

4. State of the Nation

Social Surveys

In the decade to 1901, the urban population soared by 10% with the result that over three-quarters of the population lived in towns and cities. The plight of the poor resurfaced with hundreds of thousands living below a defined poverty line. Militancy was in the air as living costs increased steadily, easily outstripping wages. Charles Booth, in his extensive and multi-volume study *The Life and Labour of the People of London*, published between 1889 and 1903, identified unemployment and old age as the main causes of poverty, rather than a weakness of character. Despite the notion of family solidarity, only 30% of families took any responsibility for grandparents.

He was not alone in these findings, broadly mirrored in major towns and cities. Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree's studies of York, published in 1901, drew a distinction between nearly 10% of people living in primary poverty, unable to sustain physical efficiency, and almost 18% in secondary poverty, barely able to maintain an existence, let alone lead a healthy life. Setting the poverty threshold at 21. 8d a week, Rowntree showed that nearly 30% of the population of York lived in abject poverty.

In a repeated but more limited study in 1910 this had not fallen. The pattern was especially striking, not just in the run-down pockets of urban areas, but over the course of a lifetime, with poverty repeated in successive generations. Poverty was endemic. It was a way of life for workers with large families in arduous, repetitive jobs, low paid work and those incapable of work through illness, disease, accidents and afflictions, such as grinders' lung. Those out of work, unable to support others, were a drain on other family members. The lessons of the Victoria era had not been heeded. Only now were the root causes being fully analysed.

Agricultural workers fared no better as a survey of Ridgemount, Bedfordshire, by P. H. Mann showed in 1903. He deducted rent from Rowntree's poverty line as many farm workers lived in rent-free cottages. Even then about 40% lived in poverty. More revealing was the 1906 *Earnings and Hours of Work Labour Enquiry*. This showed Mann's net wage of 18s 4 pence was actually 10 pence higher than the national average of all agricultural workers in England. Maude Davies, writing about *Life In An English Village*, stated that in Corsley, Wiltshire, 12.7% of households were in primary poverty and 16.8% in secondary poverty. Included in the total figure of 29.5% were the sick, old and infirm. The inescapable conclusion was that in major cities and towns, and countryside too, poverty was not only about 30% but was embedded and enduring.

In a study of Middlesborough in 1907 Lady Florence Bell, wife of an ironmaster, identified levels of primary and secondary poverty on a par with York. In her opinion, based on a study of her husband's works, lack of thrift and skilful domestic management were main contributing factors. Nearly one third of workers surveyed were barely able to make ends meet. Life was a continuing battle of survival and any thought of social pleasure, an occasional extravagance, or tempting tit-bits, could be dismissed. Drudgery, hunger, cold and misery characterised the lives of most of the poor, but the stirrings of social unrest and of perceived unfairness were becoming more strident.

A common denominator of studies was malnutrition. Further evidence was provided with publication of a report in 1904 by a Government Committee on Physical Deterioration that concluded a third of children went hungry. The staple diet for most consisted of bread,

potatoes, milk, eggs and vegetables, with only a sporadic appearance of offal or similar. A monotonous diet of bread, coated with a film of margarine and a lick of jam, was a quick antidote to pangs of hunger. Rickets, common amongst the poorest in society, was attributed mainly to poor diet, exacerbated by lack of sunlight, as was stunted growth. Tuberculosis and measles flourished. Even Lady Bell was moved to acknowledge that, for those in dire poverty or on the cusp, the threat of illness or disability plunged a family into desperate measures that meant going even shorter on basic nourishment.

The Commission recommendations included medical inspections in all schools and provision of free school meals. A Labour MP from the back-benches moved a bill that was accepted by the Government. This became the Education (Administrative Provisions) Act 1906, enabling local authorities to provide meals for the 'necessitous poor.' Medical inspections were also agreed in the same year, but not setting up a schools medical service. Two years later child neglect was made a criminal offence under the Children's Act, raising predictable questions if the causation was extreme poverty.

