

THE COERCION POLICY IN IRELAND

DISCUSSED IN WESTMINSTER.

At a recent sitting of the British House of Commons the Coercion policy of the Government in Ireland was the subject of a debate in which Mr. William O'Brien took a prominent part. From our Irish exchange we take the following report:—

Mr. William O'Brien moved the adjournment of the House for the purpose of discussing a definite matter of urgent public importance—viz., the proclamation under the provisions of the Criminal Law and Procedure (Ireland) Act of the city of Dublin and of nine Irish counties since the rising of the House in August, and the danger to the public peace arising from the harsh and partisan administration of that Act. He said that it was a relief to all of them that at last they had come to the end of the unseemly wrangle as to the right of the representatives of Ireland, without suppression from one English party and without patronage of the other English party, to have the affairs of their country discussed, instead of their being driven to whatever sporadic means they might find to express their sentiments. (Hear, hear.) As usual, the Irish Party had taught the old lesson that whatever would not be given with grace might be extorted by other means. (Irish cheers.) In the motion they had charged the Administration in Ireland with partisanship as well as with harshness. The keynote of the charge, and of all that was occurring in Ireland, was that to be found in the statement of the Chief Secretary a few weeks ago—"No Government can settle the Irish land question; it must be settled by the parties interested," and that the action of the Government should be limited to providing facilities to giving effect to any settlement arrived at by the parties. That was one of the most remarkable confessions that ever fell from an English governor of Ireland, and if he had the logic and courage of his convictions it would have been one of the most creditable.

The land question was at the root of all good government in Ireland, and to attempt to settle it except through the United Irish League on the one side, and the landlords' organization on the other, was as if they had tried to terminate the Boer war by opening up negotiations between the old women and children on both sides. (Hear, hear.) When the conference was recently proposed the contemplated settlement was a peaceful one, but again the Chief Secretary had given away the landlords and the landlords had given away him. (Laughter.) The tenants' combination instantly and unequivocally accepted the peace proposal—(hear, hear)—believing that it would be perfectly possible to have a right and friendly agreement and settlement of the land question, that would have been acceptable both to landlords and to tenants. (Hear, hear.) Aye, and, if necessary, without asking the British taxpayer to contribute a single shilling of additional taxation beyond the Imperial expenditure in Ireland at the present moment. (Hear, hear.) If that conference had been followed by a conference between the two English parties and their leaders, such as Mr. Gladstone, in one of his great inspirations, once suggested, there never was a moment when more astonishingly good results could have been brought about in the way of appeasement and reconciliation, but the Chief Secretary had now plunged himself up to the neck in prosecuting one of the parties interested—the party which was ready for peace—(Irish cheers)—and made himself and his removable and his policemen the abject slaves and partisans of the rival combination who were ready for nothing and would hurt nothing except war. The lords of the Landowners' Convention summarily and insolently rejected the negotiations, notwithstanding that the Chief Secretary himself traveled a long distance through Ireland to implore them to save themselves and to save the country. That was the attitude of the landlords, and now they had the extraordinary result that at this moment men who responded to these peace proposals were being coerced and persecuted, and it was the gentlemen who scoffed at the right hon. gentleman's own advice, it was the Landlords' Convention who, by 77 votes to 14, rejected the proposal of a conference. These were the men in whose interests the right hon. gentleman

was prostituting the power of England in order to pander to a clique of selfish territorialists, who were playing their own selfish game of political intrigue and influence at the expense of certain unfortunate landlords, and at the expense of England, for whom they were laying up a fresh harvest of trouble. That was the right hon. gentleman's notion of impartiality and statesmanship.

