

War-Time Election

When the war broke out in 1939, the political parties in Britain were preparing for a General Election in the following year. The 'National Government', based largely upon Conservative support, had been in office since 1931, but the Labour Party was making progress and was hoping for a successful come-back. When the General Election did eventually take place at the end of the War, Labour was in fact victorious, securing 393 seats in the House of Commons against 213 for the Conservatives and their associates. For the time being, however, an Election was deferred and party political activities were suspended or at least limited. National unity against Nazi aggression seemed the priority.

In May 1940 the Labour Party in fact joined Churchill's National government, for the formation of which it had considerable responsibility, and Clement Atlee, Labour's leader, became Deputy Prime Minister. So while party policies were never completely submerged, they could no longer dominate the political scene.

By-elections were the big problem. M.P.s continued to die from time to time - some from natural causes, some serving in the Forces - and their places had to be filled. An Electoral Truce was proclaimed among the parties and, as the outcome of this, the party to which the previous M.P. had belonged was given the right to nominate his successor, neither of the other parties putting up candidates. The democratic process could not, however, be entirely suspended - even if elections had to take place on an out-of-date Register. The Windsor M.P. A.A. Somerville, died in 1942 and when Charles Mott-Radelyffe was nominated, an Old Etonian, Norfolk landowner and serving officer, he was opposed by the playwright, William Douglas Home, standing as Independent.

The uncertain factor was the attitude of the Labour Party in the constituency, which at this time covered not only Windsor, but also Maidenhead, Bracknell, Cookham, Twyford, Crowthorne, Sandhurst, Ascot and many of the smaller villages in East Berks. That official Labour should stand meekly on one side and allow a Tory to be elected was unacceptable to many Labour supporters - even during a critical period of the War.

The full story can be told from the Constituency Labour Party Minutes of the time and they make fascinating reading. The Party had never willingly accepted the Electoral truce. The War situation modified the Party's views, but when the matter was put to the test by the death of Windsor's Conservative M.P. there was great disinclination to toe the official Party line.

At an emergency meeting of the Party's Executive Committee on 2nd June, all the developments were reviewed. In particular a letter to County Councillor Rickards, the President of the Constituency Labour Party, from the Conservative Association was read. The letter stated that the Association "would put forward before the electorate a

WINDSOR DIVISION BY-ELECTION

THE PRIME MINISTER
asks you to VOTE for



CAPT. C. E.

MOTT-RADCLYFFE

THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT CANDIDATE.

POLLING DAY—30th JUNE, 1942.

Candidate who is a supporter of the National Government and who will be pledged to give full adherence to the Prime Minister and to a vigorous prosecution of the War in all its aspects. I shall be pleased to write to you again as soon as the Candidate has been selected and it is hoped that your Party, in view of the Party truce, will afford this candidature their active support."

This the Labour Party was not prepared to do at this stage; any decision would be deferred until the party had had an opportunity to put a questionnaire to the Candidate. Events then moved fast. Mott-Radelyffe was selected as the Candidate and he expressed his preference for meeting the Party's Committee and answering their questions in person. This meeting was arranged for the Labour Hall, St. Leonard's Road, Windsor, on Monday 15th June. Between thirty and forty members of the Constituency and Local Party committees were present, with Councillor Rickards in the chair. The E.C. had held a special meeting on the previous evening to draw up a list of questions and had these sent to Captain Mott-Radelyffe before he came to the Party meeting. He was courteous in his answers, but his attitude was often summed up in the words, "It is best to leave it until after the War."