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BELLENGER, Frederick John (1894–1968)

LABOUR MP, FINANCIAL SECRETARY TO THE WAR OFFICE, SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WAR

Frederick John Bellenger was born at 46 Bishops Road, Bethnal Green, London on 23 July 1894, the son of Eugene Bernard Bellenger, a dairyman and Isabella Annette (née Henner). After an elementary education, he worked in a tea warehouse, as a post office messenger boy and in a variety of commercial jobs, extending his education at evening classes. He volunteered for military service in 1914, and the following year went to the Western Front as a gunner in the Royal Artillery. Following the Battle of the Somme, he was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in 1917, and was twice wounded. As a member of the Army of Occupation, he was based in Cologne. He met, and in 1922, married Maria Theresa, daughter of Karl Stallwork, one of the largest chocolate manufacturers in Germany. His marriage meant economic security. He subsequently worked as a surveyor and estate agent in west London and lived in a thoroughly middle-class neighbourhood. Bellenger's upwardly mobile career left its mark on his values and style.

His personal experiences did not readily promote a radical politics; in the early 1920s he became active in the East Fulham Conservative Association. The Labour Party had won control of the Fulham Borough Council in November 1919. Three years later this situation was transformed. The Municipal Reformers – the title favoured by the Conservatives in London local government – won every seat; the Fulham Labour Group was reduced to three aldermen. Bellenger was one of the six Municipal Reform candidates elected in the ultra-safe Barons Court Ward, a victory that he repeated in 1925. The successful candidates' election propaganda emphasised efficiency and economy, and opposed 'the *whole scheme of the Labour Socialist Party*' with its 'wild and visionary plans' leading to 'industrial *chaos and financial ruin* and the subordination of a tyranny of a class minority for our constitutional system of representative Government in Municipal Affairs' [Municipal Reform Candidates' Election Address, Barons Court Ward, November 1922].

Bellenger served as a loyal Conservative councillor for six years, but did not stand for a third term in November 1928. The reason is unclear. One source suggests that he had been disappointed not to secure the East Fulham Municipal Reform nomination for the London County Council [*Sunday Express*, 14 February 1937]. However a contemporary report of the selection in February 1928 does not mention any interest in the vacancy by Bellenger, and makes no suggestion of any controversy [*Fulham Chronicle*, 17 February 1918].

Whatever his grounds for disenchantment with the Conservatives, Bellenger quickly joined the Labour Party. Perhaps significantly the change was unaccompanied by any attestation of a new political faith. In June 1930 he was adopted as prospective parliamentary candidate for South West Bethnal Green one of London Liberalism's last surviving seats. Bellenger's political shift had taken him back briefly to the district of his birth [for Bellenger's adoption see *Eastern Post and City Chronicle*, 28 June 1930]. Local Labour organisation had included a significant Communist section in the twenties, and the Bethnal Green Communists retained some support through the subsequent rigours of 'Class against Class'. Although the Labour Party had polled credibly in the 1929 election, the increasing difficulties of the second MacDonald Government meant that Bellenger could have little optimism. He nursed the seat for a year, but in mid-1931 he abandoned the candidacy on health grounds [*Eastern Post and City Chronicle*, 17 October 1931]. His response to the political crisis of August 1931 is not recorded. There is no evidence that the recent recruit to the Labour Party was tempted to support the National Government. Instead his electoral debut for the Labour Party brought him into a constituency thoroughly affected by Labour's 1931 split.

Bassetlaw in north Nottinghamshire had been a predominantly Conservative seat since its creation in 1885. Its two towns, Retford and Worksop, were surrounded by agricultural districts stretching from the aristocratic estates of the Dukeries to the flat lands on the western bank of the Trent. Prior to 1914, the social character of Bassetlaw was changing with the eastward expansion of the Nottinghamshire coalfield. This became more marked in the twenties with the

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sinking of two deep pits at Harworth and Firbeck Main with their attendant villages at Bircotes and Langold. Their population increased dramatically in the twenties and was subject to rapid turnover [see Waller (1983) esp. chapters 1 and 2]. One consequence was a Labour victory in the 1929 election; the successful candidate, at his third attempt was the party leader's son Malcolm MacDonald. When he supported his father's decision to lead a National Government in 1931, the impact on the Bassetlaw Party was severe. He was a popular Member; the local party seems to have broken with him reluctantly and there was little immediate personal hostility [*Worksop Guardian*, 2 and 16 October 1931; Shephard (2000) chapter 1; Sanger (1996) 66–71]. Labour's defeat in October 1931 was heavy; Malcolm MacDonald's majority was 13 554 (33.2 per cent).

Bassetlaw Labour Party's subsequent search for a candidate initially resulted in the selection of W. R. Squance, the Assistant General Secretary of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen. However his union decided that election to Parliament would require resignation from his union post. Squance accordingly terminated his candidacy. In November 1933 Bellenger, who was honorary secretary of the Labour Candidates' Association, was chosen in his place [*Worksop Guardian*, 17 November 1933]; the constituency offered challenges – coal and agriculture – far removed from his previous experience. He at least could offer reliable financial support of £190 a year, about one third of the Bassetlaw Party's annual income [Shorter (1975) 83, 88–9].