In the face of the administration of this despotic and exceptional law, they did not forget that it would be unfair to include all the landlords of Ireland in the same breath. There had been some very remarkable developments. He would be a very shallow and stupid Irishman who would doubt that the action of men like Lord Dunraven, the O'Connor Don, Lord Mayo, and Lord Castletown might be capable of producing results which might be of very considerable importance, indeed, to their own class if they were seconded by a Minister strong enough to grasp the situation and fearless enough to look to higher ideals rather than of scoring a point or attempting to do so. These men, undoubtedly, compared not unfavorably in every respect even with those intellectual giants—Lord Londonderry, Lord Ardilaun, and Lord Barrymore (laughter)—who had hitherto had the courage of their opinions. Unhappily, Lord Dunraven and his friends had to deal with a class—and he was afraid of a Ministry—which was not strong enough to stand up to that syndicate of brewers and colliery owners, who were rushing Irish landlords to their ruin. (Nationalist cheers.) He regretted it truly and unfeignedly. If these gentlemen would take a suggestion from him—he would assure them that it was in no petty party spirit that he offered it. Instead of writing letters to the "Times" to convert gentlemen of the peculiar cerebral formation of Lord Ardilaun—(laughter)—they would frankly and honestly join the United Irish League and trust their own countrymen, within three months they would have settled the Irish land question to their own advantage and to the immeasurable advantage of Ireland. They were used to a great many ridiculous misunderstandings in the House, and in this country, but there never was a more idiotic notion than the notion that they clung to agitation for the mere love of it. They were ready, upon just and generous terms, to give more than generous terms to the landlords of Ireland. They did not grudge them, on the contrary they would welcome them, on the simple condition of the landlords recognizing that they were Irishmen instead of their playing the part of countryless half-castes and Anglo-Irish octopuses.—(loud Nationalist laughter)—who had not at the present moment an atom of power or respect in Ireland, and who, he submitted, enjoyed very little more respect in England. The fault or perhaps the weakness on their part was that they had been always too ready to respond with the first genuine touch of kindness. Even the most extreme amongst them was not altogether exempt from that weakness. Be that as it might, under present circumstances there was very little fear of even their extremists being subjected to any weakening because the right hon. gentleman was proceeding in his government of Ireland upon the principle of persecuting the men who were reconcilable and right in the interest of the men who were irreconcilable and wrong. (Nationalist cheers.)

What were the crimes for which the right hon. gentleman had placed Dublin and those other counties under such severe disabilities and degradations? The first fact that he would ask the House to bear in mind was that, broadly speaking, there was no real agrarian crime in Ireland, nothing except the technical crime of freedom of speech which had been created by the Coercion Act, and which even a Unionist so unexceptional as their own County Court Judge O'Connor Morris had confessed to be free from moral blame. If Englishmen would only take the pains of going through the returns of the present time in Ireland, and compare them with the state of bloodshed and terror in reference to which other Coercion Acts were proposed, he was convinced that even

the bitterest of their English opponents would feel humiliated and ashamed that proceedings so tyrannical should be put in force in a country from which crime had been so absolutely absent. If the Government had attempted to pass the Coercion Act through Parliament this session with even their ironclad majority of 139 they could not have got the Bill through the House, and he ventured to say there was no Minister on the Treasury Bench who would be case-hardened enough to propose it, knowing how utterly destitute were the materials to justify it. At the "Times" Forgeries Commission evidence was given that there had been 87 agrarian murders during the three years of the Land League in spite of the heroic efforts of Michael Davitt to arrest them. The United Irish League had been 43 years in existence, and during those years there had just been one agrarian murder in the whole country, and that took place 3 years ago, and it did not take place in the Province of Connaught, where alone at that time the United Irish League was in existence. When the Liberal Government were proposing the Coercion Act of 1882 they produced statistics showing that there had been 9,023 agrarian outrages from 1879 to 1882. He (Mr. O'Brien) had got the latest quarterly returns of agrarian crimes in Ireland, and it was like a certain famous history of snakes in Iceland—snakes there were none. Except in a few threatening letters there were only twenty-one petty agrarian offences returned in the whole country for three months. Under all the important headings there were long columns of blanks from county to county and from province to province. It was exactly the same story in what they called the disturbed counties—long, empty columns, in many cases, without a crime of any sort; not a murder, not an attempted murder; not a moonlight outrage, not an attack on a bailiff or on a policeman; nothing even the imagination of Dublin Castle could dress up to represent any crime in the ordinary sense of the word, except threatening letters, of which he (Mr. O'Brien) himself received within the last week in the House very nearly as many as had been charged against the whole people of Ireland. It was not as if they were making these representations about the state of Ireland. Let him call a better witness. On the 14th March, in that House, the Chief Secretary stated, much to his credit—"Therefore, I have always held it to be my duty to say that of violent crime against the person or property in Ireland, there is less now than in any period of which we have record." (Irish cheers.) Well, grossly though the people had been exasperated, he didn't think it would be pretended that any serious change had taken place since, except, as the House would remember, that it heard that day that no less than five county jails in Ireland had since been closed for the want of any ordinary criminals to occupy them. That was the country where the right hon. gentleman had proclaimed the city of Dublin and nine other counties; that was the country in which they were attacking members of Parliament, their own colleagues of the House, more savagely than they sometimes extended to their wife-beaters and garroters in England. This was the country in which, he ventured to say, during the last twelve months they had attacked more newspapers—they who loved the freedom of the Press—for reporting meetings than had been suppressed in Russia during the same period, and he knew what he was talking about perhaps a little better than the Yellow Journals who were so desirous of giving the Czar a lesson on constitutional matters. These very members of Parliament and these very newspapers and this organization they had got rid of agrarian crime in Ireland. (Cheers.) For the only genuine crime the Government ever put down, they created a hundred. The agents of Dublin Castle themselves were the worst disturbers, and very often the worst criminals; and, as he told the House the other night, there was a police crime which, if it succeeded, would have covered the reputation of that party and organization with mire and blood, and yet they heard the Attorney-General for Ireland really arguing as if the criminal was not the police force, but the man who, in defence of his own honor and the

