

(January 16)

The British Elections.

BY MR. JOHN R. BONE.*

ADDRESSING the Canadian Club on "The Significance of the British Elections," Mr. John R. Bone said:

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen,—After I had been a few days in London I was interested one morning to find in *The Times* a special article from its correspondent in Toronto, telling of the feeling in Canada with regard to the British elections. Imagine my sinking heart when I came to a statement something like this: "The special cables being sent to Canadian papers are useless, as they reflect only the partisan gossip of the Liberal clubs." Needless to say, I was worried until I discovered from the date line that the attack couldn't refer to me, but to allay any feelings of mistrust you may have, let me say that during my stay in Britain I was only once inside a Liberal club. And I have no objection to telling precisely what happened to me there. In company with three elderly gentlemen, one of whom was a former acquaintance, I sat at a round table, and our sole occupation during the hour I remained was drinking tea and playing dominoes.

To get a proper understanding of the tariff reform movement there are two or three things that must be remembered. First, that protection is no new thing in England. For many, many years the policy of England was protection, and when after a long and bitter fight the present policy of free trade first came into full force in 1852, there remained still a large minority, who were staunch protectionists. Under the influence of strong leaders, such as Disraeli, who said that "protection was not only dead, but damned," and of Lord Salisbury, a free trader, that protectionist minority may have been quiescent and dormant, but it did not die. When the leadership of the Conservative party fell into more vacillating hands, it became possible for a strong democratic lieutenant, not to invent a protective policy for England, but to crystallize and

* Mr. John R. Bone, Managing Editor of the *Toronto Daily Star* is one of the most prominent of the city's younger journalists. He represented his newspaper during the last general election in Great Britain and kept its readers fully informed by many graphic letters and cables. He is Second Vice-President of the Canadian Club and is Vice-President of the Canadian Press Association, of which for years he was Secretary.

give leadership to the latent protectionist sentiment of the old minority, modernize it by the addition of protection for manufacturers as it is known in Germany and America, throw round it the glamor of imperialism, and, aided by his own strong personality and by the unsettled condition of affairs following the South African war, he was able to superimpose the result on the Conservative party, which then for the first time became fully identified with the policy of protection.

Second, it must be remembered,—and this is the point I wish specially to emphasize,—that protection, as it has been advanced in England, does not mean primarily protection for manufacturing industry. It means first and foremost protection for the land. That was the protection of the old days. The corn laws meant protection for agriculture. And quite naturally the basis of the revival of protection, which we know as tariff reform, was the old idea of protection for agriculture. But the shrewd men who were formulating this new policy recognized that food taxes would be quite as unpopular in 1903 as they had been in 1846; they would constitute a pill which the nation would not accept, unless it might be induced to do so if surrounded with a generous coating of sugar. And they therefore proceeded to produce the necessary sugar.

This took the form of two important modifications of the program for food taxes. First, there was the colonial preference. It was argued that if colonial wheat was admitted at a lesser duty than the regular duty, or, as the proposal has laterally become, if colonial wheat was admitted duty free, the cost of bread to the British consumer would not be increased. I will not discuss how it was proposed that the one policy could at once protect the English agriculturist, not increase the cost of food, and at the same time increase the price of wheat to the colonial farmer, but what I wish to make clear is that the colonial preference, instead of being, as Canadians may have been disposed to believe, the keystone of the tariff reform structure, is better described as an afterthought to meet the higher cost of bread argument, and at the same time to throw around the figure the halo of Imperialism.

I should interject that the tariff reform leaders in England do not now say that the preference would result in increased prices to the colonial farmer. I heard Austen Chamberlain during the campaign, and what he was careful to argue was that the preference would result in such a vast expansion of colonial wheat-growing that the price of wheat in England would be kept down.

