

THE NAVAL CRISIS OF 1909 AND THE CROYDON BY-ELECTION

By G. J. MARCUS

THE decade preceding the first World War was distinguished by rising tension between the powers, ominously recurring international crises, and warlike preparations on a scale unprecedented in history. It was the last phase of the era which has become known as the 'armed peace.' With each successive crisis the powers accelerated and intensified their preparations.

The ubiquitous fear and suspicion which then overshadowed Europe like a thundercloud had originated in three main causes: the irreconcilable Franco-German antagonism which was the legacy of 1870-1, the rivalry of Russia and Austria for the hegemony of the Balkans, and—a crucial factor from 1908 onward—the naval shipbuilding race between Germany and Great Britain. Through the operation of these three factors the Continent had become a powder-magazine which a spark might presently ignite. Any of the ensuing crises might well have supplied that spark, and the last of the series actually did so.

It had been a cardinal principle of Bismarck's foreign policy that friendly relations with Great Britain were not to be jeopardized by any challenge to her sea power. These counsels of caution were now rejected by his successors. The goal of Tirpitz's ambitions was the creation of an immense German fleet which one day would be able to dispute the mastery of the seas with the British. The German Navy Bill of 1900 provided for a huge shipbuilding programme extending over a period of 20 years. Such a programme, if carried out in its entirety, would make Germany at least the second naval power in the world. Its purposes was plainly set out in the preamble to the Bill: "In order to protect German trade and commerce only one thing will suffice, namely, Germany must possess a battle-fleet of such a strength that, even for the most powerful naval adversary, a war would involve such risks as to make that power's own supremacy doubtful." The challenge to Great Britain was unmistakable; and though at the outset no great alarm was felt in this country, the British Admiralty in the next few years took steps to meet the new situation arising in the North Sea.

The German Navy Law of 1900 marked a turning-point in the history of European relations; slowly but surely the rift between Germany and Great Britain widened. Other developments, like economic jealousy, played their part in producing this estrangement. But the crucial factor was the growth of the German fleet. The work was pressed forward with unrelenting energy. Not since the days of Colbert had a European government set to work steadily, systematically, and effectively to develop a great sea power. At the same time the rapid expansion of the coastal fortifications, harbours, docks, canals, arsenals, factories, plant, and machinery of the Reich kept pace with the intense activity of the shipyards. The gigantic German steel industry, centred mainly in Essen and Dusseldorf, advanced from strength to strength. Within a very few years Anglo-German naval rivalry had become one of the major issues in international politics. No longer was our greatest political danger the combination of the French and Russian navies but, as Winston Churchill was later to declare, "a very powerful homogeneous navy, manned and trained by the greatest organizing people of the world, obeying the authority of a single Government and concentrated within easy distance of our shores."

The early 1900's witnessed a revolutionary advance in the design of battleships. Hitherto capital ships had mounted a mixed armament of heavy and medium calibre. The development of long-range firing necessitated a uniform 'heavy gun' armament, hence the all-big-gun ship. The *Dreadnought* (17,900 tons), constructed with unprecedented speed and secrecy at Portsmouth in 1905-6, represented a radical departure from the accepted practice. She carried no secondary armament of medium calibre and her main armament comprised ten 12-inch guns, mounted in pairs in hooded turrets. She could fire eight of these heavy guns on the beam against her predecessors' four; ahead or astern she could fire six, her predecessors only two. Not only could she outrange in the heaviest guns every existing type of battleship, but she also had the advantage of superior speed (21 knots). This high speed had been made possible by the introduction of turbine engines.

The same era saw the advent of a new type of capital ship. The *Invincible*, like the *Dreadnought*, was largely Fisher's¹ creation. She was designed on similar lines but, sacrificing armour to speed, represented the first of the battle-cruiser class, fit to lie in the line of battle. She carried four turrets only instead of the *Dreadnought's* five and was protected by 7-inch armour instead of 11; but she had a speed of 26 knots.

The German Admiralty was taken completely by surprise. From the summer of 1905 until July, 1907, the keel of not a single capital ship was laid in Germany. Then four dreadnought battleships, the *Nassau*, *Westfalen*, *Rheinland*, and *Posen*, and one battle-cruiser, the *Blücher*, were laid down. The naval armaments race between Great Britain and Germany entered upon a new and more critical phase. In 1908 the Reichstag voted an increase of about 20 per cent. in naval construction. Public opinion in Great Britain was becoming anxious. "The real cause of the political tension," the German Ambassador, Count Metternich, had observed to the Wilhelmstrasse in 1906, "is not commercial rivalry, but the growing importance of our Navy." The struggle centred around the strong personalities of Tirpitz and Fisher.

The programme laid down under the Cawdor-Fisher régime—four dreadnoughts a year—should have secured an ample margin of superiority for Great Britain. It was estimated that before the end of 1909 we would have nine dreadnoughts—six battleships and three battle-cruisers—while Germany would have only three. This would give us a lead which it would be practically impossible for our rival to overtake. By departing, however, in July, 1906, from this programme, Campbell-Bannerman's Government had lost us the comfortable margin of safety which we would otherwise have enjoyed. As Great Britain reduced her naval construction, so Germany increased hers. In 1905 we had built four capital ships, and Germany two; in 1906 we had built only three, and Germany had increased her programme to three ships; in 1907 we had further reduced our programme to two ships, and Germany had further increased hers to four ships. By the time of Campbell-Bannerman's death in April, 1908, it had become apparent that the policy of slowing down our rate of construction, in the hope of inducing Germany to do likewise, had signally failed.

