

Labour on the Eve

by J. R. CAMPBELL

THE Labour Party Conference, meeting this month at Blackpool, will put the finishing touches to the party's General Election programme and strategy.

That election will be fought after the war with Germany is over. It will then be clear to the most thoughtless that gigantic problems will face the British people. A Europe devastated beyond all imagination will await reconstruction, major British industries face the need for a root and branch reorganisation, the nations united in the fight against fascism have

to develop world economic co-operation and lay the foundations of a powerful security organisation. The British people will be in a serious mood. Those who approach the election with an apparatus of time-honoured electoral tricks may get surprisingly short shrift from the new electorate. We are sure that a majority of conference delegates will appreciate this fact.

No surprises are likely to emerge in relation to the party programme, which has already been formulated piecemeal by previous conferences.

The Executive Committee is likely, however, to present a resolution which will outline the essential measures on which the party will fight the election. The nationalisation of heavy industry, the armament industries, and building which figured in a resolution adopted by last year's conference will be quickly dropped in favour of a more modest one, confining itself to demands for the over-all control of the economic system and the public ownership of coal, steel and transport.

In foreign policy the party will be called upon to define its attitude to the Crimean agreement. Will it give this agreement its unequivocal support or will it adopt a niggling, nagging attitude towards it? Judging from previous conferences there will be no difficulty in heavily defeating those pacifist amendments which are more concerned with finding excuses for the German people, than they are with the restoration of the countries which have been over-run, looted and destroyed by the Nazis.

More dangerous, however, will be the amendments which seek to weaken the agreement in relation to the world security organisation.

The proposed composition of the Security Council of the organisation will be attacked on the ground that it constitutes "a dictatorship of the Big Three." There could be no better illustration of the pacifist claptrap which permeates a great deal of Labour thinking on foreign politics today. The unreal danger of Britain, U.S.A. and the Soviet Union tyrannising over the world is passionately attacked, oblivious of the difficulties which have still to be overcome before the full co-operation of the great powers in a world security organisation can be secured.

If the Labour Party desires to win public confidence it will reject the sorry quibbling of those who want to undermine the great agreement be-

tween Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin, which points the way forward to world peace.

On election strategy the conference is faced with the necessity of giving a more realistic answer to Churchill's electoral plan than has emerged in the speeches of Labour leaders up to the present. It is not enough to say that the proposal for a National Government after the war is purely a Tory trick. It is true, of course, that the Tory Party prefers to sail under national colours rather than under its own. But why does it prefer to do so?

Irrespective of the element of election tactics embodied in Mr. Churchill's proposals, it is true that great post-war problems like the peace settlement, international co-operation, and the reorganisation of British industry, can most effectively be tackled on the basis of a broad agreement as to ways and means to which all the leading parties subscribe, and that a new National Government should be formed on the basis of such an agreement. In these circumstances it is folly to leave the national flag to be exploited by the Tories. Surely the proper way to face up to the problem is to announce that if Labour is returned as the strongest party it will form a new National Government in which the Labour and progressive forces will predominate. No one knows better than the Labour leaders that enormous problems, transcending those of the aftermath of the last war, will confront the British people. Yet a section of old-fashioned Labour men, like the old-fashioned Tories, have learned nothing and forgotten nothing. The old Tories believe that we can speedily "return to normal" life after the war, so let us lift the controls and get back to the old unrestricted scramble for profits. The old-fashioned Labour man says that we will soon get back to normal, so let us return as soon as possible to the pre-

war party fight which should, as far as possible, be conducted on the familiar pre-war party issues. Why can't the Labour leaders say clearly that on a whole series of major issues, a period of all party co-operation will be necessary if the speediest and best result is to be maintained?

It is simply no argument to engage in a long recital of the sins of the Tory-dominated coalition. Have the Tories some peculiar, hereditary genius for dominating coalitions? Is it not possible to achieve such a relation of parliamentary and class forces as will create the possibility of a coalition under Labour leadership?

Many Labour leaders would like to postpone such questions until after the General Election. On the other hand, some local Labour Parties want the conference categorically to declare (1) That the Labour Party shall not form a government unless it has an absolute parliamentary majority; (2) that the government shall be a pure Labour government and (3) that on no account shall Labour take part in a coalition. The Executive will doubtless strive to get the discussion of the whole issue postponed. If this is supported a disastrous impression of wavering will be created in the public mind.

More ghastly still is the refusal of the Executive to consider entering into relations with other progressive forces with a view to electoral unity at the next election. The fruits of such a policy are to be seen in the victory of the Scottish Nationalist candidate over Labour at the Motherwell by-election. This vote follows too closely on the large vote for the Scottish Nationalist candidate at the Kirkcaldy by-election to be dismissed entirely as a freak result. True, the Scottish Nationalist Party has a large selection of eloquent political freaks. But great masses of Scots people remember the terrible economic depression in the country

between the wars and are more and more turning to believe that a measure of self-government for Scotland would be helpful. The shopkeepers and middle class professional people are beginning to give a favourable reception to nationalist ideas. How did the Labour Party react in Motherwell? Speakers are put up who do not confine themselves to exposing the more absurd proposals of the nationalists, but who make harmful attacks on the Scots national feelings. In a terrifyingly ignorant and cold-blooded fashion a section of the Scots middle class is driven away from the labour movement. Not only so, but the division in the working-class ranks is maintained. The largest single meeting in the campaign was one organised by the Communist Party, which was campaigning for the Labour candidates. The reply of the Labour Party was to insert an advertisement in the local press repudiating all such unauthorised meetings and threatening their organisers with prosecution. Strip away the local peculiarities and you will find that a similar policy is being pursued by the Labour Party in most constituencies in Britain. The middle class is driven away and the split in the working-class movement is perpetuated.

The conference will have the last chance before the General Election of reversing this disastrous policy. Important unions, like the Amalgamated Engineering Union, have sent in resolutions asking the Executive to meet other progressive organisations with a view to discussing electoral unity at the election. These resolutions express the will of the mass membership of those great working-class organisations. Yet both the Conference Arrangements Committee and the Executive Committee have applied a three years rule which declares that because this question was discussed in 1944 it must not be discussed until 1947. This

is just smart conference rigging. The delegates have only to glance at their agendas to see that the rigid application of this rule would eliminate two-thirds of the resolutions on the agenda. In point of fact, the three years' rule is only applied to questions the Executive would like to suppress.

If the conference succeeds in forcing a discussion on this vital issue, we hope it will not be fobbed off with bluster and irrelevances. The great majority of responsible delegates will understand that there is no hope of a Labour and progressive majority unless a whole

host of suburban and semi-rural constituencies are wrested from the grip of the Tories. This is only possible if the working-class is united in the great majorities of the constituencies and is able to establish good relations with the middle strata of society.

Electoral unity is the only policy before the labour movement which can attain these objectives. To reject it is to hand over favourable positions to the Tories before the battle has started. We are hopeful that the conference will avoid this tragic blunder.