his attention to the need for rendering closer and more effective the participation of overseas or extra-European countries in the work of the Organisation. With this end in view he took steps to stimulate ratification of the amendment of the Constitution, which had been adopted by the Conference some years previously to provide for the enlargement of the Governing Body. At the 1934 session of the Conference, the amendment was, after a delay of twelve years, finally brought into operation and the Governing Body which was elected at that session of the Conference included seven extra-European countries among the sixteen Governments represented, while corresponding increases in extra-European representation took place in both the Employers' and Workers' groups. The increased influence thus given to extra-European countries in the Governing Body marked a new chapter in the history of the Organisation. In this connection Butler also took steps to intensify direct relations between the Office and overseas countries in order that their needs and conditions might be better understood and the work of the Office directed towards giving them such assistance as they might require. Officials were sent on mission to countries of Latin America, Asia and the Near and Middle East. An Overseas Section was set up in the Office to ensure that greater attention should be paid to the special problems affecting overseas countries. Butler realised that the centre of gravity of the world was shifting and that it was necessary, if the effectiveness of the Organisation was to be maintained, that the centre of gravity of the Organisation should also shift; the expanding industrial and economic power of the non-European continents, inevitably accompanied by their growing preoccupation with social problems, rendered indispensable a reorientation of the work of the Organisation.

With rare foresight and perspicacity Butler addressed himself to the problem of the readjustment of the work of the Organisation to these developing conditions. While endeavouring to conserve all that had contributed to the strength of the Organisation in the past, in particular its time-honoured

work in the adoption and ratification of international labour Conventions, he saw that, if the future of the Organisation was to be assured, it must develop in new directions.

One of the most significant of these new directions was the consideration of problems at regional conferences. Butler pointed out in his report to the 1935 Session of the Conference that there were questions of concern to the Organisation which were of regional rather than universal significance, and there seemed to be no constitutional objection to special meetings of the countries most interested being convened from time to time to consider them under the auspices of the Organisation. In accordance with this conception, the Governing Body, accepting an invitation from the Chilean Government, convened the first American Regional Conference in January 1936 in Santiago. The debates and resolutions of this Conference furnished ample evidence of the existence of regional problems in the American Continent and of the immense value of discussing them in an American atmosphere. Butler, who himself participated in this Conference as Secretary-General, did his best to secure a similar regional conference of Asian States, but owing to political difficulties the realisation of his project in this field had to be postponed. He did, however, undertake an important mission on behalf of the Organisation to India, Ceylon, Malaya and the Netherland Indies, and his report showed how fully he understood the special social and industrial problems of that region.

With Butler's active support, much was done during this period to provided for international consideration of the labour and industrial problems of individual industries. The outstanding example was the International Textile Conference held in Washington in 1937, which discussed the social and economic problems of the textile industry on the broadest lines. The special value which Butler saw in that Conference and in the series of technical conferences on hours of work in the coal-mining, chemical and other industries was that the representatives of employers and workers in particular industries were enabled to come together, along with representatives of Governments, to discuss on the international level the solution of the special problems of their industries. In a very real sense these technical tripartite conferences were the precursors of the industrial committees set up after the war.

Another development in the work of the Organisation which Butler did much to stimulate was the provision of advice and assistance to Governments on technical problems within the field of work of the Organisation. He had himself when Deputy Director undertaken missions to South Africa and to Egypt, and when he became Director he seized every opportunity of stressing the value of the technical services which the Office was in a position to afford. In spite of financial restrictions on the number of such missions which could be organised, an increasing number of technical assistance missions were effected by officials of the Office in the years of his directorship.

Throughout the whole period of his directorship, Butler strove unceasingly to gain support for his conviction that closer attention should be paid by the Organisation to economic problems. Each of his annual reports to the Conference was presented against the background of an analysis of the international economic situation. The titles which he gave to these economic chapters in his successive reports from 1933 to 1938 constitute a revealing synopsis of the fluctuations of the economic barometer during the period of his directorship: "The March of the Depression", "The Effort towards Recovery", "Recovery and Employment", "Recovery or Relapse", "The Extent of Recovery", "Prosperity Regained —or Lost?" In his view the Great Depression had made it plain that the cure for social evils—and particularly unemployment, the worst of all social evils—could not be found without advancing into the wider spheres of financial and economic policy. While in themselves these questions of financial and economic policy lay outside the province of the Organisation, he believed that they could not be ignored by the Organisation as if their solution was a matter of indifference from the social standpoint. Economic and financial policy, in his view, was inseparably bound up with social policy; as financial, economic and social questions could not be disentangled and treated in isolation, it was as imperative to study the social implications of financial and economic policy as it was to consider the financial and economic implications of social policy.