Bellenger fought a vigorous and orthodox campaign in the November 1935 election. In the context of the Abyssinian crisis, he could not avoid the issue of rearmament and war, nor the related differences within the Labour Party. The party leader, George Lansbury, had just stepped down following the rejection of his pacifist views at the party's Brighton conference. Bellenger expressed his admiration for Lansbury, but differentiated himself from the former leader, emphasising collective security through the League of Nations. His orthodoxy extended to support for the nationalisation of the banks, briefly party policy following a vote at the 1932 conference. Rural poverty could be addressed through the state ownership of land which could provide the basis for a more prosperous agriculture [*Retford, Gainsborough and Worksop Times*, 18 November 1935].

Yet the decisive issue was the state of the coal industry. The election was fought against the backdrop of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) campaign for a wage increase. Moreover Bassetlaw had a distinctive mining profile. Although the constituency was geographically in Nottinghamshire, the organisation of the miners' unions was complex. At Harworth the Nottinghamshire Miners' Industrial Union (the 'Spencer Union') was favoured by the employer, Barber Walker. As elsewhere in the county, the MFGB affiliate, the Nottinghamshire Miners' Association (NMA) was not recognised by the coal company, and its activists were liable to victimisation. At Harworth in 1935 the NMA claimed only six members out of a workforce of 2355 [Waller (1984) 118–19]. Elsewhere in the constituency colliery companies were prepared to recognise the Yorkshire Miners' Association at Manton, Shireoaks and Firbeck Main, whilst at Warsop Main, miners were organised within the Derbyshire Miners' Association. Employer acknowledgement of trade unionism did not entail harmonious relationships. The 1935 election had been preceded by a three months stoppage at Manton whilst Firbeck had been affected by strike action for five months. Despite these conflicts miners' union sentiments in Bassetlaw were typically on the Right of the MFGB.

Bellenger was an advocate of industrial moderation but in this adversarial situation he became the symbol of miners' distaste for coalowners, the National Government and the latter's local representative. Understandably he hedged his bets.

We were in the throes of what looked like being a serious dispute. There was one in a certain part of this constituency. He was for peace in industry, but not peace at any price. The miners had suffered too long under the scandalous conditions of employment [*Retford, Gainsborough and Worksop Times*, 8 November 1935].

Malcolm MacDonald encountered hostility in mining villages and was measured in an assessment of his prospects.

I am having a more hectic election than any I have had yet, but I think that we are making reasonable progress. The great majority in Retford are for us, and I think we shall poll as strongly in the agricultural villages as we did the last time. We shall get comparatively little of the mining vote, and a lot depends on what happens to the non-mining vote in Worksop [Malcolm MacDonald to Ishbel MacDonald, 5 November 1935, cited in Sanger (1996) 74].

The miners' and other Labour loyalists' antipathy to National Labour 'renegades' was evident when J.H. Thomas was shouted down at Worksop and Retford. The solidarity of the mining vote was decisive. Those who commiserated with MacDonald painted him as the victim of a 'vendetta' waged by the 'dismally ignorant and selfish', 'a lot of hooligans' [see letters in Malcolm MacDonald Papers 3/2/8]. Bellenger with his limited experience of the labour movement was an unlikely beneficiary of coalfield passions and solidarity.

Bassetlaw, 1935: electorate 53 422, turnout 79.9 per cent

F. J. Bellenger (Labour)	21 903 (51.3 per cent)
Rt. Hon. M.J. MacDonald (National Labour)	20 764 (48.7 per cent)
Majority	1 139 (2.6 per cent)

Within the Commons Bellenger rarely raised the issues that dominated the lives of his most supportive constituents. Yet one controversy was unavoidable. By the winter of 1936/7 Harworth colliery had become the crucible where the conflict between the 'Spencer Union' and the NMA would be resolved. The NMA had been recruiting vigorously at the pit, and a lengthy dispute had begun in the autumn of 1936. By the following spring the MFGB was considering action to achieve organising rights and recognition for the NMA, not just at Harworth but across the Nottinghamshire coalfield. Eventually a compromise was reached for the amalgamation of the two unions [for the Harworth dispute see Griffin (1962) 203–20; Fishman (1995) chapter 7]. Early in May 1937, with the crisis still unresolved, Bellenger spoke in the Commons; he backed his constituents but presented his own political credentials.

I sincerely hope that the threatened stoppage will be avoided ... The owner of the colliery thinks that the trouble has been fomented by those whom he calls Reds. It is nothing of the kind. I am not going to say that there has been no political interference. Disturbances of this nature naturally attract all sorts of agitators, but there has been hardly any interference by extreme political parties ... The men are only asking for the right of free association [*Parliamentary Debates*, 5 May 1937, cols. 1194–5].

Bellenger's Commons career had begun inauspiciously with an unsuccessful encounter with one of the post-1931 Labour Party's senior figures. Over the next twenty years Hugh Dalton would develop a reputation as a political talent spotter, he already had one as a clumsy conspirator. On 20 November 1935, Dalton invited Bellenger and three other new MPs to dinner. They were joined later by other colleagues. The ostensible purpose was to meet Konni Zilliacus; the real agenda for Dalton was to mobilise support for Herbert Morrison in the pending leadership election. Dalton was unimpressed by Bellenger 'who talked disconnected rot in a tiresome way, but didn't commit himself'. One of those present, Ellen Wilkinson 'feared Bellenger blabbing' to Morrison's opponents. Dalton's verdict was dismissive. 'She turned out to be right. He is a wretched little tyke' [Dalton Diary, 20 November 1935, in Pimlott (1986) 194].