Between 1909 and 1913 Maud Pember Reeves, and other members of the Women's Group of the Fabian Society carried out a detailed survey in Lambeth. It focused on families that had to manage on about a pound a week. A typical rent was 8/-, burial insurance 1/-, coal, gas and wood 2/6d and boot & clothing club 1/-. This left a meagre 7/6d for food, based on earnings of £1 week only.

For a family of six, the average per person for food was 1/3d. For every 'bob' earned over a pound, most was spent on food – with a bob or two for the male wage-earner for transport, lunches and a few beers, if earning 22/- or more. Men often had a superior diet, keeping the breadwinner in body, soul and in work! Size of family dictated diet. If large, expect the staple of bread, with dripping, jam or treacle, plenty of potatoes, broth, suet, dumplings and two or three meatless days. No wonder, Maude Reeves proposed a national minimum wage.

Professor A. L. Bowley, a renowned statistician, stated 32% of men earned less than 25/-, a figure disputed by Philip Snowden who put this close to 50%. Trades most vulnerable to low wages included textiles, railways and agriculture. No longer were children considered as economic assets. The school leaving age was now 14 but leaving at 13 or even 12 was not uncommon. Nor was working before or after school; sometimes both and at weekends to augment the family income.

The Condition of England

The title of a bestseller by C. F. G. Masterman, published in 1909, caused people to rethink and reflect. Perhaps a new British enlightenment was needed. The book's author was well placed to comment as a Cambridge academic, Liberal politician and senior member of Asquith's government. Masterman described British society as a "civilization in the vigour of early manhood, possessing contentment still charged with ambition." He observed life for many was now more tolerable. On digging beneath the surface, it was clear all was not well.

Rider Haggard predicted not just demise but an apocalypse and Professor Bowley pointed to a pinnacle of earnings in the late Victorian period, since when they had levelled off for most and had fallen for others. Might these be ominous omens? The social surveys of Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree starkly revealed grinding poverty on a scale unimagined by those having no contact with the deprived, desperate and destitute who comprised the lowest strata of society.

Large families, far from providing a form of insurance against illness, accidents or the death of siblings, added to the financial burden, but from 1900 family size began to fall gradually. For professional classes, the average was three or four children and five or more for those in manual occupations. Whilst feckless adults might be beyond any redemption, healthy minds of children were receptive to greater self-reliance, if only they had healthy bodies. It was to be hoped that the provision of free school meals for the deserving poor would go some way towards improving nourishment and the health of the nation.

The 1905 Unemployed Workmen's Act provided for temporary work or cash handouts and, whilst it lacked teeth, the Conservatives accepted government policy could have a positive effect, rather than leaving matters to the vagaries of market forces alone. Even then only tentative progress was made in the attempt to alleviate pauperism. Of concern was avoiding schemes that would squander funds by creating a dependency through what was termed semi-paupers who "got employment in the ordinary way in the summer months and each recurring winter claimed from the local authority. These persons would have the privileges of pauperism, whilst retaining the full rights of citizenship." From this emerged ideas, first mooted in 1890 with publication of *In Darkest England and the way out* by William Bramwell Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army. He advocated an unemployed register, labour exchanges, farm colonies and assisted emigration. These and other ideas were incorporated in the remit of the Royal Commission on the workings of the poor law.

Britain was undeniably in transition and social change was in the minds of the voting public, or rather those lucky enough to have the vote. The mood of Britain was somehow different, more intense and more demanding. Something had to be done. The unpalatable reality was that, whilst the needs of Empire had come first for decades, the needs of the masses in Britain had been largely neglected. The status quo of Conservatism was unpalatable and unacceptable in this new century. So was continuing to tinker with interests in a far-flung and over-extended Empire, remote and far removed from the lives of ordinary citizens who felt it was of little or no benefit to them personally.