These were the main developments which Butler initiated or encouraged in the structure, functions and policies of the

Organisation. The wartime and post-war history of the Organisation was to demonstrate clearly their enduring importance.

In 1938 Butler decided to resign in order to accept an invitation to be Warden of the newly established Nuffield College at Oxford; the call to lay the foundations of a new type of college in the old university in which he had been bred and which he loved so well was one which he felt it impossible to refuse. At the session of the Governing Body in October 1938, members of the Governing Body belonging to all three groups expressed their regret at taking leave of him and paid tribute to the services he had rendered to the Organisation. They drew attention particularly to the progress achieved during his directorship in the attainment of universality of membership and in the study of the repercussions of economic on social, and of social on economic, affairs. It was true of Butler, they said, that a man grew with his responsibilities; he left the Office as a man who had deserved and won an international reputation; it had not been an easy task to succeed Albert Thomas, but it was universally recognised that he had proved a worthy successor to the first Director. They expressed the hope that in his new sphere of work he would maintain his interest in the Organisation, into which he had put so much of himself.

In Butler's closing words to the Governing Body, with which he had worked for nearly twenty years, he assured it that he felt no doubt as to the future of the Organisation, provided it continued to follow the line which Albert Thomas had laid down. That line was not to compromise on its ideals; to keep them alive; never to forget them; and to pursue them in a realistic spirit with care, with prudence, with energy, but at the same time with discrimination, realising that it was not always wise to proceed too hastily. He believed that the Organisation as an international institution contained the seeds of greater things than it had yet achieved.

IV

After leaving the active service of the Organisation in 1938, Butler continued, wherever he went and whatever he did, to keep the Organisation in mind and to serve it as oppor-

tunity offered. As Warden of Nuffield College, as a wartime regional commissioner in England, as British Minister in charge of information services in Washington and as Chairman of the European League for Economic Co-operation, he had occasion from time to time to work for the realisation of the ideals of the Organisation. It was a peculiar satisfaction to him that, as British Minister in Washington, he was engaged in the same task as Winant, who was at that time American Ambassador in London; both men were promoting friendly understanding between the peoples of their two nations, an understanding which they both regarded as indispensable to building a stable peace on the basis of social justice. Together with Winant, he cabled a joint message to the 1941 New York Conference, and he visited the 1944 Conference in Philadelphia. His appointment in 1950 as a member of the Fact-finding and Conciliation Commission on Freedom of Association brought him again into official relationship with the Organisation.

From the books and articles that he wrote during this period it is clear that the I.L.O. was never far from his thoughts; at the time of his death he was engaged in preparing a sequel to his book *Confident Morning*, which was to deal with his life with the I.L.O. in Geneva. Although in some of his later writings a note of disillusionment can sometimes be discerned, his early faith in the realisation of social justice through the I.L.O continued to the end to burn with an undimmed flame.

No estimate of Butler's work can be understood without reference to the happiness of his family life with his wife and children. His wife shared fully in all his interests and identified herself with the I.L.O. almost as much as he did, and her charm and vivacity helped to make memorable the hospitality that was so freely dispensed in their home in Geneva.

Butler's philosophy of life was uncomplicated; once the end to be attained was clearly seen his instinct was to go straight for it. When in the hurly-burly of international politics he encountered those whose methods were more devious, it pained him that they could not be as frank and direct as he. But if need arose in the defence of the interests of the Organisation he could prove himself an astute tactician, whose dexterity in debate and finesse in negotiation could be relied upon to carry the day. When people met him first they sometimes formed an impression of reserve or even

detachment, which was quite foreign to his real nature. If, perhaps, he did not exercise the same degree of personal magnetism as the Director whom he succeeded or the Director who succeeded him, he did not yield to either of them in the strength of his conviction that the pursuit of social justice and the struggle towards the attainment of the ideals for which the I.L.O. stands is the greatest thing in the world. Although Butler believed firmly in the soundness of the Constitution of the I.L.O., he never regarded it as sacrosanct, and he took an active part in the movement which led to the first amendment of the Constitution; he considered in fact that the Constitution was valuable only in so far as it continued to meet the needs of a changing world. Essentially practical in his outlook, he had, when participating in the framing of the Constitution, done his best to ensure that the Organisation should not be a debating society, passing pious resolutions leading to no practical results.

In his work as Director of the Office, the criterion which he never ceased to apply was the criterion of practical value. Together with this realistic emphasis on practical results went a generous idealism which grew ever stronger as the progress of events made its translation into practice more and more imperative, and a zestful courage which never flagged in the pursuit of the creative adventure to which he devoted the fullness of his life.