The year 1908 witnessed something like an epidemic of German spy stories. The entire British Press appeared, indeed, to have the espionage peril badly on its nerves. Up and down our east coast inoffensive German waiters and commercial

¹ Admiral Sir John Fisher was First Sea Lord from October, 1904, to January, 1910.

travellers found themselves regarded with sour suspicion, the correspondence columns of most of our leading newspapers were full of highly coloured reports, and credence was being given to the most extravagant alarms. The following year there were to be similar rumours of German airships. Towards the end of September, 1908, Loulou Harcourt² complained in a speech at Lancaster about the "half cowardly, half chauvinist" tone of the popular Press. At Wyndham's Theatre the following January *An Englishman's Home* was playing to packed houses. Later there appeared a play called *Invasion*. As a few years earlier, fear of a German descent on England was agitating the public mind. Field-Marshal Lord Roberts declared publicly that such a project was quite practicable. "Everyone talks of the possible invasion of England by the Germans," the Princess of Pless wrote in her diary that year. "Some believe it, and some call it hysterical rot."

The gravity of the international situation in the winter of 1908-9 did nothing to allay these apprehensions. In October Austria, with the support of her German ally, suddenly and without warning announced the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russia, the champion and protector of the southern Slavs, was peremptorily called upon to recognize this high-handed action. Confronted with the prospect of imminent war with both the Germanic powers, the Russians were constrained to submit to the Austrian demand. In addition to the Bosnian crisis, there were the Casablanca incident and the German Emperor's notorious *Daily Telegraph* interview to heighten public anxiety.

In consequence of certain disquieting evidence which reached the Admiralty during the winter months, McKenna, the First Lord, early in 1909 demanded a larger shipbuilding programme. There was reason to believe that the Germans were preparing to accelerate their 1908-9 programme.³ Some of the facts were common knowledge and freely discussed in the Press. It was well known in engineering circles that the productive capacity of Krupps and other great German firms was expanding; also contracts had been allotted in advance of the vote in the Reichstag. There was, moreover, a continuous flow of secret reports from our agents on the Continent pointing to an acceleration in German shipbuilding. Such explanations as could be extracted from the Germans were regarded by the Admiralty as unsatisfactory. Our margin of superiority had now become so narrow that the possibility had to be faced that Great Britain might be taken by surprise and actually outstripped by her rival.

Already at Scarborough, the previous autumn, Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, had spoken plainly of the vital importance of our naval superiority. "There is no half-way house," he observed, "as far as we are concerned, in naval affairs . . . between complete safety and absolute ruin." "As to Navy Estimates," Grey later reminded Morley, "do remember that the critical time must come about 1912. If we err at all we must err on the side of safety: we must be in advance rather than in arrears; for the former error is reparable, the latter is not."

During the first three weeks of February, 1909, an absolute deadlock prevailed in the Cabinet. For, while the country was becoming increasingly alarmed about what was beginning to be widely recognized as the German peril, and the Conservative press was clamouring for a larger shipbuilding programme, the left wing of the Liberal party and the bulk of the Liberal press simultaneously criticized the

² First Commissioner of Works (1908-10).

³ For an assessment of the evidence furnished by H. H. Mulliner, of the Coventry Ordnance Works, see Woodward, *Great Britain and the German Navy* (1938), pp. 481-4.

Government for building too fast. McKenna was strongly opposed in the Cabinet by Lloyd George⁴ and Winston Churchill,⁵ with Morley⁶ and Loulou Harcourt in support. After much discussion and a threat of resignation from both McKenna and Grey, a compromise decision was reached on 24th February and embodied in the Naval Estimates which McKenna presented in the House of Commons on 16th March.

"We do not know," the First Lord declared, "as we thought we did, the rate at which German construction is taking place. . . . We anticipated that work on the 1908-9 programme would begin on four ships in August, 1908. The preparation and collection of materials began some months earlier. We now expect these ships to be completed, not in February, 1911, but in the autumn of 1910." Further, McKenna went on to observe, the collection of materials, and the manufacture of armament, guns, and mountings, had already begun on another four vessels belonging to the programme of 1909-10, and the Admiralty would have to take stock of a new situation, "in which we reckon that not nine but 13 ships may be completed in 1911, and in 1912 such further ships, if any, as may be begun in the course of the next financial year or laid down in April, 1910." The Government was therefore bound to take steps to meet the possibility that Germany might have 17 dreadnoughts in the spring of 1912, and not 13, as in the official schedule. In the circumstances it had been decided to accumulate materials for four additional ships during 1909. These four additional ships would be laid down in April, 1910, if there were evidence of German acceleration during the winter of 1909. That would give us a strength of 20 dreadnoughts in March, 1912, as against Germany's 17. If there were no acceleration of the German programme, the four 'contingent' ships would not be laid down until a later date.⁷

Formerly the attendance at Parliamentary debates on the Naval Estimates had been small and naval questions generally had aroused little interest, but of late there had been a marked change. That day the chamber was crowded in every part and members on both sides were keyed up to a high pitch of expectancy as they sat tense and silent, with grave and anxious faces, intently listening to McKenna. The First Lord was followed by Arthur Balfour, the Leader of the Opposition, who declared the programme submitted by the Government to be utterly inadequate. He was of opinion that Germany might have, not 17, but 21—perhaps even 25—dreadnoughts in 1912. The next speaker was H. H. Asquith, the Prime Minister, who supported the estimate made by the Admiralty. His tone and manner deepened the impression made by the previous speakers. When the Prime Minister sat down a strange silence fell upon the shocked and anxious House.

On the day following Arthur Lee,⁸ who was the Opposition's chief spokesman in defence matters, pressed home the attack. He maintained that the Government had only themselves to blame for the position in which they found themselves. They were now reaping the results of their own parsimony and procrastination. Their policy had been one of deferring expenditure and piling it up for the future in

⁴ Chancellor of the Exchequer (1908-15).

⁵ President of the Board of Trade (1908-10).

⁶ Secretary for India (1908-10).

⁷ Hansard, *The Parliamentary Debates*, 16th March, 1909.