And now we come to the second modification of the old food tax proposals. This is protection of certain manufacturing industries. Here the arguments are familiar. The protectionist points to shop windows filled with German and American goods. He can point to the large warehouses of German and American factories that dot London, and plead that properly adjusted tariffs would clear the "Made-in-Germany" and "Made-in-America" labels from the shop windows, and replace the warehouse by British factories employing British workmen. Undoubtedly, that argument is based on fact. But at what dislocation of trade and industry already existing, trade and industry built up on a policy of free imports, I am not prepared to say, even if no question of food taxes entered in.

Because even on this phase of the question, the protection of manufacturers, the situation is vastly different from anything we know in this country. The manufacturers are by no means a unit for tariffs. Quite the reverse. It is not a case of manufacturer versus farmer, but of manufacturer against manufacturer. Broadly speaking, the industries centred around Birmingham desire protection; those about Manchester, free trade. And as the cotton industry centred in Manchester is the largest individual manufacturing industry in Britain, and as Manchester, including Salford, is a city of almost a million people, as compared with Birmingham's 600,000, it looks as though at least one-half of the manufacturers of Britain, if not more, adhere to the banner of free trade.

I would therefore present, as an analysis of the tariff reform policy of the past seven years, that it consists primarily of food taxes, the colonial preference proposals and the manufacturing protection desired by only a fraction of the manufacturers being distinctly subsidiary.

Well, when I went to England I fear I was still under the influence of the enthusiasm of some of the ardent tariff reformers who have, during the past few years, addressed this club. At all events I was quite prepared to find tariff reform on the verge of accomplishment. It seemed that the next Unionist victory could not be long delayed, and that with it would come, automatically, the policy of tariff reform. But on this question I quickly encountered a series of surprises. My first investigation was in Scotland. There I found that in spite of an active campaign, the tariff reformers had made practically no impression. Conservatives told me frankly that as long as tariff reform was an issue, the Tory party could hope for no progress in Scotland.

Then I visited the North of England, and came down to Yorkshire and Lancashire. Here I was not only surprised, but astonished, not only at the lack of progress tariff reform was making, but at the enthusiasm of the free traders. One expects to find zeal in the advocates of a new cause, indeed, no new cause can be successful without it, but here it was the party on the defensive that had the crusader's fervor.

Then I came to London. And here again there was no evidence of any advance in the cause of protection. Land owners and special manufacturers, the two classes which protection is designed particularly to help, compose only a small portion of London. London, with its vast population of eight million souls, is a city of trade, a city of barter. Manufacturing industry is the exception. The whole world comes to buy and sell. And the supremacy of London among the cities of the world seems to have its basis on free trade. As in Lancashire, there were plenty of Tories, but mighty few protectionists.

Now, I recognized that there were many important centres I had not visited, but if you look up the census figures, as I did, to get the relative importance of the districts I have mentioned, you will find that Scotland, Yorkshire, Lancashire, and London, include upwards of one-half of the total population of all Great Britain and Ireland.

How, I asked, could any party carrying tariff reform hope to win an election? I had just about decided that the Conservative party in England should be credited with one of the most striking illustrations the world has seen of sacrificing mere political success to conviction and principle, when the leader of the Conservative party made his famous Albert Hall speech. The relief, the jubilation, the rejoicing, with which Mr. Balfour's announcement was greeted by great sections of the party, including the press, could not be mistaken, and occasioned me no surprise, in view of my own observations. The Albert Hall meeting itself acted as if a millstone had just been taken from its neck. To say that tariff reform was put upon the shelf by Mr. Balfour's speech is not accurately to describe what happened. Rather was Mr. Balfour's speech, but the breadth of wind which revealed the weakness of the whole structure, and brought the house of cards tumbling down.

Perhaps I do not need to explain further why tariff reform has failed. It failed because it is opposed by powerful manufacturing and commercial interests, and chiefly because ingrained deep down in the souls of Englishmen is the belief

that under protection, particularly when it includes food taxes, his living would cost him more. Where there are vast masses of the population to whom a difference of sixpence a week means the difference between existence and starvation, one can understand that proposals which may mean, however remotely, a possibility of increased cost of living will be examined very warily.

