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Current Topics

AT HOME AND ABROAD.

A MOMENTOUS QUESTION. Is the majority of our new Parliament a band of noble patriots whose inspiration is the welfare of the country, and who are ready to undergo every labour and to make every sacrifice to secure that end? Or is it a sordid party whose end is self-seeking, and who, while ready to sacrifice others and to condemn grabbing in which it has no share, is itself determined to grab all it can lay its hands on? This is the question which during the week has distracted the country. It has been answered too—satisfactorily, no doubt, but variously. What! cries the indignant Conservative Press, prorogue Parliament and hold two sessions in the year, taking an honorarium for each, when an adjournment with one honorarium would have served all the purpose! Verily, the Colony and our fortunes have fallen into thievish hands. It is all your own doing, respond the Liberal organs. Your men, although they knew they were beaten, would not give in. To serve their own purpose they clung to office, and called Parliament prematurely together. With them, therefore, lies the blame. The *Otago Daily Times*, for example, claims for the Conservatives a monopoly of all the honesty of the country and brands the Liberals as men of low minds. "And there can be no two opinions amongst honest men," protests our authoritative contemporary, "as to its being one of the most disgraceful actions that a New Zealand Government has committed—not merely a betrayal of the trust of the country, but denoting a low-minded way of regarding the position of a public representative which is in the last degree contemptible." It is hazardous, then, to pronounce an opinion by which a man's honesty and mental decency may be compromised. Our contemporary, the *Daily Times*, however, can hardly be taken as a guide by less exalted people. This Parliament has much in connection with it that necessarily shocks his feelings. "Mr. Buick," he says again, with evident disgust, "a twenty-three-year old journeyman baker from Blenheim, appears to have shown a remarkable natural gift of oratory." The *Times* does not want too much oratory of any sort from an hon. Member like that. And wherein does Mr. Buick's fault lie? Is it in his age? Is it in the place whence he hails? Is it in his particular trade? But let us hope, at least, that Mr. Fish has, at last, found a companion in disgrace. Hitherto, of all the trades going we were continually given to understand that that of the painter alone was inconsistent with Parliamentary respectability. Or was it that Mr. Fish showed a capacity, to quote a Yankee term of expression, for painting the House red, and so kept his calling before the eyes of his detractors? We do not know that there is any humorous sense in which allusion to the trade of the baker is made, and, therefore, we must conclude that the stigma is attached to the humble calling. And we admit that to an organ which represents the aristocratic classes—the classes that, like Mr. Scobie Mackenzie, for example, are educating their children, albeit at their neighbours' expense, to stand before kings—it must be exceedingly mortifying to see a young fellow with the dough still sticking to his hands giving promise of making his mark in Parliament. Mr. Buick, in spite of his defiling connection with the dough trough, had, however, already gained a very considerable name as a public speaker. Let us hope, for his own sake and that of the country, that as a legislator he may never deserve a heavier reproach than that alluded to. But as to this momentous question that divides opinion, we hesitate to commit ourselves. Even in the eyes of the Conservative party we should be sorry to lend our right to rank with lowest men. We propose, then, that the matter should be decided by results. At any rate, in answer to the argument that Sir Harry Atkinson's Cabinet were ready in doubt as to the state of parties, Mr. Ballance might plead, at the worst, that his grounds for assurance could be no greater than these, and that, therefore, his preparation of a policy would have been premature. Mr. Scobie Mackenzie's smart claim that time should be now taken for a settlement of Judge Edwards' case, as well as to pass an Act for a graduated land tax notwithstanding. Mr. Mackenzie, we further perceive, still postures as an advocate of Liberalism—

taking the easy task to himself, as a wealthy man, of cautioning, in its name, men of more pressing needs against making it their pretence in gaining ignoble ends. And who, indeed, should be more qualified to give such a caution than a man whom long practice has well instructed in the uses to which the pretence of Liberalism may be put? Is it not common for us to judge of others by ourselves, and may we not occasionally turn our dodges to additional advantage by crying out against any tactics of a similar kind on the part of others? Don't you, poor beggars, touch a penny of this money, but go ahead, unprepared as you are, that you may all the sooner come to grief and place matters once more in the hands of your betters. If you don't you are only sham Liberals. Such is the gist of Mr. Scobie Mackenzie's argument, and, fortunately, perhaps, as events may prove, so it seems to be understood by the Members addressed. Let results, we say, determine the question. If the party, in fact, now in power succeed in legislating for the benefit of the Colony—and one or two of their proposals seem of some promise. Mr. Pinkerton's proposal, for instance, for the placing of small farmers near settled districts, and the pledge given by the Hon. J. Mackenzie that he will inquire into the land transactions of the past two years and deal sternly with tricksters, seem of such a kind. If Mr. Ballance's Cabinet, we say, succeeds in placing the Colony in a better position, and in doing something to further genuine settlement and promote prosperity, the majority by which they have been supported in what seems to us, after all, no very unreasonable demand for time for reflection and preparation, will well earn the double honorarium so much complained of. We, therefore, would leave the reputation of the majority to be determined by the future, with an earnest hope that the determination referred to may be speedy and favourable.

A VERY interesting debate was that which took MARCHING ON, place at the Dunedin Athenæum last week, and in which it was proposed to establish a public library in this city. The matter, as we are given to understand, lies in the hands of the Corporation, who have full powers to act without consulting the ratepayers. The ratepayers, nevertheless, would seem to be a party in some degree interested. On them, at least, it devolves to contribute the funds for setting the matter going and maintaining it. However, there is no reason to suppose that any objection would be made by them. Are they not an enlightened community, and quite on a level with the requirements of the age? They, of course, see the connection necessarily existing between the project alluded to and the education system of the colony, and which, indeed, if we recollect aright, was pointed out during the debate to which we refer. Necessarily an educated generation must have books to keep up and increase their knowledge, and how are they to come by these books unless at the public expense? It would appear, moreover, that when people pay for their books they choose them of a kind not quite so well calculated to sustain and increase knowledge. It is stated in connection with the library now existing—that of the Athenæum—for admittance to which the exorbitant sum of something under fivepence a week is charged—that the books excessively in demand are novels, which, even allowing for an explanation made, to the effect that it took a month to read a history and only a week to get through three or four novels—a necessary consequence, perhaps of a preference for novels—hardly speaks well for the solidity of mind possessed by those who pay for their reading. And, indeed, the case seems pretty much the same everywhere. A writer, for example, in a recent number of the *Quarterly Review* gave some striking particulars as to the class of books purchased by young people in England, and which, also, are of the nature of the romance. However, the opening of a public library would change all that. It seems people who obtain solidly instructive material for nothing would eagerly avail themselves of it. Possibly if the chemists' shops were thrown open gratis the physic would be eagerly swallowed down and the publicans would lose their customers. The experiment, by the way, might be worth trying—and as to the expense, that, as we see, is nowadays, to quote Mr. Toote's, of no consequence whatever. What, then, remains to be said? We have, we may be convinced, an enlightened body of ratepayers, and we have a Corporation truly representing them. No one of any enlightenment, as we have said, can