⁸ Lee, when Civil Lord of the Admiralty, had in 1905 made a truculent speech in the course of which he declared that the Germans ought to be forbidden any further expansion of their fleet and, that if it came to war, the German fleet would be wiped out "before they had time to read the declaration of war in the newspapers."

the hope that something might turn up. And in his belief it had been both the inspiration and the justification of this supreme effort by Germany with which we were confronted today. (*Cheers.*) In the early years of the existence of the present Government there was an almost complete lull in shipbuilding, produced largely by the advent of the *Dreadnought*. That lull was spent by us in pilgrimages to The Hague and in travelling through Elysian fields dreaming of universal disarmament. But in Germany it was spent in creating, organizing, and perfecting the greatest system of ship-producing plant which the world had ever seen, and which would enable the Germans to catch up all past delays and launch themselves upon a revolutionary period of acceleration. Towards the end of this historic debate, on 23rd March, the Opposition tabled a vote of censure, and Asquith restated the Government case in a speech of surpassing lucidity and power. "On behalf of the nation," he said in conclusion, "I make this appeal to believe that, whatever party is in power—I do not care which it is—the first care of every British statesman who is worthy of the name is to maintain intact, unassailable, unchallengeable, that naval supremacy on which our independence and our freedom depend."⁹

"A wave of consternation swept the country. It was widely recognized that we were faced with a crisis of the first magnitude. "Yesterday's debate on the Naval Estimates," said the *Irish Times* on 17th March, "was, perhaps, the most important which has taken place in the House of Commons within living memory." By the *Daily Telegraph* the situation was compared with 'Black Week' of nearly 10 years before. "Seldom has so profound an effect been so instantly produced," said *The Times*, "as has been produced throughout the country by Tuesday's debate in the House of Commons." "We had believed," *The Times* leader continued, "with no qualm or disturbing doubt, that our Navy, and our capacity to build and equip ships for it more rapidly than any other power, justified that confidence. The figures cited by Mr. Lee in yesterday's debate were not only disquieting, but positively startling. They show that, should Germany go on accelerating her already accelerated programme, there is no obstacle to her doing this, as one had formerly supposed there was, in the limitations of her manufacturing resources."

The important and influential group of newspapers controlled by Lord Northcliffe—*The Times*, *Observer*,¹⁰ *Daily Mail*, *Evening News*, *Globe*, and *Mirror*—were well to the fore in what the Ministerialists described as 'the propagation of fear.' The *Daily Telegraph*, *Scotsman*, *Western Morning News*, and other Conservative journals expressed hardly less alarm; but the *Yorkshire Post* and *Glasgow Herald* were more restrained. It was not only the great national dailies and the major provincial journals which devoted entire pages, columns, paragraphs, and leading articles to the Government's statement and the ensuing debate; but also a whole host of minor county and suburban papers, and distant organs like the *Cornish Echo* and *Shetland News*. Robert Blatchford's *Clarion* lived fully up to its name and reputation, and *Punch*, as usual, rose to the occasion.¹¹ The Opposition press was

⁹ Hansard, *The Parliamentary Debates*, 17th and 23rd March, 1909.

¹⁰ The *Observer* at one point seemed to be leaning perilously over towards the advocacy of a preventive war.

¹¹ On 24th March a cartoon appeared in *Punch* entitled "Copyright Expires," showing an argument between an Englishman and a German dressed as seamen. *German tar*. "'We don't want to fight, But by Jingo, if we do, We've got the ships, we've got the men, we've got the money, too.'" *John Bull*. "I say, that's my old song." *German tar*. "Well, it's mine now."

unanimous in supporting a large shipbuilding programme, and not a few of the Ministerialist papers were shocked by these revelations. "We may take it as proved," the *Daily News* admitted on 17th March, "that Germany has contrived to hasten her building and to advance her programme." "The prospect is enough to fill economists and social reformers with despair," said the *Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury*, "but the force of Mr. McKenna's plea that national safety must be ensured at all cost is not to be denied." The *Manchester Guardian* hoped that the four 'contingent' ships could be included in the 1910-11 programme.

As the distinguished German historian, Erich Brandenburg, has declared, "a great many exaggerated and inaccurate statements had been made in the English Press and Parliament as to the strength of German armaments." Certain journals of the 'yellow press' had fairly let themselves go and these had done a good deal to inflame public feeling; also the Conservative leader, Arthur Balfour, was certainly not at his best when dealing with intricate statistics. But even by the Government's own showing a most alarming situation had arisen. The struggle centred for the most part on the matter of the four 'contingent' ships, or what the *Daily News* called "the accelerated quartette." Soon the war-cry of the navalists, *We want eight and we won't wait*, ran from end to end of the kingdom. "The panic about the Navy does not subside," the *Daily News* commented on 22nd March, "it is rising more and more loud." Even the little children were singing in the streets:

"Eight, eight, eight!
We won't have less than eight!
So we'll smash 'em flat
If they won't give us that!
WE WILL HAVE EIGHT!"

The naval crisis was endlessly discussed in buses and railway carriages, in West End clubs and country pubs, in theatre foyers and on factory floors, at football matches, trade union meetings, and market ordinaries, in the common-rooms of schools and Universities, in messes and canteens, at house-parties and race-meetings, on city pavements and on village greens—in a word, in all the diverse groupings and gatherings of society which go to make up British public opinion. "Till this moment," Gooch sums up, "the *Flottenpolitik* had been an anxiety; henceforth it was a nightmare."

The crisis in Parliament coincided with another in the Navy, which for some years past had been reft by a violent schism. Both Sir John Fisher's reforms¹² and his *Dreadnought* policy had been adversely criticized. His methods had not infrequently aroused bitter resentment. To belong to Fisher's following—or, in the language of the wardroom, "to be in the Fishpond"—was regarded as indispensably necessary for promotion. The opposition to the Fisher régime was headed by Admiral Lord Charles Beresford, a most popular and distinguished officer who was also, at various periods, an M.P. In 1907 there occurred a number of incidents, of which

¹² Fisher's major reforms, apart from his educational innovations as Second Sea Lord, comprised the introduction of the nucleus crew system, the scrapping of obsolescent warships, and the re-distribution of naval forces.

the most serious was the famous 'paintwork' signal.¹³ This brought the feud between Fisher and Beresford and their respective partisans to a head. By the summer of 1908 it was known that the First Sea Lord and the Commander-in-Chief of the Channel Fleet were no longer on speaking terms,¹⁴ and the vendetta between the rival factions had reached such proportions that it threatened to undermine the discipline of the Service. On 23rd March, in accordance with the Admiralty's order, Beresford hauled down his flag at Portsmouth and proceeded to launch an unbridled attack on his old chief.