honor of the country against one of the foulest wrongs, inconvenienced Dublin Castle by attempting to bring that man to justice. They had given them a country absolutely free from bloodshed, or from any deeds which shunned the daylight. They were dealing now, not with a country of moonlighters, but with a country of broad daylight, thanks to the teaching of the United Irish League. They canted about crime being the ultimate end, but the taunt had been stilled on the lips of the accusers. This organization had been nearly five years in operation, every year with decreasing agrarian crime, and in all that time their watchful enemies in Dublin Castle and the landlords' camp had never been able to fasten upon a single deed of bloodshed which, by any perversity of malice, could be traced to the teachings of the organization. (Irish cheers.) There was no fathoming the infatuation of English rule in Ireland. A wise English statesman would frankly and honestly acknowledge the work of the League; he would acknowledge the tremendous step which had been taken—that literally it might be stated that adjectives—strong adjectives—had been substituted for bullets in the agrarian controversy in Ireland. A wise statesman would first go down on his knees and thank his stars that the Irish people had been brought at last to look upon peaceful and combined public action in the open day, instead of the blunderbus and the midnight lodge, for their weapons of agitation.

But what had been the statesmanship of the right hon. gentleman—or rather of the Landowners' Convention, whom he had ignobly, for a man of his admitted mental calibre, permitted to run the show and pull the strings and to direct his performance? The men behind him had been striving to wrest from the people weapons of open and legitimate agitation. They had been trying to persuade the people that an editor or M. P. who fearlessly spoke out public opinion was doing a more dangerous thing for himself and perhaps a more intellectual thing than the man who fired at a landlord from behind a ditch. These men knew that the absence of crime was the League's strength and their own weakness; and, horrible as it undoubtedly was to have to say it, he said deliberately that these men were longing for crime and working for crime, because they knew it was their only hope of putting down the public opinion of their countrymen and of arousing prejudice and passion against them. (Irish cheers.) There was an old legal maxim, "Facit hic protest," and everyone knew that crime would be their ruin, and that was the case and aim of the landlords. The House had heard a good deal about County Court Judge Curran, the gentleman who threw in the face of 23 grand jurors their resolution referring to the peaceful condition of the county. That gentleman, in passing sentence of hard labor upon one of their colleagues (Mr. Haviland Burke), made this remarkable and eloquent statement, "I have some experience of the terrible crime of boycotting in other times, and I deliberately say that as a result of that experience I should far prefer going back to the time when there would be a calendar containing 20 or 30 cases of serious crime, ordinary crime, than to see systematic boycotting practised in any county." That was to say that gentleman would be happier if there were 20 or 30 cases of murder or midnight outrage before him instead of the state of things in which the people were peacefully combined to deal with their enemies. He knew how difficult it was to criticise this gentleman's conduct. The Prime Minister declined to give the House an opportunity of doing so. He did not desire to say anything particularly unfriendly of Judge Curran owing to his earlier life, when he was a conscientious judge, but he was sorry for him, and all he could say was that if he read that statement anonymously he should have thought it a statement more worthy of a ghoul than of a judge. (Cheers.) What were the terrible crimes for which practically they had put an end to trial by jury and with the freedom of the Press, and had been carrying on against their own colleagues in the House? He hoped he had shown it was not really agrarian crime

they were dealing with as of old. It was not a strike against rent as a whole. There was absolutely no trace of any rent strife in any part of the country outside the immediate neighborhood of the De Freyne estate, where it arose out of a set of local circumstances, and without consultation with the governing body of the United Irish League. (Ministerial cries of "Oh," and interruptions.) Who was the gentleman opposite who interrupted?