Dalton's verdicts were often emphatic and transient; this one seems to have endured. Arguably it highlighted a lack of political acumen on Bellenger's part, a judgement that over

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time became endorsed more widely. Nevertheless, whatever his idiosyncrasies and distance from some senior party figures, Bellenger in the late thirties was a very visible Member. Some commentators presented him as a politician with a future who could make a distinctive contribution to the Labour Party. One observer saw him as ‘the spearhead of Labour’s question time attack’ [*Manchester Evening News*, 24 February 1939]. He interviewed Bellenger in a book-lined study in his Kensington house. He wore spats, a smart blue suit, and a blue bow tie. The journalist noted superfluously that he was not a typical Labour member. Bellenger expressed a self-confidence that suggested myopia about his limited political understanding.

Parliamentary work is difficult and intricate for many men, but the best training for it is a business or legal career. For people with such qualifications it comes fairly easily [*Manchester Evening News*, 24 February 1939].

He contributed frequently to Commons debates on the deteriorating international situation. He acknowledged that Germany had had legitimate grievances resulting from the Versailles settlement, but he became increasingly vehement about the Nazis’ aggressive policy within Europe. Following the Munich Agreement he attacked Neville Chamberlain.

He told us that he had brought home ‘Peace with honour’. I wonder what those thousands of Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Social Democrats, and the numerous occupants of the concentration camps in Germany would say if they could speak freely [*Parliamentary Debates*, 3 October 1938, col. 124].

When Chamberlain sympathised with the Czechs over their loss of territory, Bellenger was dismissive ‘It is an insult to say it’ [*Parliamentary Debates*, 3 October 1938, col. 45]. Sometimes his comments were idiosyncratic. He suggested that the Nazi regime was ‘certainly a dictatorship of the left’, on the ground that all profits over six per cent had to be invested in government boards [*Parliamentary Debates*, 9 November 1938, col. 202].

This assessment, neglecting not least the Nazi regime’s destruction of the German labour movement, underlined Bellenger’s distance from Labour Party culture. Distance was also apparent in his reaction to the government’s proposals for compulsory military training in spring 1939. His hostility to Chamberlain was insufficient for him to back the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) decision to oppose such training. The party decision represented a compromise between diverse and conflicting Labour sentiments. In contrast on 27 April 1939 Bellenger on a vote on the principle and similarly on 8 May on the second reading did not oppose the Military Training Bill.

As a member of the Officers’ Emergency Reserve, Bellenger was called to the colours in October 1939. A captain in the Royal Artillery from February 1940, he went to France in April as a staff officer. He returned to the Commons in early May for the censure debate that precipitated the fall of Chamberlain, and was the prelude to the negotiations that produced the Churchill Coalition. Bellenger’s contribution to the debate anticipated a change of government. He insisted that any reconstruction was dependent on Chamberlain’s departure. ‘The Government should make place for one of a different character and a different nature’ [*Parliamentary Debates*, 7 May 1940, col. 1140].

His return to France meant that he was absent from the subsequent political crisis and the earliest days of the Churchill government. Instead he became one of the thousands retreating to Dunkirk where he spent two days and nights on the beaches helping to organise the evacuation and living on ‘scraps of chocolate and bottles of French wine’ [*Retford, Gainsborough and Workshop Times*, 7 June 1940]. Two months later he resigned his commission to concentrate on his parliamentary work.

Although he had sympathised with Churchill’s pre-war opposition to appeasement and had welcomed the formation of the Coalition, Bellenger emerged as a critic of the government.

Until late 1941 he was Parliamentary Private Secretary to a Labour member of the administration, George Hicks; thereafter he was a backbencher who participated in several revolts by a small and politically heterogeneous section. As early as June 1941 Bellenger attempted to clarify his position in the aftermath of the evacuation of Crete.

I have always taken a more or less independent attitude, although in complete loyalty to my party. If ever there was a time when loyalty to my party would affect the independence of my judgement and thought, I should resign from the party ... I have been in complete agreement with members of my party going into the Government, but I say ... that not all the members either of my own party or of the party which the Prime Minister leads are carrying on the war as they ask the country and common people to carry on the war. We cannot ask the country to put its whole back into the war unless it is led by men and women who put their backs into the war too [*Parliamentary Debates*, 10 June 1941, col. 129].

Such language was at one with the egalitarian patriotism of the 'People's War'; but for Labour loyalists, any criticism raised the delicate question of its compatibility with Labour's continuing membership of the Government. Chuter Ede, a Minister with little patience for critics was dismissive of Bellenger.

Bellenger has no Parliamentary sense and said the Party could take a series of divisions against the Government without disaster. I said we had reached the point where the Party had to make up its mind whether continued co-operation in the Government was possible [Chuter Ede Diary, 3 December 1941, in Jefferys (1987) 27].

Such a magisterial dismissal could be insensitive to the degree of concern within both the PLP and the broader party about the compromises of Coalition. It was often significantly more extensive than the small number of overt rebels suggested.

Bellenger participated in the most famous revolt against the Coalition. The fall of Tobruk in June 1942 was followed by the tabling of a Commons motion expressing no confidence in the central direction of the war. The motion was moved ineffectively in the Commons on 1 July 1942 by a Conservative backbencher, Sir John Wardlaw-Milne. The outstanding critical speech was made the following day by Aneurin Bevan. Only 25 MPs and two tellers backed the motion; only eight rebels came from the PLP. Bellenger voted and spoke for the motion. He emphasised lack of military equipment, faulty strategic planning and the incompetence of some Ministers [*Parliamentary Debates*, 1 July 1942, cols. 282–90]. Soon after the Wardlaw-Milne censure debate he spoke in his constituency accompanied by another PLP gadfly Emmanuel Shinwell.