Whether protection of manufacturers alone will eventually carry England is pure speculation. But to get rid of the food tax proposals, the protectionist party apparently must first do what the whole nation is trying to do, get rid of the domination of the peers and landowners.

And now we come to the question which was admittedly the issue on which the election was fought—the veto of the House of Lords. Mr. Asquith has been criticized for having this election at all. As to why he insisted upon it there are two explanations, one unofficial and therefore plausible, the other official and therefore perhaps to be doubted. The official explanation is that the election a year ago was fought on the budget, and there might have been some doubt as to whether it gave the government a mandate on the Lords. The unofficial explanation is that Mr. Asquith, encouraged by the result of the by-election in Walthamstow, encouraged also by his new chief whip, the Master of Elibank, who found his organization ready and strong and was eager to try it out—thereby furnishing an argument for advocates of peace that strong armaments do not always assure peace, but sometimes make for aggression and war—the unofficial explanation is that Mr. Asquith thought he saw a chance of increasing his majority sufficiently to free him of the domination of the Irish party. An increase of but twenty in the Liberal representation would have done this.

But from whatever cause, the election was called, and the people asked to vote on the abstract question of whether they wanted to abolish the veto power of the Peers. They were asked to decide the issue under circumstances unusually free from passion and complicating issues.

The budget of a year ago, the least remote cause of the trouble, had been accepted by everybody and had as an issue sunk out of sight. The bills killed and mutilated by the Lords during the years from 1906 to 1909, while important, were not such as to appeal to the popular imagination. Home Rule complicated the issue to some extent, but its influence was undoubtedly on the side of the Lords. During the past year no new legislation had been advanced by the Commons, and

so there was nothing for the Lords to kill. There was a clear field for the decision of an abstract issue as to the veto of the Lords.

Mr. Joseph Chamberlain in his salad days once said that the only thing he could find that the Peers had ever done for England was to get the Magna Charta from King John, and, he added, that was a long way back to go for a character. And I suppose there are some Canadians who believe that the right of veto held in the abstract and exercised repeatedly in the concrete by a band of hereditary rulers, many of them owing their wealth and position originally to plunder of public property, constitutes a condition that is absolutely intolerable. And they no doubt wondered how there could be any doubt as to the issue and how any other result would be possible than that the government should sweep the country. Let me try to explain some of the reasons why the result was not more sweeping; some of the handicaps under which the policy of abolition of the veto entered the race.

First,—There was the natural reaction against the government, a reaction which is a well-known phenomenon of English politics. As far back as two years ago this reaction had already attained such magnitude against the present government that it was at that time the general opinion that nothing could save it on the very first appeal to the country. This reaction was on the present occasion aggravated by the fact that there have been three elections, with consequent disturbance of business, in a little more than four years, and some feeling that if these people could not get along without all this fuss, they had better make way for some one who could.

Second,—There was a stale register. This meant that in many constituencies the voters who had moved away amounted to thirty or forty per cent., mostly Liberal, according to Liberals. There was plural voting and the spread-out elections. This grievance had been aggravated in recent years by the introduction of the motor car, which makes it possible to get around the country easily. There are instances of one man polling in as many as six constituencies in one day, and of men casting as many as twenty votes during the election. It is estimated by Liberals that without plural voting all county ridings giving Unionists majorities under three hundred would return Liberals.

Fourth,—The apparent imminence of Home Rule for Ireland, the moment the veto of the Lords is abolished, undoubtedly lost the Liberals many seats in England.

Fifth,—The advocacy of the referendum by the Unionists, no matter if the proposal was only half baked, and perhaps to a certain extent insincere, no doubt made some impression upon the radical workingman.

Sixth,—The influence of the Church of England, traditionally Conservative, and recently irritated by the controversies of the Education Act, and by possible developments in Wales, was practically solid against the Government.

