

THE PROHIBITION PLEBISCITE

DISCUSSED BY GOLDWIN SMITH.

The issue of Prohibition is now fairly before us, and surely we may discuss it as fellow-citizens having the same end in view, without disparagement to each other's character and motives. The policy of Prohibition is questioned not only by the liquor interest but by a great body of people totally unconnected with that interest, friends of temperance and temperate themselves, who are opposed to prohibition because they sincerely believe that besides trenching on personal liberty it fails of its object and always has done, and is likely always to do more harm than good to public morality.

Drunkenness we all abhor and despise. On that subject, opinion which formerly was unsound, is now perfectly sound. It constitutes a social law really more powerful, more certain in its operation, surer in the infliction of its penalties than laws written on the statute book and enforced by the police. The man who is known to be a drunkard is socially and industrially under a ban. Nobody is willing to employ him; he forfeits his chances of marriage; the insurance office shuns him; disgrace and poverty are his lot. It used to be far otherwise. Excess in liquor was once almost a part of hospitality. But it is not so now. This very temperance movement is a proof of the strength of feeling on the question which makes itself felt in all departments and relations of life.

When Prohibition has been tried what has been the practical result? We have a right to ask this when we are called upon to make what all admit to be a very costly as well as a very critical experiment. We should have to sacrifice seven millions of revenue. We should have to kill the capital invested in the trade, amounting, it seems, to fifty millions. We should have to throw out of work thousands of people directly or indirectly earning their bread by the business. We should have seriously to injure the growers of barley, cider apples and grapes. If we admitted, as in justice we could hardly fail to admit, a claim for compensation, another large item would be added to account of loss. We should have to pay for the additional police necessary to guard our immense frontier and to coerce the less settled sections of the population, such as the mining adventurers of the West. We might possibly have to coerce Quebec. We should further imperil the interests of our country by proclaiming it to be under an ecclesiastical and ascetic rule which many, rightly or wrongly, abhor. Without setting material loss against moral gain, we are entitled to proof, before incurring so great a material loss, that we are sure of the moral gain. Prohibitionists themselves, regardless as they may be of worldly interests, compared with the principle, would not wish to see the cause of temperance saddled with the memory of a ruinous failure.

We all, it may be presumed, prefer liberty and the virtue which is freely formed. Temperance in its proper sense is self-restraint, and would cease to exist if abstinence were enforced by law. However, in desperate cases, desperate remedies must be applied. But is the case of Canada desperate? Is Canada a drunken country? Is it not on the contrary, temperate and increasingly so? Have not education, religion, and the teachings of medical science been doing their work? Professor Blaikie thought he was scoring a point for Prohibition by complimenting Toronto on the freedom of its streets from drunkenness. But Toronto was not under the Scott Act.

There have been false alarms. A temperance lecturer once said that there were 10,000 deaths in Canada annually from alcohol. Ten thousand would be more than half the male adult deaths in the Dominion. Even three thousand or four thousand deaths from alcohol, the estimates of the Honorable George E. Foster and the Honorable G. W. Ross respectively, must be very far beyond the mark.

We have tried Prohibition in the form of the Scott Act. County after county adopted the Act; county after county repealed it by majorities larger than those by which it had been past, finding, as there was a large body of evidence to show, that while the Act stopped social conviviality, it increased secret indulgence; that it led to contraband traffic in liquor, to contempt of the law, to perjury, to the evils of the spy system, to disturbance of neighborly peace and good will. Here was a genuine popular verdict founded on a practical trial of the system. Nor was it really reversed by the subsequent provincial plebiscite in favor of Prohibition carried by a majority in the proportion of nineteen to eleven, while only 58 per cent. of the vote was