The Government say we can say what we like, so long as we do not back our opinions in the division lobby. What sort of MP would I be like if I did that? There never was a time when it was more essential for individual MPs to vote and think as individuals and not as a machine [*Workshop Guardian*, 24 July 1942].

This priority led Bellenger to participate in further revolts. For example on 28 April 1944 he was one of the sixteen Labour MPs who opposed Regulation 1AA introduced to permit proceedings against those found guilty of inciting unofficial strikes. The context was widespread stoppages in the coalfields in the weeks before the anticipated landings in France [*Parliamentary Debates*, 28 April 1944, col. 1155]. Similarly on 8 December 1944, he was one of the twenty-three Labour Members who supported an amendment critical of British treatment of the left-wing Greek resistance movement [*Parliamentary Debates*, 8 December 1944, col. 1011]. Although Greece would become a cause identified with the Labour left in the post-war parliament, the 1944 revolt attracted support from diverse sources within the PLP. Even as he developed a reputation as a frequent critic Bellenger demonstrated his ideological differences with the Labour left.

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When the Commons debated the White Paper on Employment Policy in June 1944, Bevan insisted that if the White Paper's arguments were valid, socialism was unnecessary. In contrast Bellenger emphasised that he had never been a Marxist and emphasised his belief in private enterprise [*Parliamentary Debates*, 23 June 1944, cols. 548–9].

His standing within the PLP remained modest. During the lifetime of the Coalition he stood regularly for election to the PLP's Administrative Committee, but never came close to success. He spoke regularly at PLP meetings, and as chair of the party's Services Committee occasionally spoke in the House on behalf of the PLP. Any prominence in the early 1940s owed more to his journalism. Beginning on 2 February 1941 he wrote a weekly column for the *Sunday Pictorial* initially under the headline, "The Voice of the Army", later changed to "Voice of the Services". Bellenger became known as the 'soldier's friend'. His initial justification for the column emphasised his distinctive experience.

For once you are in the Services you realise that your life is controlled by a new set of rules called King's Regulations. And believe me they need a great deal of understanding. I believe I can help to interpret them for you so that the people who run the Army and the men in uniform understand one another better ... just because I am an MP, I am able to bring to the attention of the Secretary of State for War matters which may be of vital interest to those who are serving and who are often very inarticulate in expressing their point of view [*Sunday Pictorial*, 2 February 1941].

Stuart Campbell, the editor of the *Sunday Pictorial* spoke for Bellenger – 'that great watchdog of the people' [*Retford, Gainsborough and Worksop Times*, 8 June 1945] in the 1945 election. The shift to the left amongst the electorate meant that Bassetlaw was a secure Labour seat.

Bassetlaw, 1945: electorate 61 573, turnout 78.6 per cent

F. J. Bellenger (Labour)	30 382 (62.8 per cent)
R. E. Laycock (Conservative)	18 005 (37.2 per cent)
Majority	12 377 (25.6 per cent)

Although Bellenger did not rate strongly within the PLP hierarchy, his claim to office in the Attlee government was strengthened by his reputation for expertise on military affairs. Comparatively few Labour Members were interested in the subject, and with the new Government composed almost completely of those who had sat in the pre-election parliament, new MPs with very recent military experience were effectively ruled out, Bellenger was appointed to a junior post – Financial Secretary – at the War Office. His wartime journalism had not enamoured at least one senior military figure, General Montgomery.

... he came to the job with the past experience that was of a stunt journalist taking up soldiers' grievances rather than with any deep knowledge of military problems. On his first arrival in the War Office he had received a slap in the face from Monty ... He had waylaid Monty in the corridor and introduced himself saying. 'I am Bellenger the new Financial Secretary'. Monty who had looked at him coldly, remarked caustically 'the soldiers' friend, I believe, good morning' – and turned away abruptly [Talk with Sir E. Speed (War Office, 28 May 1948) Notes For History, Liddell Hart Papers 11/1948/14].

Bellenger's senior Minister, Jack Lawson, had been Financial Secretary at the War Office in the 1924 Labour Government. A Durham Miners' Member who had always been a party loyalist, Lawson was no reformer of the War Office. Senior military men found him agreeable and principled but without 'the faintest idea what his job required of him' [Alan Brooke cited in Scott

(1993) 76]. Bellenger's relationship with Lawson was amiable (see letters in Lawson Papers) and he too seemed to consent readily to the received wisdom.

Lawson had hoped that his ministerial tenure would be brief. He was ill in the summer of 1946 and was eventually replaced by Bellenger as Secretary of State for War at the beginning of October [see Attlee to Lawson, 2 October 1946, Lawson Papers]. The change was part of a wider reconstruction that took A.V. Alexander from the Admiralty to a new post as Minister of Defence. Under this arrangement Bellenger's new post was no longer of Cabinet rank.

The appointment was the peak of Bellenger's political career; he joined the Privy Council and attended Cabinet meetings for departmental items. He seems not to have questioned the opinions of the generals. Montgomery apparently exorcised his earlier mistrust. Less than a month after Bellenger's appointment he suggested he 'is behaving very well so far. He leaves me alone, signs everything put to him, and is clearly anxious to please' [Montgomery to Sir John Grigg 31 October 1946 cited in Scott (1993) 77]. Montgomery maintained this verdict in retirement.

