

A CHEAP AND SIMPLE FRANCHISE.

BY ARTHUR F. WALLIS.

With the Parliament at Ottawa rests the responsibility of legislating for "the peace, order, and good government of Canada." Pursuant to its charter that august body meets us with its laws in almost every relation of life. It regulates our commerce, promotes or destroys our industries, taxes us high or low as it thinks proper, pledges our credit, establishes the currency, controls the elections and prescribes, through its criminal code, such penalties for wrong doing as shall serve to render life and property secure. In theory the Queen, through her representative, rules the land; in practice, the people, through their representatives in Parliament, are sovereign. It stands to reason that the immense powers which Parliament wields cannot be exercised to the satisfaction of all unless that tribunal is an exact reflection of the popular will. A law-making assembly which does not speak for the people is little better than a tyranny. It is with a view to rendering Parliament representative that all the various devices surrounding the election of its members are provided. First we have the division of the country into constituencies. Then comes the qualification of voters in these constituencies, accompanied by the machinery for testing the claim or establishing the right of the individual to the Franchise. Next, we have the system or plan of voting, and following that the regulations to prevent the pressure of corrupt or undue influences upon the electors. There are, as a matter of fact, four distinct sets of laws governing the process by which every Parliament is elected. It is with one of these, the most important of them all, the Franchise law—a measure that has been for seven years the subject of angry dispute and of frequent amendment—that this article proposes to deal.

We do not enjoy a thoroughly representative system if reflecting and intelligent men who are subject to the laws and who bear their fair share of taxation are excluded from a voice in the government of the country. Nor dare we pretend that we have free institutions if, after the authority to vote has been conceded, it is by any sharp legal process withheld. The Franchise must be given, not grudgingly or of necessity, but as a right. And when given, the machinery under which the right is exercised must be sure, simple, cheap, and, above all things, entirely free from the suspicion of partizan manipulation.

Having laid down these general and elementary principles, let us look at the law as it stands to-day and consider, first, its history, and secondly, its weak points. The original intention of the Fathers of Confederation was that, in the matter of elections, we should imitate our neighbors, by leaving to minor legislatures the duty of arranging constituencies and fixing franchises for the federal house: but, before it was too late, the objection was taken that under this scheme the Parliament would practically be subordinate to the lower bodies and incomplete in itself. Mr. Christopher Dunkin added, during the Confederation debate, that this provincial intervention would produce alliances that would be inconvenient and conflicts that might be dangerous. It was after the presentation of these views that the plan was changed, and the clauses prepared under which