

THE
FABIAN SOCIETY:

ITS OBJECTS AND METHODS.

AN ADDRESS BY

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THE FABIAN SOCIETY consists of Socialists.

It therefore aims at the re-organisation of Society by the emancipation of Land and Industrial Capital from individual and class ownership, and the vesting of them in the community for the general benefit. In this way only can the natural and acquired advantages of the country be equitably shared by the whole people.

The Society accordingly works for the extinction of private property in Land and of the consequent individual appropriation, in the form of Rent, of the price paid for permission to use the earth, as well as for the advantages of superior soils and sites.

The Society, further, works for the transfer to the community of the administration of such industrial Capital as can conveniently be managed socially. For, owing to the monopoly of the means of production in the past, industrial inventions and the transformation of surplus income into Capital have mainly enriched the proprietary class, the worker being now dependent on that class for leave to earn a living.

If these measures be carried out without compensation (though not without such relief to expropriated individuals as may seem fit to the community), Rent and Interest will be added to the reward of labour, the idle class now living on the labour of others will necessarily disappear, and practical equality of opportunity will be maintained by the spontaneous action of economic forces with much less interference with personal liberty than the present system entails.

For the attainment of these ends the Fabian Society looks to the spread of Socialist opinions, and the social and political changes consequent thereon. It seeks to promote these by the general dissemination of knowledge as to the relation between the individual and Society in its economic, ethical, and political aspects.

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One question, beyond all others, is now forcing itself relentlessly upon the attention of every thoughtful citizen. The old party divisions are being rapidly cut across by a new issue. The main problem of the time is—not the constitutional relation between England and Ireland, or the existence of a Church Establishment, but the position of the propertyless labourer in a land of wealth. All serious students of public affairs now count this as the fundamental issue before them—How can we extend into the industrial world that collective self-government which we call Democracy in the political world? The problem has been set for us by the inevitable results of the machine industry. Once the individual worker was an independent producer, reaping the benefit of his own almost isolated labour. George Eliot has given us in *Silas Marner* a charming picture of this bye-gone age. But the development of competitive production for sale, and the industrial revolution of the past century, have since then involved, in order to live, not merely access to the land, but the use, in addition, of increasingly large masses of capital, at first in agriculture, then in foreign trade,

then in manufacture, and now, finally, also in distributive industries. The mere worker has become steadily less and less industrially independent as his political freedom has increased. From an independent producing unit, he is rapidly passing into a mere item in a vast industrial army, over the organization of which he has no control. He is free, but free only to work at the market wage or starve. Other option he has none, and even now the freedom to work at any wage is denied to many at a time for varying periods, and we have the constantly recurring phenomenon of the unemployed. When it suits any person having the use of land and capital to employ the worker, this is only done on condition that two important deductions, rent and interest, can be made from the product, for the benefit of two, in this capacity, absolutely unproductive classes, those possessing the legal ownership of land and capital. The reward of labour being thus reduced on an average by at least one-third, the remaining eightpence out of the shilling is then shared between the various classes who *have* co-operated in the production, including the inventor, the managing employer, and the mere wage-worker. But it is shared in the competitive struggle in such a way that at least fourpence goes to a favoured set of educated workers numbering one-fifth of the whole, leaving four-fifths to divide less than fourpence out of the shilling between them. The consequence is the social condition we find around us. A fortunate few, owing to their legal power over the instruments of wealth-production, are able to command the services of thousands of industrial slaves whose faces they have never seen, without rendering any return whatever to them or to society in exchange. A larger body of persons contribute some labour, but are able, from their education or their cultivated ability, to choose occupations for which the competition wage is still high, owing to the relatively small number of possible competitors. These two classes together number only one-fifth of

the whole. On the other side is the great mass of the people, the weekly wage-earners, four out of every five of the nation, toiling perpetually for less than a third of the aggregate product of labour, at an annual wage averaging at most £35 per adult, hurried into unnecessarily early graves by the severity of their lives, and dying, as regards at least one-third of them, destitute or actually in receipt of poor law relief.*

Mr. Frederic Harrison, writing just five years ago, said :—
 “To me at least, it would be enough to condemn modern
 “society as hardly an advance on slavery or serfdom, if the
 “permanent condition of industry were to be that which we
 “now behold, that 90 per cent. of the actual producers of
 “wealth have no home that they can call their own beyond
 “the end of the week ; have no bit of soil or so much as a room
 “that belongs to them ; have nothing of value of any kind
 “except as much old furniture as will go in a cart ; have the
 “precarious chance of weekly wages which barely suffice to
 “keep them in health ; are housed for the most part in places
 “that no man thinks fit for his horse ; are separated by so
 “narrow a margin of destitution that a month of bad trade,
 “sickness, or unexpected loss, brings them face to face with
 “hunger and pauperism. . . . This is the normal state of the
 “average workman in town or country.” (Report of Industrial Remuneration Conference, 1886, p. 429.)