The naval crisis of 1909 was accompanied by an intensification of the Press campaign against Fisher. "The sole responsibility for the fact that in a few months Great Britain will be in a more vulnerable position than she has been since the battle of Trafalgar belongs to the First Sea Lord," said the *Daily Express* on 20th March. "... If he had threatened resignation when an unsatisfactory naval programme was being prepared he would have forced the hands of the economaniacs." "We do want to ask very clearly where 'Fisherism' is leading us," the *Spectator* remarked a week later, "and whether its latter developments have had a good effect upon the Navy. Though we say it with deep regret, we can hardly doubt that the fierce controversies which have raged in the Navy for the last four or five years have done a good deal to injure the *moral* of the force."¹⁵

It is interesting and instructive to trace the course of the naval issue in the Croydon election campaign,¹⁶ which covered the fortnight or so that elapsed between the debate on the Naval Estimates and the Conservative vote of censure on 29th March. When the naval crisis first arose the candidate adopted by the Croydon Conservatives, Sir Robert Hermon-Hodge, had been absent in Madeira. On his return to England, on hearing of the disclosures made by McKenna and the ensuing debate, Hermon-Hodge added an allusion to the urgency of maintaining our naval supremacy as a postscript to the statement of his political views which he had prepared for the information of the Croydon electors. The introduction of the naval question was not of his seeking, he afterwards declared, but he added, "It is idle to imagine that a question of this tremendous and paramount importance, which is discussed in every newspaper every morning and in every Englishman's home every night, could be excluded or ought to be excluded from the consideration of those who have placed upon them the responsibility of expressing their opinion by their votes."

¹³ On 4th November, 1907, Beresford, then in command of the Channel Fleet, had ordered the curtailment of exercises so that ships could be painted and generally made spic and span for the forthcoming visit of inspection by the German Emperor. Sir Percy Scott, the gunnery expert (then Rear-Admiral of the 1st Cruiser Squadron) promptly cancelled all gunnery exercises and made a signal to the captain of the *Roxburgh*: "Paintwork appears to be more in demand than gunnery, so you had better come in, in time to make yourself look pretty by the 8th." For this Scott was publicly reprimanded by Beresford on board the flagship; but he was not superseded by the Admiralty—a fact which Beresford attributed to Scott's being 'in the Fishpond.'

¹⁴ As Lee observed in a letter to *The Times* on 6th July, 1908.

¹⁵ *The Morning Post* and *Standard* were also strongly anti-Fisher. On Fisher's side were ranged most of the Ministerialist press, as well as *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Observer*, and the two influential Service journals, the *Army and Navy Gazette* and *Naval and Military Record*.

¹⁶ The seat was rendered vacant by the sudden death of the member, H. O. Arnold-Foster.

On Croydon there presently converged all manner of societies, leagues, and movements, representative of almost every known shade of political, economic, social, and even religious opinion—the tariff reformers, the Conservative Association, the League of Young Liberals, the Fabian Society, the Imperial Maritime League, the Liberal Association, the Primrose League, the woman suffragists, and the Navy League, as well as such picturesque freelances as Messrs. Hunnabell and Stewart Gray. The Liberal candidate, J. E. Raphael, though personally well liked in the borough, found himself severely handicapped by three major factors. In the first place, though he was himself a convinced supporter of women's suffrage (and Hermon-Hodge a determined opponent of it), Raphael was at once made the target for virulent abuse of the suffragettes, headed by the indefatigable Mrs. Pankhurst, in accordance with their policy, "Keep out the Liberals." Secondly, the decision of the local Labour party to nominate a candidate was a serious blow for the Liberals. Above all, the nation-wide outcry concerning British security at sea weighted the scales heavily against Raphael.

On 18th March, F. E. Smith, the rising hope of the Conservative Party and one of the most brilliant debaters in the House, opened Hermon-Hodge's platform campaign before a large and enthusiastic audience. He declared that the Government's proposals for dealing with the present naval crisis were totally inadequate. It had fallen to Croydon, he said, to be the first to pronounce on the difference of opinion which had arisen as to the shipbuilding programme, and he offered the electors a short and simple motto for the election, "eight more dreadnoughts this year." This advice was received with loud cheers, and the speaker then passed on to the advocacy of tariff reform.

The Liberal *Croydon Times* deprecated this "dragging the Navy into the cockpit of politics." This was a favourite charge of the Ministerialist press. *The Times*, however, adopted a rather more realistic approach to the matter. "However doubtful responsible men may be of the wisdom of introducing the Navy among the ordinary topics which are discussed at by-elections," said the paper, "the present signs indicate that, with or without their countenance, it is going to be a very considerable issue in the Croydon fight The people themselves demand that the Navy shall be discussed on the platform and at the street corner meetings, and tariff reform itself would seem to be in danger for the moment of falling into second place."