Self-made tycoon, Thomas Lipton virtually took over the Irish dairy industry and American pork production. His Chicago slaughterhouse alone killed 300-400 pigs daily with new Lipton stores seeming to open daily too. But Lipton was worried. "No-one seems to care anything about money today. Nothing is held of account, except the bank accounts. Quality education, civic distinction and public virtue, each year seem to be valued less. Riches unadorned seem each year to be valued more and more." Lipton was referring to wealthy investors, scarcely interested in the stock, only the return, and those viewing money as the Gospel of Mammon, rather than the means of creating a better quality of life for the many.

Britain continued to be the wealthiest country in Europe, if not the world, but competitors were catching up fast. In the twenty years to World War 1 production of coal, pig-iron and steel, essential raw materials for manufacturing, rose by 75%, 50% and 131% respectively. Impressive as this was, Germany was producing three to four times as much and USA five to six times. These huge increases were reflected in exports, with Germany trebling exports and the USA achieving a staggering five-fold increase. Whilst still growing fast economically, Britain was actually falling behind. New workshops of the world were springing up.

Even allowing for new and emergent markets, these figures revealed a stark and unpalatable truth. The relative position of Britain was in decline as world share continued to plummet, not just in output but manufacturing value-added. For years, capital investment relied on

entrepreneurs drawing on huge retained profits, if they invested at all, in contrast to private, and long term, investment in the USA, Germany and elsewhere, fuelling an economic boom.

The unpalatable truth was Britain had made do and mend, as after all bags of cheap labour was available. Eminent economist Alfred Marshall was scathing about entrepreneurs, merely content to follow the lead given by their fathers. Many sought simply to maintain and not improve and did precious little to expand, nor introduce fresh ideas or new technologies. Complacency extended to business methods, such as productive efficiency and training, and the failure to learn from foreign competitors that were outstripping Britain. The gap was fast becoming a yawning chasm.

Thank Goodness For Invisibles

Britain was to pay a heavy price for investing in the Colonies at the expense of a neglected home economy. Ever since the Industrial Revolution, the backbone of Britain's economy was based on the staple industries of coal mining, textiles, shipbuilding and steel. Together, these accounted for 50% of the economy and 25% of the workforce. The gradual, and also relative decline, of these primary industries directly influenced the fortunes of the British economy as a whole. Agriculture suffered too. Competition from abroad was fierce and more workers were attracted by better wages and prospects in expanding towns.

This insularity, arrogance and superiority were exemplified in a blasé attitude about overseas earnings that continued to bolster substantially Britain's balance of payments. Never mind! The safety net of what were termed 'invisibles' would continue to more than compensate for a growing trade gap. In the four years between 1901 and 1905, imports exceeded exports by an average of 58%, a staggering percentage. The deficit of almost £175m was more than wiped out by financial services, including insurance, interest and dividends.

This meant a surplus of £49 million on the current account, and accumulated balance abroad of £2,642 million. The pattern was repeated in the years to 1914 with Britain remaining in surplus. The balance sheet was healthy as judged by the bottom line but manufacturing and trading showed a loss that continued to increase as manufacturing fell. The message was clear. There was an undue and unhealthy reliance on financial services and investments abroad to bail out the British economy. This warning shot was drowned out in the euphoria of what many regarded as the golden Edwardian age. The hope was the sun of prosperity would never set, other than perhaps very gradually on the British Empire.

In his novel, *The New Machiavelli*, H. G. Wells gave a prophetic and penetrating assessment of Britain's occupation of India. He mentions the apocryphal Indian ruler in the north-west who, when asked what will happen if we leave, replied, "in a week his men would be in the saddle; in six months not a rupee or virgin would be left in Lower Bengal." Wells added, that is always our conclusive justification. We avoid discussions and a conferences to enable this country to work out its own destiny. "In some manner we will have to come out of India."