Seventh,—We have the brewery interest, described to me as the most powerful individual interest in all England, eminently respectable, with ramifications forming a network through every class in the community. The liquor trade, remembering recent aggression on the part of the Liberals, fearing also threats for the future, and remembering the exceedingly beneficent legislation of Mr. Balfour, were solid for the Peers.

Eighth,—We have the landowners, whose interests are common with the land-owning Peers, smarting under Lloyd-George's land taxes, and hoping that Unionist victory might mean tariff reform, with its consequent increased prices and increased rents.

Ninth,—The direct influence of the Peers themselves is no small matter. Not only are their dependents and retainers strong numerically, but outside that, there is much friendly feeling towards them. Besides, if you go into community after community throughout Britain, you will find that the people depend upon the local hereditary magnate for all sorts of public service. They expect him to take part in the local government, and in daily administration of justice, and of the different governing bodies of the district. And in a great number of cases he does so, often with credit to himself and advantage to the community.

Tenth,—In addition to the individual classes I have mentioned, it is true that the moneyed classes generally, excepting where through free trade they are kept in the ranks of Liberalism, show a tendency to move over to the Conservative party. This is the thing that first strikes the casual visitor to England during an election. At the hotel at which I was staying in London during the election I saw only one Liberal. He was a Manchester free trader, who remained but one night. At the music halls where the election results were announced, the boos and hisses that greeted every Liberal victory were overpowering. It was only from the very topmost gallery that one ever heard the faintest suspicion of a Liberal cheer. The influence of these classes is of course enormous. As an illus-

tration, a lady canvasser on the Liberal side told me that on the street that had been allotted to her, consisting of shopkeepers, though half of them were naturally Liberal sympathizers, there was not a single one who dared hang a Liberal poster in his window. This tendency of wealth to drift toward the Conservative side I heard seriously deplored by a Conservative, who predicted that the ship of State would encounter fair weather only when the wealth of the nation was divided between the parties. Yet it is perhaps not to be wondered at. Men of wealth fear what they call the spectre of Socialism; and the ladies, and men too, see social advancement only on the side of the Peers.

And as the eleventh and final handicap in the list, I would mention the Press. In London the preponderance of Conservatism in the newspapers is very marked, and the same is true in other centres. Perhaps the most striking illustration is in Scotland, where in the great cities there is but a single Liberal newspaper; and it is owned, was, indeed established, by Lord Northcliffe's company. Yet, while the Scottish press is overwhelmingly Conservative, Scotland votes overwhelmingly Liberal.

It has been the fashion in some quarters, in view of the remarkable result of the polling, by which the parties retain almost the identical numerical relation to each other that they did in the previous Parliament, to say it was a futile election. Futile in the sense that it was unnecessary it may have been, but that the result has no significance I cannot believe. On the contrary, I regard it as full of the greatest significance.

The stubborn adherence to the position of a year ago, in view of the heavy odds against the policy of abolition of the veto, which I have just endeavored to outline, means that the democracy of England has a definite purpose, and has a tenacity and a determination in the pursuit of that purpose not paralleled since the days of previous political revolutions. It is determined to get a real grip on the reins of government. It is determined first to get rid of the absolute despotism of the little group of men who speak for the House of Lords, and who in matters of general legislation exercise a power and control that could scarcely be exceeded under any system of absolute monarchy, a system which Britons long ago abolished. That will be one step. But it is unlikely that the movement will stop there. I do not mean to predict that there is any immediate danger of single chamber government, nor do I propose to discuss the merits of that issue, though there are prominent members of the Liberal party in England who

point out with force that already England has in respect of nearly all the fundamental matters of State a single chamber system. The issues of war, of peace, of treaties, of police, of finance, are decided without interference by the House of Lords, and it is pointed out that it is only in domestic legislation affecting the ordinary daily lives of Englishmen that the interference of the Upper Chamber comes in. But at present the question of single chamber government is not an issue. I would judge that there is about as much chance of Mr. Asquith proposing to abolish the Second Chamber as there is of our seeing an announcement to-morrow that Sir Wilfrid Laurier proposes to nationalize the railways of Canada.

