

THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN CANADA.

A general election usually alters, more or less materially, the status of political parties. The most remarkable feature of the recent elections which have taken place throughout Canada is the insignificance of the change they have effected. For all practical purposes the relative strength of political parties remains the same as in last parliament. But there is one result of the election which may in some measure solace the vanquished, if they will accept such a consolation: the verdict at the polls has made clearer than ever before what must be the dividing line between the two parties, if that line is to be a fixed limit which can be definitely traced by honest intelligence, and not an indefinite "debateable land," on which the unreasoning passions and prejudices of men may find an appropriate sphere of interminable conflict.

The circumstances in which the election was held render its decision all the more unmistakable. The general election of 1878 could not be accepted as a deliberate expression of opinion on the righteousness or expediency of Protection. The country was then in the depths of financial despair, and the vote of the people was almost universally regarded as a frantic leap into the darkness of an untried policy, under the conviction that its uncertainties could, at the worst, contain no gloomier fate than that which was endured at the time. There is no such cloud of financial ruin overshadowing the minds of electors now; they are rather dazzled by the glare of a present prosperity. It is true that this prosperity throws a false glamour over the policy of the present Government, as the gloom of 1878 was unfairly charged on the Government of the day. But the people are not now adopting Protection in blind despair. They have made a trial of it, a short trial, it is true, but a trial still, and their vote must now be understood as determining the deliberate policy of this country for some time to come.

It is neither unnecessary nor unimportant to insist upon accepting the verdict of the electors as an approval of Protection pure and simple. Not long ago Mr. Goldwin Smith, in an English periodical, produced a sort of explanatory apology for the increase in our tariff by representing it as not intended for the protection of manufactures, but as a sheer necessity for providing an increased revenue; and he even charged the blame of a tariff so hostile to British interests on the British people themselves, inasmuch as they have encouraged the Canadians in those imperial aspirations which have rendered an increase of revenue necessary. Such a plea for our tariff may pass without challenge among Englishmen, who usually possess but slender information on colonial affairs; but any average Canadian audience would have received the plea as a jest, the merriment of which consisted in its ludicrous discordance with familiar facts.

But if there had been any doubt as to the object of the present Administration when they increased the tariff in 1879, that doubt is entirely removed by the perfect explicitness of the Speech from the Throne on the dissolution of the late parliament. In that Speech, not only is the fiscal policy of the Administration made a subject, it is the sole subject, on which they ask the verdict of the people. In some cases, indeed, the journals and speakers on the side of the Opposition protested against regarding this question as the main issue of the election; but the

country at large paid no attention to their protest. There is not a single other aspect of public policy on which the election can be fairly regarded as implying approval of the Government. Many who endorsed unequivocally the protection tariff, were quite as unequivocal, eighteen months ago, in their condemnation of the contract with the Pacific Railway Syndicate.

The fearlessness with which the Government threw down the gauntlet of Protection was in striking contrast with the timid hesitancy with which it was taken up by the Opposition. Not only did some contend that the prominence given to the subject was merely a *ruse* to withdraw the attention of electors from more important subjects on which the policy of the Government was less likely to give satisfaction to the country; but not a few went the length of declaring themselves in favor of Protection as decidedly as any supporters of the Government. All this vacillation and discrepancy in the tactics of the Opposition formed not only a misfortune to the cause of the so-called Liberal party, but, what is a far more serious affair, a misfortune to the cause of true liberalism. It was fair enough, of course, for any critic of the Government, to refer to other features in their policy besides their protective tariff; but any hesitancy on the part of a professedly Liberal politician to assert the right of every man to freedom in buying and selling, indicates either a want of clearness in apprehending the principles of true liberalism, or a want of courage in their defence. It is to be regretted that even the leader of the Opposition should, in his electioneering address, have spoken as if there might be some conciliation between the restrictive commercial policy of the Government and a thoroughly liberal legislation in regard to trade. From numerous public utterances Mr. Blake has made it evident that he accepts the teachings of National Economy in all their uncompromising hostility to restrictions on the freedom of trading either at home or abroad; but it appears as if the exigencies of party warfare had obliged him to tone down his electioneering utterances to chime in with the overpowering popular clamor for Protection. It is little less than startling to be told by him that Free Trade is an impossibility, that even a liberal trade policy allows protection to some industries, and that the protection which a liberal policy offers is distinguished from that of the present Government merely by being moderate.

It is surely no wonder that an Opposition of such a character should have evoked but a moderate enthusiasm on the part of its supporters. Nor need the Liberal, who has none of the interests of a partisan at stake, feel that any unmitigated calamity has been sustained in the late elections. To him Protection is not a policy which is allowable in a moderate degree, and wrong only when it becomes immoderate; it is inevitably a wrong to the unprotected classes, and it is essentially a delusion when it is supposed to increase the aggregate wealth of a nation. Every educated man who has familiarized himself with the results of scientific thought on National Economy knows that this is the verdict of science on the policy of Protection. The system is therefore doomed, like everything else which is in conflict with reason; and in the long run there is no course for us but to find our way, as best we can, out of the labyrinth of perplexing customs regulations into which we have been betrayed.