He was easy to work with and had possibly a better brain than Lawson. I often used to think that he was not very popular with the Cabinet; he got rough-housed by the Prime Minister quite a bit, and this had its repercussions on the War Office. But we liked him, he fought our battles in Parliament with considerable success, at any rate, to begin with [Montgomery of Alamein (1958) 430].

His first crisis came with his appointment – the case of the Muar mutineers. On 14 May 1946 members of the 13th Battalion (Lancashire) of the 6th Airborne Division had disregarded orders at Muar camp on the west coast of Malaya. Their protest was against the appalling condition of the camp. The battalion had been involved in the D-Day landings, the Ardennes fighting and the Rhine crossings followed by transfer to South East Asia Command. After a period in Java following the Japanese surrender they had returned to Malaya. The conditions at Muar were the latest in a sequence of extremely poor living facilities. Two hundred and fifty-eight privates were charged with mutiny; the trial began in Malaya on 12 August 1946 and lasted until 19 September. Originally three defendants were acquitted; of the remainder eight were sentenced to five years and the remainder to three years. All sentences were with hard labour. Subsequently twelve sentences were not confirmed and the remaining 243 were commuted to two years [*Times*, August and September 1946 has some reports of court proceedings].

Widespread protests developed in Britain especially from sections of the labour movement. On 8 October Bellenger faced questions from both sides of the House and two Labour back-benchers presented petitions against the sentences. Bellenger told MPs that he was awaiting the opinion of the Judge Advocate-General about the legality of the proceedings [*Parliamentary Debates*, 8 October 1946, cols. 34–42 esp. cols. 38–9]. Two days later he announced that all convictions had been quashed on the advice of the Judge Advocate General [*Parliamentary Debates*, 10 October 1946, cols. 366–73]. The ground was that of procedural irregularities and details were subsequently provided for MPs [*Parliamentary Debates*, 15 October 1946 cols. 796–800].

The intervention by the Judge Advocate-General defused a potentially difficult situation for the new Secretary of State. However the character of Bellenger's parliamentary answers suggested that the 'soldiers' friend' was comfortable with the case put by the military authorities. In his initial responses he insisted that 'there can be no shadow of doubt that these men were rightly charged with mutiny ... mutiny cannot be excused' [*Parliamentary Debates*, 8 October 1946, cols. 39, 41]. When he compared conditions at Muar with those he had experienced on the Western Front, he was reminded that the former were supposed to be peacetime conditions [*Parliamentary Debates*, 8 October 1946, col. 41]. When he

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later announced the quashing of the convictions he insisted that the ground was purely procedural.

I have followed this course of action entirely on legal grounds, and I am satisfied that there was sufficient 'prima facie' evidence to justify a charge of mutiny being preferred [*Parliamentary Debates*, 10 October 1946, col. 367].

Bellenger's identification with military opinion was also evident in his justification of their demands for manpower. Despite an early reassurance to Liddell Hart that he would grasp this nettle, he failed to do so [Bellenger to Liddell Hart, 30 November 1946, Liddell Hart Papers 1/61]. This failure made him the target of Labour backbench attacks when the Army Estimates were debated in March 1947. This debate came just as the Keep Left group were discussing a more radical economic and international strategy for the Government. A reduction in defence expenditure was a significant element within this alternative. Keep Left members criticised Bellenger for his failure to control the War Office generals and for a lack of transparency. George Wigg, Woodrow Wyatt, James Callaghan, Stephen Swingle and Richard Crossman all emphasised the necessity for cuts in defence estimates. Bellenger had a rough passage; Crossman in particular was scathing.

The function of the Secretary of State for War ... is not to be popular with the War Office, not to give way to his generals, but to fight them tooth and nail. Do not let us blame the Secretary of State for War because he has not got a strategy or a policy or any idea of what his soldiers are there for. Let us urge that if he has not any of those ideas he should at least have fewer men so that we can have a little coal next winter [*Parliamentary Debates*, 13 March 1947, col. 1628].

As Cold War tensions grew, Secretary of State for War was inevitably a difficult post within a Labour government. This was exemplified a few weeks later when Bellenger was one of the Ministers responsible for the passage through the Commons of legislation introducing peacetime conscription. The National Service Bill provoked opposition not just from several of those Labour backbenchers unhappy about the government's foreign policy but also from others whose vision of socialism owed much to a distaste for militarism. The government responded to the widespread and diverse criticism by reducing the length of service from eighteen months to twelve thereby mollifying several critics.

Bellenger also became the target for Conservative attacks because of his slowness in clarifying the full extent of Treasury losses resulting from company speculation by British troops in the Netherlands, Austria and above all Germany. By the time speculation was blocked in the second half of 1946 through the introduction of a sterling voucher scheme in place of cash payments to troops, the total loss had reached £58 million [see Second Report of the Public Accounts Committee, 11 June 1947]. Bellenger's incomplete acknowledgement of the shortfall came in a debate on an Army Supplementary Estimate [*Parliamentary Debates*, 18 February 1947, col. 1061]. He admitted that the full loss was £58 million on 26 February [*Parliamentary Debates*, 18 February 1947, col. 2206]. A later debate on the Public Accounts Committee Report saw Conservative claims that he had not understood the complexities of the issue [*Parliamentary Debates*, 21 July 1947, cols. 868–944, with Bellenger's contribution at cols. 879–93].

