

HOME RULE DISCUSSED AT OXFORD

Mr. Augustine Birrell, Chief Secretary for Ireland, spoke at a meeting of the Oxford Union Society, when the question debated was 'Home Rule for Ireland.'

Mr. P. Gaedalla (Balliol) moved—'That, in the opinion of this House, the time has come when the control of Irish affairs can with safety be entrusted to an Irish Parliament subordinate to the Imperial Parliament.'

Mr. Birrell, who on rising late to speak in support, had a cordial reception. He said questions had been addressed to the Government as to the details of any Home Rule Bill, and complaints made that such information had not been given. They were asked what they were going to do with the Irish members in the Imperial Parliament. Were they to remain there or not? If they were to be removed outside they would not be representative, and therefore would be untaxable by the Imperial Parliament, if we acted on the principle that taxation and representation should go together. If, on the other hand, they were present, what were they to do when purely English or Scotch or Welsh business was under discussion? Well, that was a conundrum which undoubtedly in earlier days it was difficult to answer; but if there were federations, that difficulty, of course, disappeared, if they frankly admitted that Home Rule for Ireland involved the subsequent consideration of what was called Home Rule all round for Scotland, Wales, and for England also. Alluding to the religious aspect of the Home Rule controversy, Mr. Birrell remarked that some of their opponents were thirsting to have an opportunity of putting before the Protestant electors of England, Scotland, and Wales the idea that no Roman Catholic country or community was fit to be entrusted under any circumstances to have control over a Protestant minority. 'Home Rule means Rome Rule' they said. He was the last person in the world to underrate the force of a cry of 'No Popery.' He heard the rumbling of a religious storm only the other night in the House of Lords, though the Duke of Norfolk was there and other great potentates. The McCann case discussion in that serene atmosphere recalled the echoes of 1850 on the Ecclesiastical Titles Bill. He did not wonder at the fears and suspicions of Protestants, particularly outside Ireland, but he said that those suspicions and fears must be allayed in Ireland. He was well persuaded that except in a few

places in the north-eastern portion of Ireland the spirit of religious bigotry was gradually dying down. That it should have done so was not discreditable to the Roman Catholics, when one remembered the long series of penal laws under which they had suffered. Ireland was not the country that people represented it to be, full of bitterness and perpetual disputes. The Irish people were as keen for business as any people he had ever been brought into contact with, and they were not going to spend money on Dreadnoughts in order that they might have a foreign policy of their own.

That was One of the Wildest Dreams, and showed the ignorance of the real nature of the new Ireland that was springing up. The financial difficulty had been raised with the object of showing that Home Rule was impracticable. It was the crux of Home Rule that we should be able to make proposals to the Irish people of a financial character which should be such as to enable them to support their new system of government with some kind of success. The question had to be answered as to what justice demanded should be done and what it was politically wise and expedient to do. Mr. Birrell proceeded: 'The Government are engaged now in an actuarial inquiry without romance, fancy, or anything of that kind, and are trying to find out how the financial position is, which position has completely altered since Mr. Gladstone's second Home Rule Bill. A new scheme will have to be devised if Home Rule is to have a chance of success. That is a thing which you will have to weigh; and, if it is impossible, there will be no Home Rule. The subject is one upon which many people in Ireland have very strong views of their own. I believe, after full inquiry, it will be found quite practicable, though it may be a tight fit, to make financial proposals which will not be open to the charge of being impossible or absurd.' Touching further upon the religious antipathy of Ulster to Home Rule, Mr. Birrell said a great Labor Party was rising up in Belfast, and he believed that before long that would more occupy the attention of the people of the province than the Battle of the Boyne. Dealing with the general character of the proposal, the Chief Secretary said he admitted that Home Rule advocacy involved a great responsibility. At the same time, if they had had a full opportunity of reading the Bill of 1893, it would be seen that what was proposed would be something like that, subject to the alterations and the changes and the modifications which the times that had

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