The prognostication of *The Times* was justified in the event. Though the tariff reform poster might be prominently displayed in the 150 miles of streets comprising the borough of Croydon, it was the naval issue which invariably aroused the keenest feeling. Forcing itself inexorably to the front, it made this particular election campaign the most fiercely contested, the rowdiest, and the most exciting in the history of the borough. "We all wish to see the Navy placed outside the sphere of party politics," Hermon-Hodge observed on his arrival at Croydon on the 21st, "but the Government by their failure to maintain our naval supremacy have forced it upon us as a party issue, and therefore Croydon is bound seriously to consider the naval question and to vote upon it." Day after day organized bands of youths paraded the streets, chanting, "We want eight dreadnoughts," instead of the usual slogan, "Tariff Reform means taxing the foreigner." Over and over again Liberal meetings were interrupted by the familiar invocation, "*Dreadnoughts, Dreadnoughts, Dreadnoughts!*"

In vain the Croydon Liberals struggled against the current. "I will be no party to extravagance, panic-mongering, or stirring up strife among nations," Raphael had declared on 19th March. Ministerialists soon found whether they liked it or not that they were obliged to dwell more and more on the naval issue. At the Public Hall, Croydon, on Saturday, 21st March, Masterman¹⁷ vigorously defended the Cabinet's naval policy against its critics. "At the present moment this country is absolutely invulnerable from invasion," he argued. "We have got a fleet which in essentials is very nearly equal to those of all the powers of the world put together." Speaking on behalf of the Liberal candidate on the following Tuesday, Macnamara¹⁸ likewise devoted a large part of his speech to the Navy. "You are asked," he declared, "to believe that the trident—the sceptre of sea-power—is slipping from John Bull's grasp. It is not slipping from his grasp, and we Radicals do not mean that it should." The Croydon Liberals eventually gave up trying to play down the naval crisis. "The Navy, and tariff reform, continued to be the principal, almost the exclusive, topics," the *Croydon Times* reported on the 24th. "All the parties have been obliged to recognize that the Navy is certainly one, if not the chief, of the issues upon which the electors mean to vote."

Throughout the campaign the conduct of the candidates and their respective agents was exemplary, but the same could scarcely be said of some of the partisans skirmishing on the wings. Raphael in particular suffered severely from the recurrent sallies of these irregulars. On the evening of Friday, 26th March, a big Liberal meeting held at St. Peter's Hall, South Croydon, nearly broke up in disorder. A gang of men and youths had stationed themselves at the back of the hall and systematically interrupted the speakers. In the end a dozen or more were thrown out into the street, and the meeting was able to continue.¹⁹ Towards the end of the week the rowdiness increased. It was apparent, too, that a good deal of money was being spent in various undesirable directions in the course of the campaign, though not by the official party organizations.

"The whole borough reeks with oratory of the wildest character," declared the *Croydon Advertiser*. "Bands of boys have marched up and down Croydon streets for a stricken week with everlasting uproar, groaning, cheering, and hooting; babes and sucklings have thronged the pavements distributing 'literature'; paid stumpers have yelled themselves hoarse and almost speechless." Every available square yard of hoarding, wall, and fence was plastered over with pictorial posters extolling the rival merits of Free Trade and Tariff Reform, Old Age Pensions and a strong Navy; the pavements were scrawled with chalk inscriptions, "Votes for Women" and "We want eight and we won't wait"; in the town-centre prudent proprietors had boarded up their shop-fronts. Katherine Street, it was observed, presented a spectacle more like that of a country fair than the quiet thoroughfare which it usually was. Large crowds wandered nightly from pitch to pitch seeking amusement and entertainment, with numerous pickpockets busy in their midst.

On Saturday nights in the early 1900s the principal streets of Croydon and the neighbouring suburbs were a mixture of market and music-hall where, in the light of flaring naphtha torches, stalls were set out with a wide range of commodities and all kinds of variety turns from fortune-telling to sword-dancing. But on this particular week-end the usual street carnival was altogether eclipsed by the most

¹⁷ Under-Secretary of State, Home Department (1909-14).

¹⁸ Parliamentary Secretary to the Admiralty (1908-16).

¹⁹ *The Croydon Guardian and Surrey County Gazette*, 3rd April, 1909.

fascinating show of all—a political ‘free for all.’ The Suffragettes had brought down a number of ex-prisoners from Holloway gaol, among them the redoubtable Mrs. Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel, whom they embarked in a smart motor-charabanc, and, with drags and motor-cars, paraded triumphantly through various parts of the constituency, marching with colours flying and drums beating to an enthusiastic rally at the Empire Palace Theatre in the afternoon. On this Saturday evening, 27th March, Katherine Street, “the cock-pit of Croydon,” was a scene of “wild and whirling disorder,” the turbulence of Thursday and Friday culminating in a perfect orgy of rowdyism. In the course of the proceedings an unfortunate Free Trade speaker was bundled in a dustbin and deposited in a Tariff Reform van amid the exultant yells of a war-band of hilarious youngsters sporting Conservative colours.

As the evening wore on the noise continued to increase until Katherine Street was one continuous roar of oratory, cheering, and booing, accompanied by the ceaseless squealing of penny trumpets, clatter of rattles, and ringing of handbells. “Late in the evening,” the *Croydon Times* observed, “the ‘storm-centre’ shifted to the corner of George Street and Park Lane, where were situated Mr. Raphael’s Central Committee Rooms. Here for two hours a great crowd swayed and shouted, booed and yelled, while party colours rose and fell like flotsam and jetsam on the waves of the sea.” There had been no such night as this, as the *Daily News* remarked, since Mafeking night. It was calculated that at least 300 meetings were held in the constituency on the Saturday. Hermon-Hodge’s final meeting was held that night at the Public Hall before an enthusiastic audience. It was certain, the candidate declared, that had the election been fought on Tariff Reform, the Licensing Bill, the alien question, or the upholding of the British Constitution, Croydon would have been won by the Unionist Party. “But beyond that,” he went on, “I appeal to you, not only as a Conservative, a Unionist, and an Imperialist, but as an Englishman to Englishmen, to let every Englishman outside Croydon know what you think about the action of the present Government in neglecting our first line of defence.”