But before abolishing the Second Chamber, I am not sure that the House of Commons is as democratic as the masses desire. The ever present and ever dominating system of caste seems to have reared its head even in that democratic institution. In Canada we are disposed to grumble about government by caucus; that the members of the government party are rarely, if ever, consulted; that even what is known as the Radical wing, which meets occasionally, is hoodwinked by a sham Radical, Sir Charles Dilke; that a little clique of, say, twenty-five members in the House of Commons keep within their little circle all power; that, in other words, what is known as real responsible government is non-existent. If this is so there is work for a militant democracy before it reaches its Second Chamber.

The democracy of England proposes to get control of its Second Chamber, to get, if necessary, real control of its First Chamber. It proposes to attack privilege and class rule and despotism anywhere and everywhere it shows its head.

And now, what of the immediate future? I am not going to prophesy in specific terms. But I will express a belief in general terms that Mr. Asquith will be safest if he adopts a strong course straight ahead. If he accepts the verdict of the people as an instruction to abolish the veto, to give a measure of Home Rule to Ireland, to go ahead with temperance reform, social reform, electoral reform, educational reform, perhaps Church reform, and further, land reform, he will not, I think, be exceeding his mandate, and what is perhaps more important from a tactical standpoint, he will hold together, I believe, his coalition following. Of course, trouble may be met in uncharted waters at any time. Home Rule particularly always has submarine mines lying around. In reference to Home Rule I have been asked many times about the alarmist

reports of preparations in Ulster to fight. I have not been to Ulster, but I would simply make this observation for what it is worth: first, that the bogey of Home Rule has helped to preserve the veto of the House of Lords for the last twenty-five years; and, second, this prediction, that if and when the veto of the House of Lords is once abolished beyond recall, we will hear little more of civil war in Ireland.

But if Mr. Asquith vacillates or temporizes he will, I predict, invite trouble. At the opening of Parliament last February, Mr. Asquith, in his inaugural speech, in a very lackadaisical tone proceeded to outline a very lackadaisical policy. That speech brought Redmond, and Barnes, the Labor leader, and Dalziel and Wedgewood, the Radicals, and Keir Hardie to their feet in white anger. But more significant than anything that happened inside the House was the revolt in the country. The coalition struck, not merely Irish and Laborites and Radicals, but more or less moderate Liberals as well. They melted away like the outgoing tide and left their leader marooned. In a week Mr. Asquith yielded and announced a more aggressive program.

The conference later in the year was tolerated because of the death of King Edward; but now any weakening will, I feel sure, court a revolt, even more surely than it did last February. The aggressive coalitionists if they become convinced that Mr. Asquith is not true to their cause will strip his power from him and will be content to wait for a new Moses to arise to lead them into the promised land. Who that will be is impossible to say, but the man who seems to be practising the role of the babe in the bulrushes is our friend Winston Churchill. However, if Mr. Asquith stands firm, he will probably carry with him the confidence of practically four hundred out of six hundred and seventy in the House of Commons, and the Second Chamber will hardly dare show fight.

What is the lesson for Canada? To my mind it was indicated in the scholarly and interesting address heard by this club two weeks ago from Mr. R. L. Borden. Speaking of the distribution of wealth, he parenthetically used, in effect, these words: "When William the Conqueror came over and conquered England he parcelled out the land among his barons and established a system from which England is not yet quite free."

Eight hundred years ago, and England is not yet free from political tyranny of huge wealth and hereditary power.

And our democratic neighbors to the south have developed vested interests and a Second Chamber which is already a greater incubus than even a hereditary House of Lords. To-day, with unimportant exceptions, Canada, with all her faults, is, politically, the freest nation on earth; nowhere else is there as near an approach to free and responsible government. And at this halcyon epoch in our career let us beware, let us beware of our William the Conqueror and their noble barons.