

THE CAMP FIRE

A Monthly Record and Advocate of the Temperance Reform.

VOL. V. No. 10.

TORONTO, ONT. APRIL, 1899.

25 CENTS PER YEAR

THE SITUATION.

In his letter to the Dominion Alliance the Premier sets out the ground upon which the Government decision was based in the following terms:—"The record shows that the electorate of Canada, to which the question was submitted, comprised 1,233,849 voters, and of that number less than twenty-three per cent, or a trifle over one-fifth, affirmed their conviction in the principle of prohibition."

The conclusion arrived at by the Government is stated as follows:—"In our judgment, the expression of public opinion recorded at the polls in favor of prohibition, did not represent such a proportion of the electorate as would justify the introduction by the Government of a prohibitory measure."

The discussion that has followed the Government decision both in Parliament and outside it, has largely turned upon the question of whether or not the Government was bound by some previous promise and a prohibition majority, to introduce into Parliament a prohibitory measure, and too little attention has been paid to the Premier's argument that the magnitude of the vote was not such as to warrant this action.

The statement of the Premier above quoted, might convey the impression that only "a trifle over one fifth" of the electorate was polled in favor of prohibition. The number of prohibition votes was nearer to one-fourth than to one-fifth of the number of names on the voters' lists. Everybody knows, however, that the number of names on the list is not the number of possible voters. If we deduct the dead men, the duplicates, the absentees, and the other voters who for various reasons could not go to the polls, it is pretty certain that the possible vote would sink below 1,000,000. It is safe to say that at least twenty-eight per cent of the actual electorate voted for prohibition, being a majority of a polled vote amounting to fully fifty-five per cent. of all that was possible.

This was sufficient to warrant the statement made by the Premier on November 2nd that "the vote is under the circumstances a large one." In the contest on the prohibition side there were none of the strong inducements that usually stir men to activity. There were no offices to be filled, no patronage to be secured, no personal benefit to be attained by those who gave their energies to the cause. No one could expect the vote polled under such circumstances to equal the vote polled in ordinary elections.

It must be remembered that in this case electors had to go to the polls specially to vote upon this question. In the provincial plebiscites the voting was at the same time as other elections. The voters were at the polls and had the prohibition ballots tendered to them. This is usually the case with the plebiscites that are frequently taken upon questions submitted to the electors in the United States where such voting is generally necessary to change constitutional state law. The vote in the Canadian Plebiscite was

remarkably large when compared with such votes. It must be remembered also that in the United States the questions submitted are printed on the ballot paper used in voting for political candidates so that every elector deposits a ballot blank or marked, relating to the constitutional amendment submitted.

In November last at the regular California state election, seven constitutional amendments were submitted to the voters. The total number of votes polled for Governor was 284,208, the highest aggregate votes polled for and against any of the constitutional amendments was 149,880, and one amendment that was adopted had polled in its favor only 70,718 votes. The aggregate number of ballots marked in reference to legislation was about fifty per cent. of the number cast, or say about thirty-five per cent. of the possible vote, supposing that seventy per cent. of those actually went to the polls. The state constitution was changed on a vote in which less than thirty-five per cent. of the voters took part, and less than twenty per cent. of the voters recorded themselves in favor of the change, although seventy per cent. of them actually deposited ballots on which the question at issue was submitted.

Hon. Albert M. Todd, Member of Congress for a Michigan constituency recently said that "in his state during ten years there had been twenty-nine referendums submitted to the people and that there was a vote of only an average of ten per cent. of the ballots cast in reference to them."

It would be easy to quote a very large number of such cases all showing that on abstract questions the opinion of the people is expressed and recognized by very small votes.

The City of Toronto has a voters list of persons qualified to vote on money by-laws of not less than 20,000 names. It would naturally be supposed that men would be eager to vote upon the questions which affect the amount of taxation to be imposed upon them. Two money by-laws were submitted to the voters at the municipal election of 1897. The number of votes for and against the by-law aggregating most interest was 7,292. A few months before a similar by-law had been submitted when there was not the element of a personal election to bring the people to the polls, although the voters were directly financially interested in the question submitted and the total vote polled for and against the by-law was only 905.

Even in Switzerland, the home of the Referendum, where people have been trained for many years in direct legislation, and look upon the popular vote as the regular method of settling important questions, the same difficulty is found. The total vote of the Swiss Republic is about 750,000, and the number of votes polled for and against important measures in recent years has frequently fallen below 250,000, or less than thirty-three per cent. of the voters' lists. The Canadian vote in the prohibition plebiscite was forty four per cent.

