

(February 21st.)

## The British Elections.

By J. S. WILLISON.

ADDRESSING the Canadian Club on the subject, "The British Elections," Mr. J. S. Willison said:

*Mr. President and Gentlemen*—On Saturday I had the privilege of speaking at the University on the political situation in Great Britain. Necessarily, therefore, I must on this occasion endeavor to avoid repetition although it will be necessary to reach somewhat similar conclusions. To change one's political relationships between Saturday and Monday would be too much, even for Mr. Winston Churchill, to say nothing of myself.

People in the Old Country found it hard to believe that we in Canada were as much interested in the British election as they were themselves. They could hardly believe that each night during the polling, the streets of Toronto were filled with people; that the newspapers displayed bulletins and issued extra editions. In short, they have only a faint conception in the Old Country of the closeness with which we follow British public affairs and of how much we are a part of the Empire in all that concerns its interests and its fortunes. If they could see this meeting of the Canadian Club they would know that Canadian interest in the election was as great as I represented it to be and if they could get below the surface they would find that we are divided on British public questions very much as the British people themselves are divided.

Throughout my whole newspaper experience I have been a defender of the American Associated Press which for many year has brought the bulk of British news to this continent. I have sometimes thought that it was feeble and narrow in the range of events which it covered but I have seldom thought that it was either grossly misinformed or deliberately in-

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accurate. I do say, however, that from the day the Lloyd George budget was introduced in the British House of Commons nothing more misleading, more ridiculous or more stupid ever was sent over the cable than the bulk of these despatches. In saying this I make no reference to the despatches which were sent to Canadian newspapers by their own correspondents. In the main the work of my colleagues who went out from Toronto was interesting and brilliant and reflected only credit on the press of Canada. My reference covers only those despatches which were intended primarily for American consumption and which misrepresented and perverted the issues of the British contest.

The British election was a keen election but, upon the whole, it was an orderly and good tempered election. From the outset it was an uncertain election. There never was any sign of the marked unpopularity of the House of Lords and the certain sweep of the Government such as one found in the press despatches. Before polling began a representative Liberal-Unionist said to me: "If anyone tells you he knows how this election is going he is a liar." Candidates who came back from the constituencies during the progress of the contest agreed that never in their experience had they met so many people who refused to say how they would vote and were even unwilling to discuss the questions before the country. Never were there so many people who exercised the right to vote under the secrecy of the ballot. All over the United Kingdom men were active in the contest on one side or the other who had never before interested themselves in any political election and when one knows that in two or three constituencies ninety-seven out of every hundred registered votes were polled and that throughout the contested divisions eighty-seven per cent. of the total available vote was cast, one can understand just how serious and desperate the contest was.

As between election methods and manners in Canada and in Great Britain, the contrast is not so great as has been imagined. I went to the Old Country conscious that there was much in the politics of my own land for which I should apologize and something for which I ought to be ashamed. But every day as the polling went on my self-respect rose and towards the close of the contest I felt positively arrogant in my feeling of self-righteousness. I found that there were liars in England, and even some in Scotland, and more in Ireland. I had the curious satisfaction of visiting Worcester, a cathedral city, which in the last election was disfranchised

for corrupt practices, and of feeling that no such thing had ever happened in Canada, where, fortunately, we make no provision for disfranchisement.

Sir, we, in Canada, know little or nothing about elections. On various occasions I went into a constituency on polling day. Always the streets were overflowing with people and carriages. Many persons wore colors and many carriages were decorated. The crowd was good humored and orderly. Election literature lined the streets and the placard of a Unionist on one side was answered by a Liberal placard on the other. Nothing in all the contest was more interesting than these election placards and I have the opinion that if the Liberals exceeded in severity, the Unionists exceeded in humor and originality. I stood for hours before the bulletin boards on Fleet Street as the returns came in and were bulletined by the newspapers. Always I was impressed with the good temper of the crowds, the sense of humor which enlivened and redeemed every situation. Good tempered as we are in our political contests, we have something still to learn from the British people. Nothing struck me more forcibly than the behavior of mixed crowds when time after time and night after night the picture of Mr. Chamberlain was exhibited on the election bulletins. There was always tumultuous cheering and it was difficult to tell whether those who cheered were Liberals or Unionists. The people seemed only to remember that he was one of the great figures of his time, that his day was done, and that he had done service for which he should be acclaimed and honored. It is just possible that if Mr. Chamberlain himself could have appeared on the platform throughout the country, the contest would have had a different and more decisive ending.

The impression has been created in Canada that the House of Lords is a House of privilege, concerned only with the personal and social interests of its members and indifferent to the welfare of the masses of the people. You have been led to understand that the House of Lords opposes reform of its constitution and particularly adheres with angry tenacity to the principle of hereditary representation. You are not told that before the Lloyd George budget appeared in the House of Commons, a committee of the House of Lords itself was appointed to consider the question of reform. On that committee the regular members of the Liberal Opposition refused to serve, but its membership embraced the Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Lansdowne and many of the most representative Unionists of the Upper Chamber, with Lord Rose-

bery and a few other Liberal peers. This committee reported before the budget was introduced and the substance of its report was that heredity alone should cease to be a qualification for membership in the House of Lords, that it should be less an organ of party and that it should be made to express more fairly the feelings and sentiments of the great laboring and commercial communities.