The Fabian Society, which has now nearly completed its eighth year of existence, is an organisation of men and women who are convinced, with John Stuart Mill, that the way out of our present social and industrial anarchy lies in the substitution of Socialism for Individualism as the dominant principle of social politics. Its basis, or articles of faith, have been brought before all of you. It seeks to combine practical work with scientific study, and it urges upon all its members not only the

* A fuller description of this social evolution may be found in Fabian Tract No. 15, *English Progress towards Social Democracy*; or in *Fabian Essays in Socialism*. References to the authorities for the statistics will be found in *Facts for Socialists* (Fabian Tract No. 5).

importance of systematic thinking and reading on the social problems of the day, but also of taking the fullest possible part in public life, in order to promote the more general adoption of the principles which they profess.

The Society takes in hand, in friendly conjunction with other Socialist bodies, nothing less than the conversion to Socialism of the entire population of the country. To accomplish this task, first of all it relies upon its members. They singly, as advocates or subscribers, as writers or lecturers, as helpers or learners, as parishioners or members of a congregation, as members of Committees of other Societies, as trade unionists or co-operators, as holders of municipal posts, such as town councillor or guardian or school manager, above all, as electors and citizens, may do much to rise above the party shibboleths of the hour, and spread true principles of social organisation.

Many members of the Society in all parts of the country are in these ways both educating themselves and potently influencing public opinion. On their work the Society chiefly depends. The responsibility is first of all with them. They are the Society.

Next come the local centres of the Society—the London Society, with its Executive Committee and its local groups, and the twenty or thirty Societies in other towns. There are weak Societies and strong, but the weak are becoming fewer, and are weak mainly because the members of the district are themselves weak in numbers, and are not able to surmount the difficulties of really learning how to take an effective independent path in local affairs. Throughout the country more and more is the need felt of a band of trained thinkers—whether able to debate or write or lecture, or merely to hand on trustworthy information and sound arguments to those with whom each may come in contact in his political and social life.

"Almost thou persuadest me," says the would-be convert. "But what shall I have to do?" How shall we answer this enquiry? What is expected from a member of the Fabian Society?

I do not intend to venture on the hazardous task of laying down a rule of personal conduct for Fabians. We all know the reply of the converted housemaid; we can each of us "sweep under the mats" in our sphere; translate our faith into our lives; make it clear, to ourselves at any rate, that Socialism implies no loosening of social bonds, no neglect of the social duties that are nearest to us. How much more we add in the shape of social work; how far we are willing to go in renunciation of personal luxury; how truly we "live the life," are matters for the individual conscience. "Is there any point of your conduct on which you have become more strict with yourself?" asks the gentlemanly Devil in Stevenson's ghastly tale of "Markheim." This is a question which every true Socialist will, sometime or another, put to himself.

But one point I venture to insist on, and that is the duty of serious study of social problems. The Fabian who can neither give a reason for the faith that is in him nor hold his tongue is worse than useless to the Society, apt, indeed, to do the cause more harm than good. Nay, he must be able to give a sound practical reason for every one of the steps he votes for or against—such a reason as will be clear to the ratepayers and voters of his immediate circle, whether they "understand Socialism" or are only plain men of business. But this cannot be done without a good grounding in social history and social theory. We cannot all lecture or write; but we can all learn what the state of society really is. We cannot all be leaders of thought; but we can all be diligent followers of what is thought.

If I were asked to suggest a course of study for new Fabians, I should begin by assuming that the "Fabian Essays"

and, indeed, the whole of the Society's own publications had been carefully read. This ought to be the first duty of a new member. He must, at any rate, learn the views to the support of which he is committing himself. His next task would naturally be to read the criticism of those views contained in such books as "A plea for Liberty," or Donisthorpe's "Individualism." We, at any rate, must not imitate the curates of the last generation, who thought it rather wicked to study their opponent's case.

If I might suggest one book which raises the whole question of industrial re-organisation in a distinctly original way, I should name Miss Beatrice Potter's "Co-operative Movement," which every student of social problems would do well thoroughly to digest.

