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Labor Government Shaken by Defeats

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LONDON, March 5 — Prime Minister Wilson's government today got its first real taste of parliamentary trouble, predicted since elections last October, in trying to run the country on a toothpick majority of four seats.

It came simultaneously on the government's two most vulnerable fronts: one from Labor's left wing, the other from the sheer weight of the opposition, which defeated Labor this afternoon on two procedural issues that were minor but embarrassing.

Frank Allaun, parliamentary private secretary to Colonial Minister Anthony Greenwood, announced his resignation. His was not a government or cabinet, job, but his quitting "to gain more independence" mattered.

The issue, though Allaun deliberately did not say so to avoid too much embarrassment to Wilson, was the government's firm support of American policy in Viet-Nam. A block of at least 50 Labor MPs feels strongly that Britain should disavow Washington on this.

Ominous Rumble

Wordlessly but adamantly, Wilson has in effect dared them to choose between bringing down the government or limiting their discontent to rumbling noise. Allaun's show of discontent was such a rumble—ominous but inconclusive.

It was, as one official put it, just "bad luck" for the government that Allaun's resignation was disclosed on the same day as the first defeats in the House of Commons.

The resignation was submitted Monday. Allaun had signed a left-wing motion last week for an independent British initiative to get peace talks on Viet-Nam. The Labor whips forbade all administration aides and members putting their names to any further statements at odds with government policy.

Gently phrased as it was, Allaun's resignation rocked

Wilson's fragile boat. It showed two things—the left is upset, but it doesn't want to drown the government.

The House of Commons defeat by the opposition also showed two things—the Conservatives are moving into harassing attack, but don't yet want to shoot down the government.

Surprise Defeat

The defeat of the bill to abolish capital punishment came as a surprise. On second reading, a free vote without party discipline, it passed with solid support from the Conservative side.

As a matter of tactics, however, the Tories sought to bring it out of committee today. They won by 128 votes to 117 on a motion to end debate about the procedure, and then by 128 to 120 on a motion to put it before the whole House sitting as committee.

Labor was caught off guard. Friday afternoon is slack time in Commons and many members sneak off early to catch trains for a weekend's cultivation of their constituencies.

The immediate significance of the vote was that abolition of capital punishment, which has overwhelming parliamentary support but is not so popular in the country at large, may now be lost for lack of time and the press of more urgent issues.

The larger significance of the vote was that the opposition has drawn first blood. It has found how to use the element of surprise, and that is bound to whet its appetite and fray the government's nerves.

But the opposition does not want to bring Wilson down with a whistle, but rather would like to choose a solid issue, and anyway does not appear quite ready for the chore of a full-scale campaign. But today's unconnected rebuffs demonstrated practically how great is the scope for accident when the margin of stability is so narrow.