On the afternoon of Monday, 29th March, in a packed and expectant House of Commons, Lee rose, amid loud Conservative cheers, to move the vote of censure. He maintained that, if only the Government had adhered to the “moderate and reasonable shipbuilding programme laid down in the Cawdor Memorandum,” this danger which was alarming the whole nation would have been avoided altogether. The German Government, he declared, had built up in an incredibly short time, “by long premeditation, forethought, minute organization, and immense financial sacrifices,” the greatest shipbuilding plant perhaps the world had ever seen, and he ended a strong and closely reasoned speech by demanding that “at all times and at all costs we shall maintain a complete and even a crushing superiority over the one power which alone of all powers has the means to overwhelm us in these islands if it is able to challenge our superiority in home waters.”

Sir Edward Grey replied for the Government with one of the greatest speeches of his career, and one which created a deep impression on the House. He began by saying that the House and the country were perfectly right to view the situation as grave. A new situation had been created for this country by the German programme. Whether that programme was carried out quickly or slowly, the fact of its existence made a new situation. When that programme was completed Germany, a great country close to our own shores, would have a fleet of 33 dreadnoughts. That fleet would be the most powerful the world had ever yet seen. “There is no comparison,” Grey declared, “between the importance of our Navy to us. Our Navy is to us what their Army is to them. (*Cheers.*) To have a strong Navy would increase their

prestige, their diplomatic influence, their power of protecting their commerce; but as regards us—it is not a matter of life and death to them as it is to us. No superiority of the British Navy over the German Navy could ever put us in a position to affect the independence or integrity of Germany (*Cheers*), because our Army is not maintained on a scale which, unaided, could do anything on German territory. But if the German Navy were superior to ours, they, maintaining the Army which they do, for us it would not be a question of defeat. Our independence, our very existence, would be at stake." Grey passed on to the general question of armaments and spoke of the immense sums which were being spent by the powers on what were, after all, "preparations to kill each other." Yet they could find no way of escape by the unilateral disarmament of Great Britain. "If we alone among the great powers," he declared, "gave up the competition and sank into a position of inferiority, what good should we do? . . . We should cease to count for anything among the nations of Europe, and we should be fortunate if our liberty was left, and we did not become the conscript appendage of some stronger power."²⁰

Meanwhile at Croydon polling was in full swing. Since nine o'clock that morning a continuous procession of motor-cars, carriages, waggonettes, and other vehicles of every size, shape, and condition had been winding to and from the 26 different polling-stations in the constituency. Everywhere were to be seen the party colours—the Conservative orange and violet predominating over the Liberal blue and white.²¹ Parties of Suffragettes drove around in motor-cars scattering clouds of handbills. Wherever one of the rival candidates appeared in the streets he was loudly cheered. "The gaiety of the scene was enhanced by the elaborate decorations on many of the vehicles," observed the *Croydon Guardian*, "and a somewhat novel feature consisted of cyclists—singly and in groups—carrying long sticks with pennons attached, using what influence they possessed to awaken voters to a sense of responsibility. Every now and then a dog with neck and tail adorned according to his owner's political views trotted unconcernedly in and out of the throng. As the day went on the crowds in the streets increased, and the town assumed the appearance of a public holiday. Hawkers came down from London selling party favours in the form of parasols, enormous rosettes, and nosegays, together with ticklers, hooters, confetti, balls on elastic, and paper caps; and these were bought eagerly by a public thoroughly imbued with the holiday mood."

From six o'clock onwards, North End, the High Street, George Street, and Katherine Street were filled with a crowd of steadily increasing dimensions. The weather was rather showery at first, but later on it cleared up. Both parties appeared to be frantic with excitement. Cheers for Hodge were followed by counter-cheers for Raphael, while gangs of rowdy young men paraded up and down chorussing "Hodge, Hodge, Hodge!" or "Eight more Dreadnoughts!" What with these cries and the ringing of bells, blaring of trumpets, and blowing of whistles, Katherine Street was a pandemonium.

After dark a searchlight began to play upon the crowds from an upper window in the High Street. For a while its rays fell upon a strange, incongruous figure, dressed in a white smock, with long dark hair falling upon its shoulders, and with gesticulating arms, which reared itself above the heads of the multitude on a stool. It was the eccentric Mr. Hunnable, whom the *Croydon Guardian* later likened to "Peter the Hermit preaching a last Crusade." For several minutes this apparition

²⁰ Hansard, *The Parliamentary Debates*, 29th March, 1909.

²¹ It is to be noted that by 5 p.m. the hawkers were confidently offering the Conservative favours as "the new M.P.'s colours."

swayed to and fro, "bending now this way, now that, in fierce, fanatical exhortation and entreaty." He was roughly handled by the crowd and was eventually led off out of harm's way by the police.

As the time approached when the result was expected the concourse became thicker and thicker and the excitement reached its climax. It is calculated that outside and around the Municipal Buildings there was collected a crowd of more than 20,000 people. Above the ear-splitting discordance of penny trumpets, rattles, whistles and handbells rose an insistent chorus, "Dreadnoughts, Dreadnoughts—eight more Dreadnoughts!" chanted in unison to the chimes of the Town Hall clock. The poll was declared at about half-past ten. The Mayor then appeared on the balcony over the entrance to the Town Hall. What he said was quite indistinguishable in the hubbub except the one word "Hodge." It was quite sufficient. Upon the word hats and caps were thrown into the air, sticks and umbrellas were waved, cheer upon cheer rang out into the night. A tremendous shout of "Hodge, Hodge, Hodge!" went up from thousands of throats. When the successful candidate came out on the balcony he was received with frantic cheering which went on uninterruptedly for half an hour to the accompaniment of *Rule Britannia*. The Conservatives had nearly doubled their majority.²² "Croydon's verdict," said the victor, "shows that the constituency stands, above everything else, for Tariff Reform and a strong Navy." In an interview with the Press his opponent declared that he attributed his defeat to "the wholesale working up of the naval scare," which had produced "a kind of 'mafficking' spirit throughout the constituency."