The percentage-of-possible-vote theory if lived up to would place Sir Wilfred Laurier and his Party in rather an embarrassing position. The Liberal Party claims the right to control the legislation and administer the affairs of the Dominion of Canada in relation to all political questions. The Liberal Party however, is not supported by fifty per cent. of the electorate, nor even by a majority of the electorate. It holds power because of having secured majorities in a majority of the constituencies. Here the prohibitionists have far surpassed it.

In making comparisons between the Plebiscite and the political vote it must be borne in mind that there are seven constituencies in each of which two candidates are elected and in which each elector therefore has ordinarily two votes, only one of which he could use in the Plebiscite. A fair comparison therefore will require a doubling of the possible vote in these seven constituencies to enable us to ascertain the exact per centage that was polled of either the listed vote or the available vote. If this is done we shall find that in the last general election the Liberal Party polled less than twenty-nine per cent. of the voters' list, while Conservatives and Independents polled nearly thirty five per cent. of that vote. If the Liberals win by a majority of the constituencies against a majority vote, have not the prohibitionists a right to win by a much larger majority of constituencies against a minority vote.

Putting the percentages of the voters lists polled in both cases in the form of a table we get the following result:—

For the Liberal Party	28 per cent
Against the Liberal Party	35
For Prohibition	22
Against Prohibition	21

Yet the Liberals win but the prohibitionists are beaten, although a twenty-two and a half per cent vote at a special election is a much stronger expression of public sentiment than is a twenty-eight per cent vote taken under the pressure of party excitement, personal feeling and all the other influences that come into play in an election contest. Anyone who calmly considers the situation will say that there is at least as much public opinion in favor of prohibition as in favor of the policy of the Liberal Party.

In the Provinces of Quebec and British Columbia the Liberals polled a larger percentage of the voters' list than did the prohibitionists. In the remainder of the Dominion the percentages of votes polled stood as follows:—

	Liberal Vote	Prohibition Vote
Ontario	24	27
Nova Scotia	33	34
New Brunswick	29	30
Prince Edward Island	36	37
Manitoba	18	25
Northwest Territories	19	27

The vote for prohibition was a very large vote. The ballot box is a register of public opinion showing the proportions in which the people are divided in support of and opposition to questions

and policies and parties. The doctrine that it is a register of the actual number of persons favoring any policy is altogether new in representative government. Under that doctrine no party in Canada could hold power, no question could be decided, no government would be possible. As used in relation to the Plebiscite it is both absurd and unjust. Government has no right to adopt it in relation to the liquor traffic. That traffic stands condemned in spite of desperate efforts to mislead voters, and even in cases to manufacture votes. It is safe to say that the liquor traffic has polled as many votes as it can really command. Why should the Government declare that the legislation of this country must be in harmony with the views of a minority percentage of the electorate, while the views of a majority percentage are ignored? The majority is not strong enough to prevail, but the minority is to have its way.

The grievance of the prohibitionists is intensified when we consider the fact that their asserted weakness exists in only one province and that there the opposition to them was helped by Cabinet Ministers and active politicians with appeals to motives and prejudices that should never have been suggested in a mixed and united community like ours.

Outside of Quebec the prohibitionists are in a majority of 107,948. They polled twenty eight per cent. of the voters list, while their opponents only polled sixteen per cent. They carried the constituencies of 120 out of 148 Members of Parliament. The average majority of votes in these constituencies was over 1,000. They won a ballot box victory such as has never been heard of in Canada before. The Government has not treated them fairly in proposing to do absolutely nothing in view of this wonderful demonstration of public sentiment.

If Quebec is to have what she wants the rest of Canada must have equally fair treatment. Conservative Members of Parliament must respect the views of their constituents. Liberal Members of Parliament are bound to do the same, though perhaps in the present case they are more formally though not more actually committed to such a course. The expressed will of the people cannot be considered to mean anything except the will of those whose will is expressed. The present Minister of Agriculture when in the presence of his Leader, he laid before his Party Convention the plebiscite policy which was enthusiastically approved, stated the meaning of that policy in the following terms:—"I propose to read the resolution which pledges the Liberal Party if returned to power, to give the people of Canada an opportunity to express their views upon this question, and the Government in power must necessarily carry out the expressed will of the people. There is no doubt that this is what the Liberal Party would do, for we know their pledges can be trusted."