Such exchanges were part of the customary Opposition pursuit of Ministerial failings, but more fundamentally the 1947 summer was a difficult time for the Labour government. A winter fuel crisis had damaged Labour's confidence; in July there began a financial crisis precipitated by the introduction of sterling convertibility. Plots amongst senior ministers and deepening pessimism on the backbenches led to expectations of a reshuffle, eventually implemented in early October. Bellenger was amongst those who lost his job, replaced by Shinwell whose removal

from the Ministry of Fuel and Power had become a political necessity. Gaitskell, Shinwell's successor, suggested the dynamics of the change.

... none of the Big 5 wanted him [Shinwell] in the Cabinet. So everything pointed to a Service Ministry. B [Bellenger's] stock was not high and so he was replaced by S [Diary entry 14 October 1947, in Williams (ed) (1983) 35].

However, Attlee had clearly included Bellenger amongst 'the members of the Government who ought to go' [Attlee to Herbert Morrison, September 1947, cited in Donoughue and Jones (1973) 421]. His retrospective assessment was clear. 'On bad advice I made Bellenger who had done well as an under sec to be S of S for War. He was not up to the position and had to go' [Attlee Papers 1/17].

Bellenger's removal was the result of his limitations as a Minister, the complexities of a reshuffle at a critical moment, and not distinctly noted by Gaitskell, his lack of a political base within the Parliamentary Party. From within the War Office came the judgement that he took his 'unexpected dismissal with remarkable fortitude in a spirit that compelled admiration' [Talk with Sir E. Speed (War Office), Liddell Hart Papers 11/1948/14]. But Bellenger's successor characteristically denigrated his immediate predecessors. Shinwell 'referred rather scathingly (to Lawson and Bellenger). He said that as far as he could see they had hardly ever drawn the files on any problem and could not imagine what they had done with their time' [Talk with Shinwell at the War Office, 22 April 1948, Notes for History, Liddell Hart Papers 11/1948/11].

Bellenger could look forward only to a career as a senior backbencher. This lasted for more than twenty years. He contributed frequently to Commons debates and PLP discussions, but became even more marginal within the Parliamentary Party. To some degree this reflected his ideological position. He stood on the far right of the party, not least on international issues. In the summer of 1950 with Labour's parliamentary majority now in single figures, he abstained in a division on Churchill's demand for a secret session on defence. The government won by one vote. Bellenger had to deny the suggestion that he would follow the idiosyncratic right-winger Raymond Blackburn and leave the Labour Party [*Retford, Gainsborough and Worksop Times*, 18 August 1950]. His style added to his marginalisation. Crossman characterised one contribution to a PLP meeting on foreign affairs as 'the usual incoherence' [Diary entry 14 July 1953, in Morgan (1981) 255]. With Labour back in opposition Bellenger stood for election to the PLP's Parliamentary Committee in November 1951. He finished last of 52 candidates with ten votes; he never stood again.

His electoral position in Bassetlaw remained secure. There was no return to the marginality of 1935. This security depended heavily on support in the mining villages. The reduction in his majority at the 1955 election was attributable to the removal of 6000 largely supportive electors as the consequence of a redrawing of constituency boundaries. His electoral campaigns became much more limited and focused on his strongholds. Conservative candidates, including in 1959, the future historian of 'high politics', Maurice Cowling made little impact.

Bassetlaw elections: 1950–1966

1950: electorate 62 879, turnout 87.2 per cent

Rt. Hon. F.J. Bellenger (Labour)	31 589 (57.6 per cent)
J.J.C. Irving (Conservative)	17 622 (32.2 per cent)
W.G.E. Dyer (Liberal)	5 590 (10.2 per cent)
Majority	13 967 (25.4 per cent)

1951: electorate 64 139, turnout 84.4 per cent

Rt. Hon. F.J. Bellenger (Labour)	32 850 (66.7 per cent)
W.A. Sime (Conservative)	21 257 (34.3 per cent)
Majority	11 593 (21.4 per cent)

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1955: electorate 58 203, turnout 79.5 per cent

Rt. Hon. F.J. Bellenger (Labour)	26 873 (58.1 per cent)
Mr K.V. Maiden (Conservative)	19 375 (41.9 per cent)
Majority	7 498 (16.2 per cent)

1959: electorate 59 907, turnout 80.2 per cent

Rt. Hon. F.J. Bellenger (Labour)	27 875 (58.0 per cent)
M.J. Cowling (Conservative)	20 162 (42.0 per cent)
Majority	7 713 (16.0 per cent)

1964: electorate 60 752, turnout 77.0 per cent

Rt. Hon. F.J. Bellenger (Labour)	27 612 (59.0 per cent)
R.W.M. Orme (Conservative)	19 167 (41.0 per cent)
Majority	8 445 (18.0 per cent)

1966: electorate 61 047, turnout 73.4 per cent

Rt. Hon. F.J. Bellenger (Labour)	27 623 (61.6 per cent)
R.W.M. Orme (Conservative)	17 195 (38.4 per cent)
Majority	10 428 (23.2 per cent)

This electoral dominance cohabited with a diminishing political vitality. Labour in Bassetlaw became accustomed to success. Bellenger's visits were infrequent. He usually stayed in the stylish 'Ye Olde Blue Bell' at Barnby Moor. His comparative affluence, London base and army officer background distanced him from the lives of many constituency supporters. He seems to have made little effort to bridge the gap, but his style could mobilise some deferential support. One Harworth councillor recalled the Bellengers as 'a better class of person'. He was remembered by some as a 'perfect gentleman, very dapper in appearance well spoken'. But this style could grate against Labour's egalitarian sentiments. Harry Dunn, his agent in the 1951 election, found Bellenger to be aloof; he acted like his commanding officer and called him 'Dunn'. The agent had his revenge. He reacted to Bellenger's frequent visits to Germany in pursuit of Anglo-German understanding by reminding him that he was the Member for Bassetlaw not for Germany [material in Shephard (2000) chapter 4].

