

# THE WEEK:

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## TOPICS OF THE WEEK.

WHEN Riel's counsel put forward the plea of insanity they practically admitted that there was no other defence. Other defence, in truth, there was none. But the plea of insanity was desperate. No man would commit a crime if he were wise or had a well-balanced mind; and it seems that Riel was a victim of that extravagant egotism which, apart from disease or lesion of the brain, is perhaps the most common source of madness. But to those who knew him best he was so far from appearing insane that they sent for him expressly, to lead them in a most difficult and dangerous enterprise, placed themselves under his guidance, and apparently trusted and obeyed him to the end. His plan of defence and his negotiations with the Indians for their aid prove, to say the least, that he was in full possession of his faculties. On what the recommendation to mercy was founded, the jury did not state. The judge intimated that no attention could be paid to it, and it is to be presumed that he spoke from his knowledge of the mind of the Government. Riel had before experienced the clemency of the nation, though it was extended to him in an irregular way; and as a resident in the States he could have no share in the wrongs of the Half-breeds, or in any excuse for rebellion which those wrongs might afford. Worst of all, he, who knows as well as any one can what the ways of Indians are, deliberately let loose those savages upon Canadian homes. It is true that rebellion does not excite the same abhorrence as mean or mercenary murder; yet there is nothing which society has so much interest in preventing, and prevention is the main object of punishment. The word treason ought surely to be blotted out of the Statute Book if Riel does not pay the penalty of his offence.

It is perhaps to Mr. Blake's social credit that he has a circle of friends who, as our own experience shows, resent the slightest criticism on his leadership with a violence somewhat surprising in philosophic minds. Yet even these devotees can hardly be blind to the fact that the Opposition is

not a success, or shut their ears entirely to the murmurs which are beginning to arise in the Liberal ranks. They must perceive, at all events, that no ground is gained in the elections. Provincial bye-elections are won, at least in Ontario; but these successes only lend emphasis to the discouraging verdict which on the whole is returned by the bye-elections for the Dominion. To all appearances we are doomed, at least for the residue of Sir John Macdonald's public life, to all the evils which wait on Party government without an effective Opposition. What is the cause? It cannot be said to be lack of eloquence on the part of Mr. Blake, who must be allowed, after all, to be the first of Canadian speakers, although the force of his appeals to the people is marred, as a hundred critics have said, by prolixity and by redundancy of detail. His reputation for integrity and devotion to the public interest also stands as high as possible, and his escutcheon is as stainless as that of any party politician can be. It is commonly alleged that he is wanting in "magnetism," a somewhat mysterious quality, and one which, if we rightly apprehend its nature, is perhaps less essential to political leadership than is commonly supposed. It is necessary that a leader should inspire confidence, that his associates and followers should feel that he will be true to them, that he should never send his soldiers where he is not willing to go at their head, that he should be free from ignoble selfishness and from that most fatal and incurable of all kinds of cowardice which is bred by excessive sensitiveness about a man's own position. But supposing magnetism to be anything in the liquoring-up and baby-kissing line we repeat that its value has been overrated. It may be necessary to a mere manager and wirepuller: it is not necessary to a leader. Neither Pitt nor Peel liquored-up or kissed babies, yet both were successful leaders. Pitt was personally high and unapproachable; Peel was to all, but a few bosom friends, reserved and shy. It is understood that Mr. Gladstone's relations with his colleagues and political associates have always been rather cold. The real cause of Mr. Blake's ill-success, we are persuaded, is that to which we have already pointed. He has no policy to propose. He cannot show the people that any substantial benefit would accrue to them from a change of Government. He has no motive power to do for him that which the National Policy did for Sir John Macdonald in 1878. The question of the Pacific Railway would have furnished him with a strong platform, if he could have managed to keep his hands free; but they were tied by his own act; and the country, feeling itself irrevocably committed to the enterprise, paid but a languid attention to his criticisms on details or to his protests against the forms of subsidies, to which in some form or other it was necessary to assent. When he visited the Lower Provinces the people were all struck, as they could not fail to be, by his ability as a speaker; but he left no other impression on their minds; he gave them no definite object for political effort; that they must bestir themselves he told them in eloquent language, but for what he did not say. In his anxiety to recruit his scanty forces he has tried, though with little persistency, some rather equivocal combinations, and had recourse to some sources of popularity from which he could scarcely draw without forfeiting support of a more trustworthy kind. Into the vacuum meanwhile are creeping individual or sectional crotchets, such as Coercive Morality, Prohibitionism, Semi-socialism, with which Liberals of the school that values liberty refuse to have anything to do; and Mr. Blake is in some danger of seeing Conservatism reinforced by a secession to its ranks as those of moral and social freedom. The Fisheries question raises the more general question of the Customs line. This is a great, practical and vital issue. It is the only great, practical and vital issue which now is, or is likely soon to come, before the country. If Mr. Blake can make up his mind to take a bold stand in relation to it he will have a policy indeed; he will be able to hold out to the people a large and certain increase of prosperity; he will be supported at once by the Maritime Provinces and the North-West, nor will Ontario remain long behind. His rival has cleared the way for him by definitively taking Canada out of the Commercial Union of the Empire, so that no commercial treaty with our own Continent would any longer involve any breach of amity with the Mother Country. A second time Fortune holds out her hand to him; if he will grasp it he may yet leave his mark on history.