The chief difference between the two parties over the House of Lords is that the Liberals desire to abolish and the Unionists to reform the Upper Chamber. What Liberals call abolition of the veto means that within a single Parliament the will of the House of Commons shall prevail. In other words, a party majority shall be omnipotent, no matter what the circumstances under which it may be elected, and shall have power under all circumstances to over-rule the House of Lords. As the election proceeded, however, Mr. Asquith, Sir Edward Grey and other leading Liberals were obliged to declare that they did not favor a single Chamber. Unionists, while admitting the necessity for reform, frankly and energetically justified the rejection of the budget. But the House of Lords was by no means the supreme issue in the contest, as Liberals had expected. Except in the industrial constituencies of the north of England and in Scotland, the attack on the House of Lords substantially failed. Since the election the two chief Labor organs of Great Britain have admitted that the majority against the House of Lords in the election was so small that it cannot be taken, even by the most optimistic, as a mandate for revolution. In England, at least, the parties broke substantially even. In Scotland no doubt there was a clear judgment against the Lords. In Ireland the constituencies voted on the issues and according to the influences which have been uppermost since the time of Parnell. In short, the attack on the House of Lords was by no means as successful as the Liberal press and Liberal politicians assumed it would be and probably in the end reform of the House of Lords will proceed from the Unionist rather than from the Radical party.

The other question, and the great question, of the elections was Tariff Reform. Hardly had the contest begun when the Unionist speakers discovered that this was the one issue in which the constituencies were deeply interested. So the Liberals discovered that outside of Scotland and in a few constituencies in the industrial north they must turn their whole energies towards combatting the movement for fiscal reform. It is my conviction, and I imagine the opinion of

the majority of close political observers in both parties, that without the budget tariff reform would have won a decisive triumph. On the other hand, without tariff reform the Unionist party would have gone to pieces and the Government have come out of the election with a majority of three or four hundred. The Unionist party now recognizes that it has only one great constructive issue, the restoration of Protection with a preference in favor of the Colonies. This policy, even to the details of a tariff, is thoroughly prepared and it is no secret that the Colonial Preference will be fifty per cent. over foreign countries. I venture to think that as soon as the budget is out of the way the people of Great Britain undoubtedly will declare for Protection and Preference and in my own judgment for Great Britain under all the circumstances to adhere to free trade would be a remarkable and depressing example of human stupidity. Since I returned to Toronto we have had an instructive illustration of the soundness of the Unionist position. This country, with only seven or eight millions of people, has forced Germany, with a population of sixty or seventy millions, to abandon discriminatory fiscal legislation against Canada. Who can doubt that Great Britain, with forty millions of people and with the best consuming market in the world, could force every protectionist nation to moderate its duties in favor of the Mother Country? Thus the restoration of protection in the Mother Country would mean a lowering of the tariffs of all protectionist nations and the first and only conspicuous world advance towards free trade. One of the leading merchants of London told me that in face of the results at the last election business men could not doubt that tariff reform would soon triumph. He had already let contracts for the building of a bonded warehouse and I heard of several American firms that were buying land in Great Britain in order to establish factories there. Business men know that the next appeal to the country, if the constitutional issue can be eliminated, means the restoration of protection and they are getting ready for the new situation.

When I left England there was no expectation in well-informed quarters of an election inside of twelve months. There was loose talk that the Government would hardly survive the meeting of Parliament but no one who looked closely into the situation could believe that a new appeal to the country would come so quickly. Towards the close of the contest, Mr. Asquith and Sir Edward Grey notified the King that in case the elections should show that they would

have to depend absolutely upon a Nationalist majority they would refuse to go on, and certain negotiations with Mr. Balfour were begun in view of the position in which the Throne would be placed if the Liberal leaders refused to carry on the Government. The result of the election, however, was to leave the Government with a majority of three or four over Unionists, Labor and Nationalists. Even if the Government had depended upon the Labor party, or the Nationalist party, it is difficult to see what either of these parties could gain by its early defeat. Probably on the question of Home Rule there is not much difference between the views of Mr. Balfour and those of Mr. Asquith. Both are opposed to any full measure of legislative autonomy for Ireland and both favorable to a Liberal extension of local government. On the general issue of Home Rule the Unionists are more hostile than the Liberals to Irish pretensions and demands. So far as the Irish party is concerned, therefore, it has nothing to gain by defeating Mr. Asquith. So Labor justly or unjustly, wisely or unwisely, believes that its ends can be best served by co-operation with the Liberal leaders and in the election there was a practical alliance between the two parties. Labor, therefore, like the Nationalists, has nothing to gain and something to lose by an early defeat of the Government. Moreover, I cannot think that any party in England is desirous of an early appeal to the country and, therefore, the appeal probably will not come as soon as now seems to be expected. If the budget goes back to the House of Lords, its members will not stop to inquire whether it is sent back by an Irish majority or a Labor majority or a Liberal majority. Their position will be that as the House of Lords referred the question to the people and that as a result of the election the House of Commons has been able again to pass the budget, therefore, the Lords have nothing to do but to obey the will of the people as so expressed. There will be practically no discussion if the budget returns to the Lords but an immediate acceptance, and to that extent, at least, the Upper House will show that whatever may be its attitude towards a Liberal Government it submits without question to the judgment of the British people.