End Of The Old Order

As Roy Hattersley comments, Victorian parliaments were characterised by two types of men. The Cavendishes, Primroses (better known as the Earls of Rosebery) and Cecil family were the dominating aristocrats with Peel, Gladstone and Chamberlain representing industry and commerce. Rival factions presented town versus country, and industry versus agriculture, rather than a clear ideology. Primary imperatives were peace, preservation and prosperity.

The Marquess of Salisbury, who died in 1903, was for the historian Andrew Roberts, "the last grand aristocratic figure that died with Victoria." With little interest in the domestic agenda he said, "The use of Conservatism was to delay changes until they became harmless." He much preferred "careful and tentative reform" that would not rock the boat of stability and security, nor undermine preservation of the lifestyles of the wealthy and privileged.

The era of aristocratic government and mercantile enterprise had prospered and survived for over two centuries, but was now coming to an end with the last custodian, Arthur Balfour, a nephew of Salisbury. The speed with which he replaced his uncle was breathtaking, coining the expression Bob's your uncle! Lord Rosebery quipped, "never before had one family been so blessed with such an abundance of talent."

Balfour regarded politics as a gentleman's pastime. It was not to be taken too seriously, or consume an excessive amount of time. Unlike his uncle he did recognise the importance of health and education to the British economy. Similar to his uncle he was curiously detached from British society, once asking a relative what a trade unions was. A reluctance to change and learn permeated the upper echelons of society. Even Masterman succumbed to this in saying, "Already in America one can detect a kind of disease of activity in people to whom business has become a necessary part of life." Such class-ridden attitudes, distaste for trade and failure to adapt to the modern world, ensured Britain would lag behind America.

The Victorian success story was built on free trade. The old Corn Laws with Tory landowners fixing the price of grains had been swept away by radicals in the 1840s, with Cobbett and Bright to the fore. They believed this would make Britain rich, little realising other nations were in a race to catch up with British industrial expertise and methods. Lancashire cotton towns bore the brunt. Attention turned to the British Empire for salvation but India would soon develop its own textiles economy. Free trade was a burning issue and split the Tory party. It was a contributing reason for the Liberal landslide of 1906 with a staggering 400 seats; 130 more than the other parties combined.

The last intervention of Balfour was to set up a Royal Commission into operation of the Poor Law. The Cabinet discussed its composition on 23 June 1905, anxious to ensure, not only the appointment of experts, but those who believed the prime purpose of charity was the moral improvement of recipients. Octavia Hill of The Charity Organisation Society, and the social theorist Helen Bosanquet, reflected these views but Beatrice Webb of the Fabian Society, with considerable expertise in the subject, did not. The old order for her and many others was an anachronism. Referring to the Party opposite, and the suave, elegant and articulate Arthur Balfour, the incoming Liberal Prime Minister, Henry Campbell-Bannerman, trumpeted "enough of this tomfoolery." Politics would never be the same again.

When, four years later the Commission reported its findings, the new Liberal administration felt inclined to listen to compelling arguments for change. The head of the Poor Law Division of the Local Government Board, J. S. Davey, and a strong advocate of self-help, pressed hard for reversion to the punitive relief principles of 1834. Whist sympathetic to those who lost their jobs, they had to suffer the consequences in the broader interests of all. This was a throwback to Bentham's greatest good of the greatest number. A women's group on the Board 'nosed around' literally to examine hygiene and sanitation. They were utterly appalled at the high incidence of ringworm, afflictions and illness through mass sharing of water for bathing, and communal use of towels, toothbrushes and linen. The final indignity, and a major risk to health, was toilets being locked at night.

The majority report, signed by the chairman and fourteen members, wished the stigma of the Poor Law to be removed and for a more compassionate system to operate. A minority report was produced by the largely Fabian group represented by Beatrice Webb, George Lansbury and future bishop of Birmingham, Francis Chancellor. They sought an entirely new system of assistance. Both reports wanted Local Government to assume the responsibilities of the Boards of Guardians.