Predictably within the Labour Party factionalism of the fifties Bellenger became a firm supporter of Hugh Gaitskell; Gaitskell noted a conversation with Bellenger in December 1954. 'Fred made no bones about it. He thought it highly probable that I would be leader of the Labour Party before long' [Diary entry 14 December 1954, in Williams (1983) 356]. Bellenger was at one with Gaitskell's positions on the Anglo-American alliance, the Soviet Union and German rearmament. His affinity extended to economic policy. When the Labour Party went down to its third successive electoral defeat in October 1959, he was iconoclastic about the party's commitment to public ownership.

I am not one of those who believe that the tablets of stone have been brought down from the mountain top, or that any declarations by the prophets that we have in the Labour Party are like the laws of the Medes and Persians, and will remain forever ... the people of this country want certain fundamentals, and ... so long as they get those fundamentals they are, with the exception of a few who are very dogmatic, not concerned with the methods, whether it be by nationalisation or otherwise [*Parliamentary Debates*, 28 October 1959, col. 338].

Such an intervention was a characteristically independent effort. He was in no sense a member of Gaitskell's social and political network. Such independence allowed Bellenger to express

views that could not be endorsed publicly by a Labour Party leader. In the spring of 1958 Gaitskell was keenly aware of the political dangers posed by the London bus strike called by the Transport and General Workers' Union under the leadership of its recently elected and left-inclined General Secretary, Frank Cousins. Nevertheless Gaitskell supported the strikers [Williams (1979) 462–4]. In contrast Bellenger's assessment showed no respect for trade union sentiments.

How is it possible for trade unions to countenance strikes of this kind in pursuance of their wage claims? Is the strike weapon the right one to use any longer in a free democracy in which a high standard of living has been achieved for all classes of society ... ? There is no such thing today as the harsh and unconscionable employer exploiting any section of industry [*People*, 22 June 1958].

If such sentiments placed him on the far right of the PLP, his opposition to any reform of laws governing sexual behaviour placed him thoroughly at odds with the liberalism of the Gaitskellites. He responded with hostility to the Wolfenden Committee's recommendations for liberalisation of the law on homosexuality.

... they [homosexuals] are in my opinion, a malignant canker in the community and if this were allowed to grow it would eventually kill off what is known as normal life ... I do not believe in this fancy talk – for that is all it is – of love and attraction for another man [*Parliamentary Debates*, 26 November 1958, cols. 417–18].

Such sentiments were increasingly anachronistic within the PLP, but above all it was Africa, and particularly Rhodesia where Bellenger distanced himself most decisively from the dominant position within the Labour Party. In the last two weeks of the Attlee government two Ministers, Patrick Gordon Walker and James Griffiths had given formal backing to the principle of a Central African Federation that would incorporate Southern and Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. The support was despite African opposition; in retrospect Labour politicians tended to emphasise its conditional character. The prime justification was that a federation might provide an effective barrier against encroachment northwards by South Africa. The Churchill Government subsequently went ahead with a scheme for federation but weakened the safeguards for Africans. The Labour Party therefore opposed the policy in a vote on 24 March 1953. However sixteen right-wing Labour Members led by the former Commonwealth Secretary Patrick Gordon Walker abstained. This group included former ministers, George Brown, Richard Stokes and Maurice Webb, and also Charles Hobson, Thomas Reid, Stanley Evans and William Coldrick. Bellenger did not vote in this division; it is highly probable that he subscribed to this so-called 'Keep Right' group. He also failed to vote along with a few other critics in a further division on 23 July 1953 [for Labour Party differences over the Central African Federation see Goldsworthy (1971) 214–30]. The rebels were sanguine about the feasibility of a multi-racial partnership and felt that any credible counterweight to South African influence was acceptable. They also were optimistic about the federation's ability to enhance economic growth [see Goldsworthy (1971) 229 for 'Keep Right' claims].

By the early sixties the Central African Federation was disintegrating. Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland became independent states within the Commonwealth in 1964 – Zambia and Malawi. Southern Rhodesia now known simply as Rhodesia proved much more intractable. Its white minority was well entrenched and self-confident. Bellenger visited Rhodesia and returned with a sympathetic appreciation of the settlers' achievements and viewpoint.

I often wonder whether the one man one vote principle out there is really democracy as we understand it ... Anyone who has been to Salisbury which some seventy years ago was a jungle, knows that it has not been built on the efforts of the Africans ... I do not want to

12 BELLENGER

see Communists on top there or anywhere in Africa [*Parliamentary Debates*, 30 July 1962, cols. 62–4].

This assessment was praised by Conservative backbenchers. The election of the Wilson Government, and the subsequent Unilateral Declaration of Independence by the Smith regime in November 1965 did not alter his views [see his speech in *Parliamentary Debates*, 27 April 1966, cols. 762–8].