Probably by this time our new member finds that he is in the deep water of unfamiliar economics. He may shiver at the prospect; but if he is not to be drowned he must now seriously attempt to find his footing. And it is a most unfortunate circumstance that there is at present no complete treatise on Political Economy to which the Fabian student can be referred without so many warnings, exceptions, and qualifications, as to leave him very doubtful whether he had not better let it alone. Broadly speaking, it may be said that the non-socialist writers on economics minimise and apologise for all the evils of our present political and industrial condition, and usually give only such illustrations of the operation of economic laws as are creditable to those conditions. The Socialist writers do exactly the opposite; and the most impressive of them, Karl Marx, has, besides, based his most famous work on an economic theory which is rejected by many Socialists, and which invariably rouses so much useless discussion, that it is far better for the Fabian student to master the accepted "orthodox" science, which in no way contradicts—which, in fact, powerfully reinforces—the

humanitarian basis of Socialism. The main laws of this science are given in *Fabian Essays*; but a much more exhaustive treatise on their application to modern industry should be studied by the Fabian who wishes to do credit to his Society as an economist. Now, none of the standard treatises are written from the Fabian point of view; and in recommending the student to undertake the steady reading of the larger works of F. A. Walker or Professor A. Marshall, I must warn him that, if he is in a very ardent mood, he will find them usually unsympathetic, and, unless he has a special taste for economics, dry. But perseverance, in spite of such discouragements, is the test of the reality of our conversion. There is no way of reaching the Promised Land save through this Jordan.

Finally, each member (and, as it seems to me, each Local Society) could usefully "specialise" on two different planes. Local politics and personal connections map out clearly one road for each of us. Could we not each undertake, in addition, to study one particular department of Social Evolution? The Society's new pamphlet "What to Read," will be found a valuable guide to young students. One may choose Poor Law, another the Regulation of the Hours of Labour. Much further thought is required as to the relations between Local and Central governing bodies and between Voluntary Associations and the State. Much information ought to be collected about Trade Unions and Friendly Societies. This may be out of the reach of many. But we can all of us study, and (though I add this with diffidence) there is scarcely anyone too young to learn.

With regard to practical work, I would remind you once more of the importance of making the fullest possible use of your influence in local public affairs. Much can be done by the Town Council, the School Board, the Board of Guardians, the administrators of your public libraries, baths, charities, etc.,

to put into practice the principles which you will profess. It will be your duty to see that every citizen in Nottingham knows all about the potentialities of Municipal Socialism in Nottingham, and it would be well if you could prepare a "Facts for Nottingham," on the lines of the "Facts for Londoners," and "Facts for Bristol," which have already had such a marked influence on Municipal politics in those places. In London, indeed, the London Liberal and Radical Union, the official representatives of the Liberal Party in London, with Mr. John Morley as their president, have just been driven, by the advance of public opinion, to adopt, as their County Council programme, the whole of the proposals of this Fabian tract. Nor are the Conservative Party far behind their old rivals. I need hardly say that we shall at once set to work to give both of them something further in the way of Socialism to which they may be converted.

Some of you may not relish going beyond local politics into Parliamentary action. It is much easier, much nicer, to content oneself merely with the cherishing of an ideal, and "living out one's own life," and so to keep oneself unspotted from the world. But after all the House of Commons is but the Committee whom we elect to manage those of our affairs which must be dealt with nationally. We Socialists are specially bound, as it seems to me, to endeavour to do all we can to secure the dominance of our own principles in that assembly. It may not be possible yet awhile to elect many avowedly Socialist members. If this is so, we must try all the more to make the others as Socialistic as possible. As Socialists, we believe that neither Liberals nor Conservatives yet see the root of our social difficulties; and we must therefore always take up a position of critical independence of party leaders. But that need not prevent us from supporting with all our might that which is good in either of their programmes, or from denouncing, with equal

impartiality, those merely bogus reforms, such as "Free Land," or Leasehold Enfranchisement, of which the stupider members of both parties are so fond. As for our own practical proposals, there is a good list of them in the "Workers' Political Programme" and other of our tracts.

Finally I would urge upon you the importance of establishing a Fabian Society in your town as a recognised centre of political and educational activity. Isolated members can do little except subscribe to the London Society, which would much prefer local activity. We sadly need higher and deeper political ideals, more serious political study, a greater crop of new ideas, and a more rapid dissemination of these. Be it yours to found in Nottingham a little circle who think out every political problem for themselves; who are inspired not only by a common love for Humanity, but also by a common faith in the main principles of its redemption; and who will band themselves together in the obstinate determination that neither indifference nor obloquy, neither indolence nor the pressure of material affairs, shall prevent them from taking the fullest possible part, both in ascertaining what is true in social politics, and in bringing about its universal acceptance.

FABIAN SOCIETY.

THE FABIAN SOCIETY consists of Socialists. A statement of its Rules, &c., and the following publications can be obtained from the Secretary, at the Fabian Office, 276, Strand, London, W.C.

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