The minority report highlighted that poor relief had much to do with social distress in one guise or another. It was causes that required addressing, not meddling with the system of poor relief, once those in greatest need came forward. The horse had already bolted. What was required was radical reform in examining the nature of unemployment and remedies to get people back into work, and alleviate poverty in old age.

Ill-health, old age and market fluctuations were issues to be tackled in their own right. The suggestion of financial support in the search for jobs during periods of unemployment was not just ground-breaking but revolutionary. So too was the idea of labour exchanges and training schemes under control of a specific government department. There was recognition also that quality of life mattered to avoid the humdrum existence 'between bed and factory' as Winston Churchill put it, with "time to see their children, time to think and read and water their gardens - time, in short, to live." The message was clear. Social reconstruction would come only with a complete change from centuries old aristocratic government.

Educating The Workers

Largely self-educated, Albert Mansbridge became an Anglican lay reader and was a copyist in the Board of Education, before becoming a clerk with the Co-op in Whitechapel in 1896. He attended evening lectures at Battersea Polytechnic and university extension classes at King's College, London that appealed to the middle classes and those aspiring.

In 1902 Albert Mansbridge published an article, *Co-operation, Trade Unionism and University Extension*. It focused on "lack of thinking power in the rank and file" of the fledgling Labour movement. Mansbridge insisted higher education for working-class leaders would result in "right and sound action" in public affairs. Such opportunities were lacking as most trade unions were debarred by their own rules from spending money on education.

Mansbridge decided to form the Association to Promote the Higher Education of Working Men. The group was joined by trade unionists and by those in the co-operative movement. The inaugural conference was held in Oxford on 22 August 1903, part funded by 2/6p each week from the housekeeping coffers of Albert and wife Frances. In 1905 the name was changed to the 'Workers Educational Association' to reflect female and male membership and to avoid any elitist connotation. The WEA was now open to all working adults.

Mansbridge formed an alliance of young academics from Oxford that included Richard H. Tawney, William Temple and Alfred Eckhard Zimmern. In 1908 working class men could access the University. "Here we find representatives of the more predictable groups, such as teachers, clerks and librarians, rubbing shoulders with an odd assortment of artisans and tradesmen, which included a gardener, a plumber, a potter's thrower, a basket maker, a miner, a mechanic, a baker, a grocer and a clothier - with an average age of 30." Richard Tawney's dream of direct personal involvement, and the participation of ordinary working people, had come true.

Cites historian W. H. Hosford, "Each Friday morning, during the winter of 1907, Tawney travelled from teaching at Glasgow, University, to travel to Longton in south Stoke on Trent for his evening class. Next day he left for Rochdale, where forty members of the WEA gave up Saturday afternoons to study." The first tutorial classes become a legend in the history of education. Tawney played down his contribution, saying he learnt as much from students.

Hosford worked closely with the WEA founder, Albert Mansbridge. "Tall, good-looking, full of vitality, the West Country burr in his voice was undoubtedly an asset. His personality was remarkable; it seemed to fill the office and his entry was like a battery being recharged. The effect he had on people was indeed striking. I have seen visitors leave his room with heads up, eyes shining, stepping as it they were walking on air... it was a phenomenon that had to be seen to be believed. His energy was amazing; he was constantly dashing about the country, starting new centres, converting the doubters, inspiring the faithful, stimulating the beginning-to-get-tireds into fresh activities."

"Mrs Mansbridge kept his bag packed with duplicate night things, shaving kit and the like, so he had only to grab his case and rush off, knowing that everything needed would be there. All this expenditure of energy seemed to spring from an inner compulsion that would not let him rest."

Bernard Jennings claims that Mansbridge continued to argue for radical educational policies. "He demanded secondary education for all, with maintenance allowances for needy families; a school-leaving age of sixteen; access to universities for all who could benefit; a national system of creches; and paid holidays for all workers, so that they would be refreshed to enjoy opportunities for learning."