At Westminster the debate on the Opposition's motion continued. Late that evening Asquith supplemented the arguments which Grey had already put forward in a strong speech summarizing the Government's case. It was not, he maintained, a case for anxiety, but a case for precaution. But he thought he would have been lacking in his duty both to the House and to the country if he had not on such an occasion pointed out the emergence of two new and grave factors, both of them phenomena of the last 12 months—in the first place the acceleration, which was not disputed, of the German programme, and in the next place the enormous increase which had taken place during the same time in the productive capacity for ship-building purposes of the German nation.

Balfour pressed for a larger shipbuilding programme. He said he did not believe that the Admiralty could know all that went on in Germany and it was therefore madness to trust to a small margin of dreadnought power for our national safety. At this point the news of the Croydon election result ran along the crowded benches, and Balfour was interrupted by loud Opposition cheering. Resuming, the Leader of the Opposition demanded that power should be obtained to lay down the four 'contingent' ships without delay. The Government were dependent upon small margins. Although their information was, by admission, inaccurate, not blameably, but necessarily inaccurate, although they knew the capacity of Germany for building was as great as ours that we could not be sure of what they were doing, they yet depended on a margin of one in this year, a margin of two in another year, and a margin of three in a third year.

When the House divided the motion was lost by 353 to 135, a Government majority of 218. While the Ministerialists were congratulating one another the Opposition replied with cries of "Croydon!" and "Go to the country!"²³

²² Hermon-Hodge polled 11,989 votes, Raphael 8,041, and Smith (the Labour candidate) 886.

²³ Hansard, *The Parliamentary Debates*, 29th March, 1909.

The Conservative press was jubilant. "The voice of England has spoken at Croydon," said the *Daily Mail*. The *Times* spoke of the "decisive victory of Croydon," and the *Morning Post* of the "magnificent victory of Sir Robert Hermon-Hodge at Croydon." "Croydon was fought mainly on the issue of our naval supremacy," the *Irish Times* observed, "and on that issue the English working-man is sound." "The time for shilly-shallying and soft speeches has gone," the *Daily Express* declared. "We must have the eight Dreadnoughts, and we must have much more. Sir John Fisher must go, and all that Fisherism means. That is what Sir Robert Hermon-Hodge's magnificent victory at Croydon means—a mighty, complete British Navy that can face any possible combination and any possible danger."

The attitude taken by the bulk of the Liberal press was to deplore the fact that the Navy had been dragged into the cockpit of party politics. "In their eagerness to discredit the Government the Tories played upon the credulity and passions of the mob," said the *Daily News*, "and did not hesitate to throw the Navy into the party conflict." The Conservative *Daily Telegraph*, however, also saw much to regret in the fact that "for the first time for many years the Navy has been made the subject of direct antagonism between the two great political parties in this country." The consternation expressed by the British Press was echoed by that of the Dominions and Colonies. Already the people of New Zealand had volunteered to bear the cost of at least one dreadnought, and shortly after a similar offer came from Australia. When the Naval Estimates were voted on 26th July McKenna announced that the four 'contingent' ships would be included in the 1909 programme. This had a reassuring effect upon public opinion. As the *Annual Register* remarked, "All but the most extreme economists on the Liberal side were silenced." It is significant that less than 100 members voted against this programme.²⁴

The year 1909 was one of unprecedented activity in the British shipyards. The *Neptune* was laid down at Portsmouth in January; the *Indefatigable*, at Devonport in February; the *Colossus*, at Greenock, and the *Hercules*, at Jarrow, in July; the *Orion*, at Portsmouth, and the *Lion*, at Devonport, in November. The *Orion* was the first of the so-called super-dreadnoughts, with a waterline belt of 12-inch armour, mounting ten 13.5-inch guns in pairs—two pairs forward, two pairs aft, and the fifth pair right amidships—in superimposed turrets at different levels. For the advance from the 12-inch to the 13.5-inch gun Fisher was largely responsible. The *Lion*, which like the *Invincible* was a hybrid, was the latest and most powerful of the battle-cruisers. Her size was greater than that of the *Orion* (26,350 tons to 22,500), and her cost was £2,000,000 as against the *Orion's* £1,900,000. She was protected by a waterline belt of 9-inch armour and mounted eight 13.5-inch guns. Gun-power and armour were thus sacrificed to speed, 28 knots as against the *Orion's* 21.

In each of the two succeeding years McKenna had five dreadnoughts laid down, and the naval supremacy of Great Britain was thereby assured. The fact that in the first few critical months of the war of 1914-18 the Navy enjoyed an adequate

²⁴ The *Economist* continued doggedly to oppose the 'Big Navy' policy. On 24th April it spoke of the "artificial naval scare"; in March, 1910, it declared an Anglo-German understanding to be impossible while our Naval Estimates continued to show such great increases, and the following November observed that, "The German fleet which has struck such panic is largely imaginary, and the supposed danger is entirely due to the fact that our Admiralty invented the *Dreadnought* and fostered the impression that this type of ship had superseded all others."

margin of superiority over the High Seas Fleet was due in the last resort to the inclusion of the four 'contingent' ships in the 1909 programme.²⁵

The week before M. Blériot, the first aviator to cross the Channel, landed safely on the cliffs of Dover—i.e., from 17th to 24th July, 1909—a huge fleet of warships, comprising nearly 150 vessels, lay moored in the Thames from Southend to the Houses of Parliament. Below, in the estuary off Southend pier, lay the *Dreadnought*, flying the flag of Admiral Sir William May, and astern of the flagship the three dreadnought battleships *Bellerophon*, *Superb*, and *Téméraire*, the *Lord Nelsons* and the *Formidables*, and the three *Invincibles*. Huge crowds lined the wide pavement of the Embankment and Westminster Bridge to gaze at the submarines and torpedo-boats moored almost in the shadow of the Houses of Parliament. It was beyond question one of the most imposing spectacles which Londoners had ever beheld. On the 20th the Lord Mayor paid a civic visit to the Fleet, and on the following day 1,200 naval ratings marched through the thronged and cheering streets to a luncheon held in their honour at the Guildhall.

