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Elections As They Were (IV.)

"THE FIRST SEVEN YEARS ARE THE WORST"

SOME men are born into politics and some dragged in. I knew one once who had been kicked in by a cow—or so he told me. He had been a farmer, but a cow broke his knee-cap and changed the whole course of his life. My brief plunge into public life changed nothing. I ended at the bottom of the poll and at no stage in the campaign did I feel for more than two or three minutes that I would end anywhere else. So I picked myself up with as much dignity as I could muster and went back to the only job society had ever thought I could do.

Since something like that will happen to three out of four of the 291 candidates nominated last week, I offer my sympathy in advance. I can assure them that the first seven years afterwards are the worst. About the eighth year the joke will be dawning on them. In 10 they will be laughing without effort.

ANYHOW, this is what it looks like now. I became a candidate for all that mixture of reasons with which we work ourselves into delusions of duty—vanity, generosity, self-seeking, self-love, public spirit, love of our fellows, love of the limelight, dislike of a person, devotion to a cause, interest in our children, pity for ourselves, shame in ourselves, and so on. I was, of course, not conscious of all those influences when I found myself, quite without warning, listening to reasons why I should "come forward in the public interest," but if they had not been at work, I would never have agreed even to consider the question, and should certainly not have answered solemnly in a day or two that I was "sensible of the great honour" the deputation had shown me and "of my own unworthiness," but after earnest consideration, etc., etc., had decided to accept their invitation. For I was not a party man, had no political tradition behind me, and no qualifications at all for smiling at babies and attending flower shows. I am sure, too, that I had not previously thought of a political career or even dreamt of one.

BUT a night came on which I found myself sitting on a stage watching a theatre fill with people who were arriving to hear me speak. I saw the chairman rise and the talking stop, heard him asking the audience to give me a fair hearing, and then realised suddenly that the little crackle of applause that followed was the call for me to begin.

I was, you see, a complete novice, not exactly tongue-tied, but entirely without experience in this class of speaking, which is dominated by the thought that you must sell yourself and your cause (if you have one), more successfully than your opponents will be able to sell themselves and their causes. Unless you strike a successful compromise between cheapness and worth the others will beat you. They will undercut you on price (make more jokes, distribute more smiles, accept more rebuffs), or over-puff you on value (promise more, show

Confession of a Defeated Candidate



"The customers are always right"

more sympathy, offer bigger bribes. But whatever your opponents do, the position between you and your audience is that you are the seller and they are the customers; and the customers, as you know, are always right. So you ignore them when they are rude, smile fatuously when some wag makes a fool of you, listen respectfully when a fool asks a stupid question. If you lose your temper, you are lost.

WELL, I did not lose my temper. But I once lost my notes, once took the wrong glasses and could not read my

notes, often lost my memory or my line of thought or my sense of humour, and after about half a dozen meetings, lost, irretrievably, all interest in what I was saying. From that stage on I longed for questioners and hecklers, and even for the fanatics who follow candidates round asking the same set of questions and repeating the same obvious attempts to corner or commit them.

But it is not always safe to anticipate their questions and declare yourself in advance. One of my most awkward moments came at the end of a meeting in a woolshed in which I began by saying that it would save time if I announced at the outset that I was opposed to Douglas Credit. It was a good meeting, with an entirely respectful audience of 50 or 60, who asked a few questions and then apparently were satisfied. But when the chairman rose to close proceedings, a black man got up at the back and asked permission to put a question.

"I think the candidate said that he is opposed to Douglas Credit?"

"I did."

"Has the candidate made a deep study of Douglas Credit?"

"Not exactly deep, but I have examined it."

"Does the candidate feel justified in condemning something he does not understand?"

"Who said he did not understand it?"

"The candidate said he had not studied it deeply."

"Well, he knows the ABC of it, and is not tempted to go further."

"Would the candidate please tell this audience the ABC of Douglas Credit?"

Fortunately the candidate could and did; but he could not have gone as far as D, and sat down sweating.

ONCE I think I scored, but the audience did not. I was asked how much gold the Bank of New Zealand held, and answered frankly that I did not know.

"Well, you should know!"

"Why should I?"

"You are asking us to put you into Parliament. You are not fit for Parliament if you don't know things like that."

"No? What is your own occupation?"

"I'm a shearer, and proud of it."

"So should I be if I were a good shearer."

"I am a good shearer."

"Sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"All right. What is the specific gravity of steel?"

"Trying to be funny?"

"No, just trying to find out how much you know about your job. Fancy calling yourself a good shearer when you don't understand what your shears are made of."

I still think it was my trick, but I got a boo for it at the time, and about

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