



'To promote the cause of Religion and Justice by the ways of Truth and Peace.'

LEO XIII. to the N.Z. TABLET.

THURSDAY, MARCH 20, 1902.

A METEORIC STATESMAN.

SINCE the delivery of his now famous speech at Chesterfield and his more recent utterance at Glasgow the name of Lord ROSEBERRY has been more or less on everybody's lips, and no other figure has loomed quite so large on the horizon of Imperial politics as his. He has certainly had a magnificent opportunity. He could not possibly have chosen a more fitting and favorable time for his re-entry into political life. The great Liberal party had sunk in a state of almost hopeless collapse—disunited, distracted, dispirited, without real leader or really definite policy, looking vainly around for someone who would tell them what to do, sound one clear bugle note, and lead them once again with fresh life into the fray. When, therefore, Lord ROSEBERRY announced his intention to deliver a speech and outline a Liberal programme and policy, the whole party kindled with fresh enthusiasm and fresh hope. Now at last they have got a leader, and after he had spoken the party would once more feel itself a party with a power, a policy, a purpose of its own. No leader ever had a better chance given him of reviving and reuniting a defeated army and of restoring its former glory and its old prestige.

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How did Lord ROSEBERRY use this great opportunity? He did precisely what anyone who has watched or read his political career could have safely predicted he would do. He spoke with the ease and elegance and charming felicity of phrase, of which he is so great a master. He said a great many things that were clever and to the point. In his criticism of the Government he made some pretty rapier-play and some telling hits. On his own side he avoided with great tact the snares and difficulties that were in his way, and spared no effort to dance his political egg-dance without breaking a single egg. He filled his address with judicious and carefully-balanced compromises, so that, as someone afterwards said, everyone got something and no one got everything that they expected. When he had to indulge—as he frequently did—in mere generalities and pleasing platitudes, he dressed them up with such literary grace that they were easily taken for words of deepest wisdom. His hearers were, to begin with, not only sympathetic but enthusiastic, so that he had no difficulty in working up a great deal of histrionic excitement. He carried his audience so completely with him that at one stage of the meeting, we are told, a number of those on the platform jumped to their feet and wildly waved their hats to give further emphasis to their cheers and applause.

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For the time, indeed, it seemed as if the orator had accomplished all the great things that were expected of him. The speech was received with a tolerably general chorus of approval and almost of acclaim. That particular section of the Liberal party known as the Liberal Imperialists—better known in the House of Commons slang as the Liberal Imps—were carried into the seventh heaven of delight. 'A new era has dawned,' writes one in his delirium, 'for the nation and for the party of progress. It is impossible to imagine any more splendid fate for Lord ROSEBERRY than that he should lead us out of the Slough of Despond and bring us once more into the ways of national greatness. He has the heart and mind, the voice and the spacious imagination for the highest things. His banner shall not be furled but

in the hour of victory.' Most of the great London dailies, though of course not so extravagant, still expressed warm approval of the speech. The *Daily Telegraph* thought that 'Lord ROSEBERRY had risen to the very height of his opportunity.' 'We shall not be accused of favoritism,' wrote the *Daily Mail*, 'when we state the simple fact that Lord ROSEBERRY amply justified his reputation, and proved that, as in former times of difficulty, our country has produced a statesman.' And even the *London Times*, usually unemotional enough, declared 'that Lord ROSEBERRY had risen with rare completeness to the level of a great occasion.'

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But the after effect of a speech is the true test of its greatness, and the time that has elapsed since Lord ROSEBERRY's first effort has shown how delusive was the hope that he or his speeches would effect anything in the nature of a revolution or do anything whatever to rehabilitate Liberalism in England. In the first place the speech itself, though it was undoubtedly great as an oratorical effort, was, so far as its matter was concerned, a signal failure. On close analysis it was found to consist either of mere empty catch-phrases—such as the watch-word of 'efficiency' which was in no special sense a Liberal watch-word, and would serve equally well as a battle-cry for any party under the sun—or else of very thinly-veiled Conservatism. The speech was, in fact, as a German paper cleverly put it, only CHAMBERLAIN in a special and superfine edition. Instead of reinvigorating the Liberal party Lord ROSEBERRY betrayed it. To have followed his lead would have been to abandon the fundamental principles and most honored traditions of Liberalism, and to fall back to the very Toryism which they were organised to oppose. No wonder the great bulk of the party will have none of Lord ROSEBERRY. Even if the speech had been a greater one than it was it would still have been a comparative failure because Lord ROSEBERRY has not known how to follow it up after his first success. Instead of promptly calling a meeting and putting himself at the head of the party, he contented himself with issuing an authorised edition of his speech, with the following appeal:—

'My policy appears to have received a large meed of general approval. But political opinion to be effective must be organised—political energy must work and entrench. I want some of this spade-work on behalf of this policy, or else the wave of popular adhesion will be lost in space.'

No true leader would speak like that. If spade-work was to be done he would know that it was his place to grasp the implement and make the first start. The real leader says, 'Come on, I will lead you;' Lord ROSEBERRY says, 'go on, I will follow.' But a 'leader' who follows will never revive or rebuild any party.

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We have not yet said anything about Lord ROSEBERRY's change of front on the Home Rule question and his attempt to induce the Liberal party to make such a dishonest and dishonorable breach of faith with the Irish people, and we have not space to deal with it now. We regret this the less because we do not believe it will make the slightest difference to the ultimate success of the cause what Lord ROSEBERRY may think or say. Looking at his prospects quite impartially and apart altogether from our feeling at his having turned renegade on this great question, we do not believe that the future holds any great career for Lord ROSEBERRY as a statesman. He is undoubtedly a gifted man. He has plenty of ability and of political imagination, and as a pleasing and persuasive speaker he has probably no rival in the United Kingdom. But he has one absolutely fatal defect. He has not the nerve and will-power and force of character, without which no one can ever be a successful leader. He can make very beautiful flights, but they are always short-lived. He is like a meteor, flashing with brilliance one moment, vanished from sight the next. Or to vary the metaphor, his "points" and his pace are excellent, and he does his preliminary canter in a way that arouses the wildest enthusiasm, but he has not sufficient 'staying-power' to ever get home in the race.

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All this is not mere matter of personal opinion; it is the inevitable inference from the admitted facts of his life. In March of 1891 Lord ROSEBERRY was received as Premier with an almost universal chorus of acclamation throughout

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