By 1914 there were 145 tutorial classes, 3,234 students, 179 branches and 2,500 affiliated societies. Mansbridge was disappointed that the WEA wasn't always popular with the Labour movement. Trade unions accounted for 953 affiliations only in 1914. The 388 Co-operative affiliations represented a far larger number, with the third strand comprising religious groups attached to churches and chapels. The WEA filled an important gap in educating working people beyond the shop floor with a wide array of subjects, enriching the lives of members.

Standing Alone

"Matters are gloomy and I never saw them gloomier," said a disillusioned Lord Salisbury in reference to continuing tensions with France, Germany and Russia. Egypt still festered after General Gordon was hacked to death in 1884. The Irish question continued to loom large and so did the budget deficit and sluggish trade. Peace with Russia simmered uneasily and tensions with their ally France continued. As if all this was not enough, the demise of the Ottoman Empire, and instability in the Balkans, were leading to unrest that would spread and fester. Added to this potent mix were British interests in Venezuela, Afghanistan and Siam, not to mention India, Africa, China and soon Japan. The world was changing rapidly, and Great Britain was struggling to keep a firm foothold to retain its many overseas interests.

In a letter to Queen Victoria of 24 January 1887 Salisbury wrote glumly, "The prospect is very gloomy abroad but England cannot brighten it". He was powerless to restrain open hostility between France and Germany with rumours of war. Concerns deepened and by early April Salisbury suspected Bismarck of trying to bribe Russia with a free hand given in Bulgaria. This was an inducement to stand aside while Germany and Italy pulverized France. Salisbury described the Iron Chancellor's strategy as "employing his neighbours to pull out

each other's teeth," having already secured the unification of Germany. The distrust was mutual.

Salisbury was worried too about Turkey, and a belligerent and unpredictable France. He had long feared a sudden attack against London as the best means to paralyse the Empire. His anxieties were dismissed by his military advisers who felt that annihilation of the Channel fleet and capture of London was not feasible but, ever cautious, a state of readiness was to be maintained in case of a surprise beach landing somewhere along the Kent or Sussex coast.

Events worsened. The ailing Emperor, Friedrich III died on 15 June 1888 at the age of 56. He had been Emperor for just 99 days. Fritz, as he was informally known, had married Princess Victoria, the eldest daughter of Queen Victoria. The couple had intended to rule in a liberal way, not unlike Albert and Victoria. Committed to peace and security, he was prepared to stand up to Bismarck. A decent and intelligent Kaiser was replaced by the vain and unstable Wilhelm II, grandson of Queen Victoria and related to monarchs and princes across Europe.

A complex breech birth resulted in nerve damage to his neck and virtual paralysis of his left arm. His desperate mother tried extreme measures including a head and neck brace but to no avail. The young Kaiser, more mentally than physically scarred, deeply resented all things British. A depressed Salisbury said, "I do not like the look of things in Germany. It is evident the young Emperor hates us and loves Russia."

Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria hinted the Kaiser would snub his uncle the Prince of Wales in Vienna. Relations were not helped by the Prince saying the Kaiser was still living in the Middle Ages, an aside that found its way back to Wilhelm. Victoria was not amused by his intemperate comment. In private she tended to agree. The Kaiser was bombastic, rude and impetuous but she acknowledged he had talents and was quick on the uptake. The Kaiser believed in brute strength rather than carefully devised strategy, unlike the shrewd Bismarck who prophesied Wilhelm's steamroller approach would, one day, spark a European conflict.

Out of the blue, two years later on 20 March 1890, Wilhelm II dismissed Bismarck who, for 28 years, had guided the destiny of first Prussia and then Germany. Salisbury decided on a pre-emptive strike by proposing an inspired, if not ingenious deal. Britain would cede the small island of Heligoland at the mouth of the Kiel Canal, that had almost fallen into its hands in 1814, and the Caprivi Strip, a small piece of land south west of the Zambezi River. They were to be exchanged for Zanzibar and surrounding areas, considered to be of greater strategic importance.