An Irish member—Mr. Archdale. Mr. O'Brien—Well, he was one of the octopuses, and he was addressing himself to English gentlemen.

Mr. Archdale—Is the hon. member for East Mayo not one of the governing body?

Mr. O'Brien—The hon. member for East Mayo will be mighty well able to speak for himself. I assert most distinctly that in no way whatever was the governing body of the League consulted.

Mr. Tully—Why am I attacked? (Laughter.) Mr. O'Brien—I would refer the hon. gentleman to his own constituency, who, I think, will inform him that the English House of Commons is not the proper place for an altercation among men calling themselves Irishmen. (Irish cheers.)

Mr. O'Brien proceeded to say they had no crime to deal with, no rents to deal with, and that the only crime was that of free speech. There was an easy test. Lord Londonderry was a mine-owner, and a landlord in Ireland. If there was a strike of his miners in England he would like to see Lord Londonderry and his colleagues facing the working men of England at a general election; he would like to see the Prime Minister facing the working men of Manchester; he would like to see the member for West Birmingham facing the working men of Birmingham—(Nationalist cheers)—if for speeches of that character, addressed to strikers in England, men of honored and noble lives, like the member for Monmouth, the member for Battersea—(Ministerial laughter and Irish cheers)—the hon. member for Durham, had been treated as their colleagues had been treated, with the same cowardly and beastly violence and foul play. (Nationalist cheers.) The Chief Secretary had, with a candor upon which he complimented him, heartily made to the House the astounding confession that the city of Dublin had been proclaimed under this frightful Act for no other reason except to enable him to deal with the "Irish People" newspaper. (Nationalist cheers.) Was there ever such a declaration made by a Minister before? As though the capital city of a country which, with its suburbs, counted something like 500,000 inhabitants, should be stripped of the right of trial by jury and reduced to a state of minor seige in order to deal with a humble weekly newspaper. The Chief Secretary spoke in language of glowing eulogy in reference to Mr. Chamberlain. There were two Mr. Chamberlains—one of the present and one of the past. (Nationalist cheers.) He asked Mr. Chamberlain to fancy Birmingham of old times being proclaimed under that Act, and being stripped of the right of trial by jury in order to get at a weekly newspaper in Birmingham, or even the "Birmingham Daily Post," for publishing the speeches of the right hon. gentleman the member for West Birmingham, in those old times, in Mr. Chamberlain's Radical days—(Nationalist cheers)—or rather in his Republican days. (Renewed Nationalist cheers.) They were assured upon distinguished authority that he was preaching doctrines of Jack Cade. But Birmingham was not proclaimed, although Dublin was a very much more peaceful city than Birmingham. They accused the Government of harshness as well as partisanship. Nay, harshness was the very weakest term he could find in the dictionary for the purpose. They did not intend to make any appeal to the House in reference to the brutal and blackguard way in which the Coercion Court was carried out. If coercion there had to be, the more cowardly and beastly it was the sooner every decent Englishman would revolt against it. (Nationalist cheers.) If public opinion was to be a crime, by all means let the Irish not be spared. They were now laying down as their principle of Government in Ireland that the most heinous crime

that they were dealing with in the country was to be a representative of the people—(Nationalist cheers)—and that the more faithful and fearless a representative of the people was the heavier would be the crime, and the heavier would be their disgusting punishment. (Nationalist cheers.) That was their pretty theory of constitutional government in the old times before the Local Government Bill. It was always easy enough to fall back upon the empty and unconstitutional cry—that the elected representatives of the people of Ireland. He noticed that even so late as in Saturday's newspaper Lord Cadogan—(ironical Nationalist cheers, and a Nationalist—"The old humbug")—was repeating that with some questionable taste and gratitude—(Nationalist cheers)—knowing, as he well must, that if he had made that speech the day before he quit Dublin the men he abused had only to raise their hands and he would have been hooted through Dublin to the ship's side. But by their own Local Government Act they had blown Lord Cadogan sky-high, for in the city councils and district councils they had now as intensely localised a representation of the people as it was possible to have. And what was the consequence? In 30 out of the 32 counties of Ireland they were forced to make war on the county councils and district councils. In point of fact, the whole of the new hard labor machinery was directed not so much against the members of Parliament whom they could not disqualify and whom they dared not expel. (Nationalist cheers.) It was directed against the local representatives of the people to intimidate men who have carried on a system of local administration so excellent that the Local Government Board, hostile as it was, had borne testimony to it—(Nationalist cheers)—and, instead of hostility, confessing that they had the people of Ireland against them—all the people of Ireland, all their representatives in every category, in Parliament, in the corporations, in the district councils, and in the county councils—their brilliant idea was to try to terrorise or drive from the public service by these disabilities the men whose private character and public spirit would be a treasure for the good government of any other country on the face of the earth. (Nationalist cheers.) Their treatment of these men was opposed to all the usages of civilization.

