

MR. ASQUITH AND IRELAND

Mr. Asquith, speaking at a dinner of Liberals in London in April last, referred to the significance of the by-election results, and described the Coalition as a top-heavy structure resting upon foundations of sand. Dealing with the Irish question, he said:—What is the situation there? And how do we stand in relation to it, before either the tribunal of our own national conscience or that larger tribunal which is the spokesman and vehicle of international opinion? A Home Rule Act, admittedly in need of amendment before it is put into effective operation, is on the Statute Book. A little less than three years ago, after the abortive rising in Dublin, the Government of that day, the Government of which I was then head, attempted to achieve, and very nearly succeeded in achieving, a settlement by consent. A year later the present Government, with the hearty good-will of all parties here, summoned a representative national convention, which sat in Dublin for the best part of 12 months. Their deliberations resulted, I will not say in complete agreement, but in a far greater approximation to it than anyone could have anticipated, or even thought possible. It was, moreover, a striking and significant accompaniment of the sittings of the convention, that, as I remember pointing out at the time, there was a distinct set-back, manifested at by-elections and in other ways, in the authority and influence of the extreme, or Sinn Fein, Party in Ireland.

The necessity for immediate action, when the convention had reported, was acknowledged by no one in stronger terms, or with more solemn pledges, than by leading members of the Government. But with a shortsightedness for which I have never been able to discover any explanation or excuse, they chose that particular moment to insist upon the inclusion of Ireland for the first time in the compulsory provision of the Military Service Act. It was an abortive proposal, foredoomed to failure from the first, and bound to prove, and, as I predicted, it did prove, sterile of any military result. But its political consequences were immediate, overwhelming, and disastrous. The power and prestige of the Constitutional Party were fatally undermined. The waning authority of Sinn Fein was not only restored, but multiplied a hundredfold, and the recent election has given it, for the moment, though, as I believe, only for the moment, a majority of the Irish representation at Westminster. And there are now, as we were informed the other day, more than 40,000 troops kept in Ireland to preserve the peace, and to overawe unconstitutional agitation.

What is going to be done? That is the question which was put to the Government little more than a week ago in the House of Commons by the leader of

the Free Liberals—my friend Sir Donald Maclean. And what was the answer? It was given by the new Chief Secretary—one of the few Liberals who hold responsible office in the Government. (Cries of "Question.") As I read it—I have to read these things now—(laughter)—I rubbed my eyes, for in argument, and even in phraseology, it was an almost exact reproduction of what I used to hear night after night more than 30 years ago from the then holder of the same post, the most famous of all Tory Chief Secretaries, the champion crusader of coercion, Mr. Balfour.

"So long," says our present Chief Secretary, "as the condition of the country is what it is, no steps can be taken to alter the present system of government"; and this was followed, of course, by the venerable platitude that it is the first duty of a Government to maintain law and order. (Laughter.) It is sad, it is sad to me at any rate, to hear a young and promising Liberal lisping the obsolete accents of reaction. "It is," says he, "the first duty of a Government to maintain law and order." So it is. Who denies it? But I venture to tell my right hon. friend that the first condition for a durable basis for law and order in Ireland is to alter the present system of government. (Cheers.) That, at any rate—he may take it from me—is the Liberal doctrine, preached by Mr. Gladstone, and followed, in days when the condition of Ireland from the point of view of law and order was far worse than it is to-day, by all the great Liberal statesmen of my time. No wonder that even an enlightened Unionist, Major Hills, after hearing the Government spokesman, felt constrained to exclaim:—"Either the Government have got a policy or they have not. If they have not got a policy it is the bankruptcy of British statesmanship. If they have got a policy, in God's name let them tell us what that policy is."

We are engaged, and rightly and worthily engaged, in Paris at this moment in starting upon a new era of self-determined life for races and communities—none of them more gifted than the Irish—which have been too long denied the right and the power to control their own development and destiny. Some of their cases present difficulties, actual and contingent, from the standpoint of law and order, besides which those which confront us in Ireland fade into relative insignificance. But the Allied and Associated Powers, wisely preparing the road for a real League of Nations, are not going, I venture to predict, to allow themselves to be daunted by those difficulties into withholding or delaying the healing gift of freedom. It should be an object of paramount urgency with all true Liberals that we should do likewise here at home.

There is always room for workers in this world, and the will to advance will certainly find the way.

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