Bellenger's defence of white Rhodesians reached its apogee in the Commons debate that followed the failure of the *Tiger* negotiations early in December 1966. He expressed scepticism about sanctions and emphatically endorsed the settlers' concerns.

... can we blame the white Rhodesians? Many of them were born there. Many of them fought for this country against Hitler. Many of them have turned their eyes to the North and seen the results of one man, one vote in certain other countries, and they have observed the corruption, brutality and more in these countries [*Parliamentary Debates*, 8 December 1966, col. 1638].

Bellenger abstained in the subsequent division; another Labour Member Reginald Paget resigned the whip and voted against the government. There were no disciplinary consequences for Bellenger. Arguably he was viewed widely as a maverick who had no wider influence.

His position on Rhodesia and his lack of enthusiasm for steel nationalisation had provoked criticism within the Bassetlaw Party after the 1964 election. He had been summoned to a special party meeting to explain his position; his candidacy for the 1966 election had been on the understanding that this would be his last contest [Shephard (2000) 56–7]. Bellenger died on 11 May 1968; he left £35 531. By the time of his death he had become a political anachronism both at Westminster and in his constituency. It had been a long goodbye.

Bellenger typically appears in standard accounts of the post-war Labour government simply as one of those Ministers dismissed in the October 1947 reconstruction. His limited political impact owed something to his style – he was not an inspirational speaker – and something to his underlying conservatism. His brief ministerial career endorsed the established outlook of the War Office. Such references can be flavoured with the critical diary comments of Dalton and Crossman. Yet his political career was complex. It included a change of party and participation in the 'awkward squad' during the Churchill coalition. His background – elementary education, business and a spell in the Conservative Party – was unusual for a Labour politician. Consequently he did not fit any of the familiar identities within the Labour Party culture. He was not a trade unionist, and was distant from and sometimes hostile to trade union practices. He lacked a socialist pedigree; especially in his later years references to socialism were notably absent from his speeches. He was not a member of the progressive network composed largely of university educated Members that played an influential role in the post-1945 Labour Party. Although a man of the right, he was close neither to the moderate miners in Bassetlaw nor to the self-conscious modernisers around Hugh Gaitskell.

Sources: (1) **MSS:** Attlee Papers, Churchill College Cambridge; Malcolm MacDonald Papers, University of Durham Library; Liddell Hart Papers, King's College London – correspondence from Bellenger under 1/61; Lord Lawson of Beamish (Jack Lawson) Papers, University of Durham Library; Labour election material, Fulham Borough Council Minutes, Hammersmith and Fulham Local History Centre; Minutes of Parliamentary Labour Party. (2) **Newspapers:** *Fulham Chronicle*, *Worksop Guardian*, *Retford, Gainsborough and Worksop Times*, *Sunday Pictorial*, *Eastern Post* and *City Chronicle*, Press Cuttings File, Labour History Archive, People's History Museum, Manchester. (3) **Other:** Alan R. Griffin, *The Miners of Nottinghamshire 1914–1944* (1962); David Goldsworthy, *Colonial Issues in British Politics 1945–1961 From 'Colonial Development' to 'Wind of Change'* (Oxford, 1971); Bernard Donoghue and G.W. Jones,

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DAVID HOWELL

See also: †A.V. ALEXANDER; †Jack LAWSON

BENNETT, Sir Ernest Nathaniel (1868–1947)

LIBERAL, LABOUR AND NATIONAL LABOUR MP, NATIONAL GOVERNMENT MINISTER

Ernest Nathaniel Bennett was born in Ceylon on 12 December 1868. His father, George Bennett was an Anglican clergyman and schoolmaster, educated at Trinity College Dublin, and from 1885–96 Rector of Rede near Bury St Edmunds. His mother Eliza (née Mapleton) was the daughter of a captain of the East India Company.

Ernest Bennett was educated at Durham School (1881–85). He became a King's Scholar and captained the rugby fifteen. After a brief period at Wadham College Oxford he won a scholarship at Hertford College in 1885 and achieved Firsts in Classics Moderations, Literae Humaniores and Theology. He was awarded the Hall-Houghton Greek Testament Prize and became a Fellow of Hertford in 1891, a position he retained until 1915. He published *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries in 1900*. This short study was written from lecture notes used by Bennett in the Honours School of Theology.

He had political ambitions, Liberal in contrast to the strong Toryism of his father. He decided to establish a reputation as a journalist as a prelude to a political career. He reported the Cretan insurrection of 1897 as an assistant correspondent for *The Times* and subsequently presented his experiences in an article in *Blackwood's*. The Turks were praised and the Cretans condemned for alleged barbarism. During the summer of 1898 he went as a correspondent of the firmly Liberal *Westminster Gazette* to report the British conquest of the Sudan. Present at the battle of Omdurman he rapidly produced a book *The Downfall of the Dervishes*. He applauded the destruction of the Mahdist regime but was critical of the killing of wounded Mahdists. He emphasised these criticisms in an article in the *Contemporary Review* and precipitated a controversy. In particular his claims about the behaviour of British troops were attacked by the *Daily Telegraph* war correspondent Bennett Burleigh. In contrast, Winston Churchill had been at Omdurman and was preparing his own book on the war. He praised Bennett's article as 'very clever and as far as my experience goes absolutely correct' [letter to his mother, 26 January 1899, Churchill (1967)]. When the Salisbury Government proposed a grant to Kitchener, the victor of Omdurman, the radical Liberal Member and *Manchester Guardian* editor C. P. Scott used Bennett's information to oppose the proposal.

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