Englishmen had been prisoners themselves, and not so long ago either. There was Dr. Jameson, for instance. He was not gloating over that gentleman's imprisonment. The Chief Secretary had sent down to the House a petition in favor of his being dealt with in prison in a civilized fashion—(Mr. Wyndham shook his head as if implying a denial)—but the Irish members who endured like punishment themselves signed it. (Nationalist cheers.) Dr. Jameson who was not the only prisoner of President Kruger, for the same offence he had committed, would have had his neck stretched in this country and been hanged—(more Nationalist cheers)—but he had experienced more clement treatment from the President of the Transvaal, who was but an uncultured Boer farmer. There had been British prisoners of war of late, and they had received better treatment at the hands of the Boers, who were brave enemies, than an Irish member now in the House, and whom he would not mention, when he was suffering the punishment inflicted by the Chief Secretary. (Cries of "Shame.") And yet his Irish colleagues now sitting in the House had while in prison to wash the clothes of abandoned women. (Cries of "Oh!" "Shame," and "Disgraceful," followed by some laughter from the ministerial benches.)

A Nationalist member—Whoever laughs must be a mere cad. (Hear, hear.) Mr. W. O'Brien—The noble lord opposite (Lord Hugh Cecil), whether he be a lord, a gentleman, or something else, I know not, is unworthy to loose the latchet of my hon. friend's shoe. (Nationalist cheers.) He did not want to say anything against soldiers who had to obey orders. They had been sent to the Transvaal to plunder the Boers of their gold and enslave them. (Loud cries of "Question" from the Ministerial benches.)

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The Speaker—The hon. member going very wide in his allusion now before the hour.

Mr. W. O'Brien said he was going to do so. He was on behalf of a country which was wasting away, 430,000 of the flower having vanished from last ten years. No maddening over this were flying away from week, and something to stop this—some adopted to stop this of things. (Cheers.) Government had adopted a stretching Irish measure, and there were like fifty prisoners on the Act. When the Chief Secretary in those prisoners who had police and the bailiffs to hard labor. Not of prisoners now in jail had resistance at all. (Hear, hear.) He did not think that Mr. personally, enjoyed the inflicted in his name. not be pleasant to him, but if he raised his he would bring them to Dublin Castle and the magistrates had appeared the cue from some quarters which degraded the English people inflicted—(Nationalist cheers)—Irish people would defy him, the other day, would not have hard labor of his sentence, if he undertaking not to resign. His friend, the for South Mayo (Mr.) had another term of before him because he attempts of the police places to prevent him his constituents, a brute force towards him would undergo imprisonment and did anybody think Roche, M.P., for East of hesitate to undergo months' with hard labor of them would risk the necessary, in resisting the Government. (Nationalist cheers.) It would be for the Government to send back either a message or a message of war. be the responsibility. Some of them would be the they sent the Nationalist back with a message whether truth nor pity for whom they persisted and ruining, and who had them any wrong. The story might rest assured the Irish people might down by the force of had never yet been along. (Nationalist cheers.) could not do it, and flatter of the Chief Secretary suggest that the right man was likely to succeed. Cromwell failed. (Loud cheers.) The attitude of the Party and the Irish people their enemies in that of it might be summed and ready way in a country was familiar to them in which the stalwart Tipperary were made to landlords—

We have a hand for the friendship. Another to make you You are welcome to what It pleases you most to (Loud Nationalist cheer) Mr. O'Brien's speech hour and twenty minutes

Captain Donelan, in motion, said it appeared policy of the present Government every kind of insult upon the Irish members to find that even Lord Lieutenant, who had been treated with courtesy, had joined in the abuse raised by the Unionist. Mr. Tully and others time the debate, but The Speaker, disregarding cries of "Tully, hear." Mr. T. P. O'Connor, supporting the motion, said for this country, ed to stand in the nation and humanity, to the despotism of Russia, perialism of France had Some of the sentences been passed he characterized.

Mr. Tully, who also in motion, remarked that not been a Coercion Act during the last twenty-five