On the 27th, when the House went into Committee of Supply on the Navy Estimates, there was further discussion on naval affairs between the Government and the Opposition. The shadow cast by Blériot's successful flight over the sea two days earlier was too faint yet to make any impression on maritime affairs.

At the General Election of January, 1910, the Navy formed one of the main topics of discussion. At Haddington, on 3rd January, Asquith defended the Cabinet's policy of Imperial defence. The Navy also figured prominently in Balfour's speeches. At Hanley, on the 4th, the Conservative leader devoted a large part of his speech to the Navy. "We exist as an Empire only on sufferance unless our Navy is supreme," Balfour declared, "and I for one am not content to exist on sufferance." At Edinburgh, on the 10th, Grey devoted the greater part of his speech to the Navy and foreign relations. At Wolverhampton, on the 11th, Austen Chamberlain observed that, "Our naval supremacy had encountered such risks and perils such as have not been known within the memory of living man." "Liberal and Labour speakers argue that the Navy has been introduced as a stalking-horse," the *Spectator* commented a few days before, "but it is enough perhaps to point out that facts are facts and they do not cease to be true because they are put forward with some ulterior motive." The whole nation had, in fact, become Navy conscious as never before or since in time of peace. The age-old instinct of an island people warned them that the maintenance of their naval supremacy was for them a matter of life and death. From this time on the idea began to be widely held of an inevitable war between Germany and Great Britain.²⁶

The naval question was now the leading factor in Anglo-German relations. It was, indeed, the main and fundamental cause of a worsening of those relations. The naval debates in the House of Commons had been followed with absorbed and watchful interest by the *Tägliche Rundschau*, the *Berliner Tageblatt*, the *Kölnische Zeitung*, and other leading German papers. At an important conference held in Berlin on 3rd June, 1909, Bülow declared that judging from all the accounts he had

²⁵ In the early months of 1909 five 2nd class cruisers of the *Bristol* class were laid down—the *Bristol*, *Gloucester*, *Glasgow*, *Liverpool*, and *Newcastle*. These were followed by the four improved *Bristols* of the 1909-10 programme—the *Dartmouth*, *Falmouth*, *Weymouth*, and *Yarmouth*. Under the same programme 20 destroyers were also laid down.

²⁶ "I saw George Wyndham in Park Lane. He is pessimistic about the prospects of a German invasion, and thinks it is certain to happen in a few years. The only thing we can do is to go on building ships." (W. S. Blunt, *My Diaries*, 1883-1914: 18th March, 1909.)

received, "popular opinion in England is very seriously inflamed against us. People who must be taken seriously in England are predicting a war with Germany."

This was later confirmed by Metternich. He reported that though relations between the two countries had deteriorated through the Kruger telegram and the German attitude to the Boer War, "British feeling had not become thoroughly and seriously inimical till the moment when our [German] naval programme and public agitation on its behalf had given the English the constantly increasing impression that our fleet would mean a serious menace to England, for whom absolute security and supremacy at sea were matters of vital importance." Unfortunately for the future peace of Europe, the German Emperor as usual totally failed to understand the British attitude. On 11th June William II told Bülow that "the alleged English agitation about our new programme was simply bluff, for reason of English domestic policy. Such is the opinion of Admiral von Tirpitz, and His Majesty is in entire agreement."²⁷

In point of fact no acceleration of the German programme after the alarm of 1909 ever materialized. No more shipbuilding contracts were allotted in advance of the votes in the Reichstag, the German dreadnoughts of the 1908-9 and 1909-10 programmes were completed in accordance with the published time-table, and the fears which had been entertained for our naval ascendancy during the critical period of 1912-13 were not fulfilled in the event. Nevertheless, viewed in the light of certain statements which were made shortly after by Tirpitz and others, it would appear that the British apprehensions had not been without foundation.²⁸

Finally, from the British standpoint, a highly important by-product of the naval crisis of 1909 was the fact that the new programme substantially increased the Naval Estimates and, together with the recently introduced Old Age Pensions, was mainly responsible for Lloyd George's 'People's Budget.'²⁹ The then enormous total of £16,000,000 had to be found by new taxation, which imposed burdens hitherto undreamed of on income and property. In the violent controversy which followed, the Budget was thrown out by the Lords, which occasioned the dissolution of Parliament and the historic 'Peers v. People' campaign. The rapidly increasing expense of the Navy was a standing embarrassment to a Liberal Government anxious to implement its plans of social reform.³⁰ Tension both in the Cabinet and Parliament over these costly naval increases continued to recur during the last few years of peace.

²⁷ Prince von Bülow, *Memoirs* (1931), III, pp. 420, 426-7. See also *Die grosse Politik der europäischen Kabinette*, 1871-1914, xxviii. 97.

²⁸ *British Documents on the Origins of the War*, 1898-1914, ed. Gooch and Temperley, vi. 244-6. "Count Reventlow, in the *Tägliche Rundschau* of 19th March, spoke of acceleration in the rate of building the ships of the 1908-9 and 1909-10 programmes as a 'matter of common knowledge'" (Woodward, *Great Britain and the German Navy* (1935), p. 229). This is confirmed by the reports of our Ambassador and Naval Attaché in Berlin: see *British Documents*, vi. 555-6, 581-3, 656-7. See also Woodward, *ibid.*, Appendix vi, pp. 489-94.

²⁹ In his famous Limehouse speech of 30th July, 1909, Lloyd George referred with telling effect to the exigencies of the shipbuilding programme. "We started building," he declared; "we wanted money to pay for the building; so we sent the hat round. We sent it round amongst the workmen and winders of Derbyshire and Yorkshire, the weavers of High Peak, and the Scotsmen of Dumfries who, like all their countrymen, know the value of money. They all dropped in their coppers. We went round Belgravia; and there has been such a howl ever since that it has completely deafened us."

³⁰ In 1901 the Naval Estimates had amounted to just under £31,000,000; by 1911 they exceeded £44,000,000, and still heavier increases were considered likely for succeeding years.