In Cowes week in 1895 Kaiser Wilhelm II decided to stay on his yacht, anchored in the Solent, whilst Salisbury resided at nearby Osborne House. Salisbury had an appointment to see the Queen at 3.00 pm on 5 August. He then received a telephone call to say the Kaiser would see him at 4.00 pm. A note was dispatched to the Kaiser, politely explaining his prior engagement with Her Majesty, saying it might overrun. Unknown to Salisbury, the Kaiser arrived bang on cue, at a time he had not so much agreed as dictated. Clearly, he expected Salisbury to be there. For the Kaiser, the non-arrival of Salisbury was not only humiliating but a personal insult and rebuff. There was now a perfect pretext to take an even more anti-British stance. At the turn of the year Salisbury lamented "both at home and abroad there are heavy clouds." Concerns included the upper Nile. At least four nations were attempting to muscle in as the Mombasa to Lake Victoria railway had still not been built.

Salisbury was also wary about the sabre-rattling and concealed intentions of France which may try to "sell us a property she has already sold to someone else."

In the same year of 1898, Salisbury felt marooned for another reason with the death on 20 November of Lady Salisbury. His closest friend, confidante and bulwark against his periodic troughs of deep depression had gone. He wrote to son Edward, "It was not so much that she died as she slowly ceased to exist." Then came another shattering blow, for on the evening of 22 January 1901, Her Majesty died. He could confide in Victoria and, in spite of differences, there was warmth in a working relationship of 23 years. Their intricate mutual deference, exquisite manners and extreme politeness were delights to behold. The Queen occasionally popped in for lunch with the Cecil family at Beaulieu and on Sundays they went to church together,

The 25th anniversary of the founding of the 2nd Reich fell on 1 January 1896. Kaiser Wilhelm II could not let that pass unnoticed, proudly announcing that the German Empire was now a World Empire. Referring to Britain he said "everywhere you stand alone." His views were echoed by The Times. The paper referred to Great Britain's "splendid isolation," a mocking label which continued to be hung around the neck of Salisbury.

A Sense of Foreboding

At the annual Guildhall speech in November 1897, Salisbury warned of the dangers of a pan-European war. Of concern was stockpiling modern and lethal weapons in a form of arms race, the result of which would be carnage and mutual destruction. This sage advice fell on deaf ears in central Europe and Germany in particular. The Kaiser had ambitions of his own.

In his "Dying Nations" speech to the Primrose League at the Albert Hall, London, on 4 May 1898, Salisbury returned to the theme of division. Powerful and wealthy nations continued to grow and expand, improve efficiency and technology, and use science to develop new and even more destructive weapons. Dying nations reeked of decay, disorganization, corruption and mis-government. The rich and powerful fed on the dying, sowing the seeds of conflict as each nation scabbled for its share of the spoils. The speech was widely reported in Europe. A week later Chamberlain, addressing the Liberal Unionist Party, admitted Britain had no real friends or allies. Britain could parley and dine with other nations, though warily, and in the case of Russia with a long spoon! Mistrust went hand in glove with isolation.

On the day of the coronation of Edward VII on 9th August 1902, Salisbury wrote to Lord Curzon expressing anxieties about the future. Instead of careful judgements of the past, there now emerged agitated, menacing and aggressive forces, concealed for years. He was alluding to the build-up of armaments and armies in Germany.

A year before, Salisbury received a confidential report from Secretary of the Admiralty, Hugh Arnold-Forster. He visited Wilhelmshaven and Kiel and observed that the German navy was embarking on a massive programme of military expansion. As war against France or Russia could be conducted by land only, the reason for this vast build up was entirely self-evident. Germany was determined Britain would no longer rule the waves. A pessimistic prediction was the inevitability of eventual war, given a pretext or spark to ignite conflict. Europe was an unpredictable volcano, relatively benign in contrast to the previous century, but which could eventually erupt.