

The Meaning of Coalition Governments.

(Written for "Progress")

In his speech at the banquet recently given to our New Brunswick Premier, it was intimated by that gentleman that his was a "Coalition Government." It will be my aim in this article to show the meaning of this term and at the same time express surprise that a leader of a government should not know better, and also to show him that this is by no means a "Coalition" as historically, if not constitutionally understood. Before analyzing the composition of the present government, collectively and individually, I will give my reasons for dissenting to the Premier's statement, and why his Council is not a coalition, but rather of a composite formation and without any distinctive mark or claim to a party appellation.

Wherever Coalition governments have been formed in any British Legislature, they have been the outcome of great public questions, about which the opposing parties may have long disagreed—such as the English Reform Bill, Catholic Emancipation, Abolition of Slavery, Repeal of the Corn Laws, and of late the Irish Home Rule Bill—and with regard to these provinces, reference will be made hereafter.

Now the above were very great questions, and the whole nation took a most active part in the discussions, particularly in the Press, upon party lines, for and against; and, although there were no resultant coalitions in the House of Commons in order to their passage as the measures came up, the object now in this mention is to show what really constituted grounds and justifications for such amalgamations. "Coalitions" are not advisable although sometimes unavoidable, but never turn out successfully for disintegration is almost sure to follow preconceived prejudices after a time, as will presently be shown by historical references. Probably no two men, as Parliamentary leaders, stood in greater antagonism in the House of Commons during the latter part of the last century, than Charles James Fox and William Pitt, the former a Whig and the other a Tory. Upon a great burning question coming before Parliament in 1780, on which both were in accord there two great antagonists united their forces and formed a "Coalition government." Again, at a subsequent date a measure brought down by the Shelburne Ministry for settling terms of peace between England and France, war between which powers had just terminated, was stoutly opposed by Fox and Lord North, two leaders who had always occupied hostile camps but who on this occasion "saw eye to eye," and that the measure if carried would only result in a cessation of hostilities for the time being, and would sooner or later break out afresh and the sparks for kindling the flame would be contained in several items of the treaty now proposed. A coalition was accordingly formed between the forces of these two great leaders to defeat the Bill. That "coalition" called forth at the time much disapprobation. It may have been ill-judged; and the result showed that the parties had not formed a correct estimate of the public opinion which was an important factor in the problem to be solved. But then the peculiar circumstances of the case were offered by their respective friends as grounds of justification. But as in the Fox and Pitt fusion of parties for the purpose of carrying or defeating certain measures, so with this last "coalition" they both fell to pieces after the convictions of their first love returned to them, and each saw in the future, questions likely to come up in Parliament, upon which they could not possibly agree, such as formed the staple articles of their political faith imbibed by them from sire to son. (The corn law question may be here mentioned as an example.)

There have been no "coalitions" of any great moment in the imperial government since those mentioned. Parties have strictly maintained their distinctive affiliations and sides throughout. What some persons may have thought to be "coalitions" do not come under this cognomen, whatever the resemblance may have been. It does not follow that because the Duke of Wellington took up the cry and embodied it in tangible form on the side of Catholic Emancipation, that in joining with his parliamentary opponents to carry a measure he had always bitterly opposed, that it was necessarily a coalition, no matter how many of his old followers went over with him. To constitute what is called a coalition both opposing parties must agree in common to form a Ministry upon well defined principles, and promises in measures well understood for the best interests of the country, although the spots of the leopard may remain unchanged. The same remark will apply to Sir Robert Peel and the old Corn Laws which he always upheld, but was compelled by force of public opinion, to introduce and overthrow, even the very measures so long disputed by his opponents such as Cobden and Bright. The same may be said with reference to Mr. Chamberlain's recent turn over. It does not follow that the Salisbury Government is a "coalition," because certain leading radicals from the other side have been taken into it. Mr. Chamberlain broke loose from his old party ties because he could not agree with his chieftain's, "Home Rule Bill for Ireland." He and Lord Hartington (now Duke of Devonshire) joined the Salisbury Government, because both sides had all along been "unionists," not because both had differed, and now united for the purpose of carrying or defeating a particular measure. But in any case, the old opinions which each party holds upon very vital issues will come up in time (and the old land marks be rehabilitated. We now return to the direct subject itself in regard to what constitutes a "Coalition Government" in the true meaning of the term.

In or about the year 1842 a Coalition Government was formed in Nova Scotia. The party in power led by Mr. Attorney General Johnston, called "the family compact"—that is the Tory party, as then designated—was invulnerable to all arguments brought to bear against their doctrines and practices by the reform party. Those were the days of political and family exclusiveness. Right or wrong, there was no dislodging the party—they had been entrenched in their strongholds from the first settlement of the Province, while the Legislature was like a foreign body to them. But the opposition led by Mr. Howe was daily gathering numbers and strength in the country, and it now became evident to Mr. Johnston, that his fort was doomed and capitulation must soon follow. Lord Falkland was the Governor (a counterpart of our Governor Gordon both lacking understanding and common sense in the discharge of their executive duties.) The English Government sent out Mr. Paulet Thomson, afterwards Lord Sydenham, one of their number—as a pacificator, and to bring about harmony between the contending parties, if possible. The leaders of the opposition—Messrs. Howe, Uniacke, McNab—were invited by Mr. Thomson to meet him and the Johnston leaders at Government House. This meeting resulted in an agreement to form a "Coalition Government" and the three opposition members just mentioned, entered Lord Falkland's Cabinet, but it was like an attempt to cement iron and clay—there being no adhesive qualities (the radical and tory elements still remained) for the machinery in a year or so fell to pieces, and the war recommenced with more virulence than ever. In a few years after this the Howe party became victorious at the polls and the strength of the old Tory party was broken forever. So much then for the first Colonial Coalition.

In New Brunswick precisely the same political principles had been at work for upwards of forty years. L. A. Wilmot and Charles Fisher were Reform leaders, while Robert L. Hazen, John Ambrose Street and others of that ilk held the reins of government with as rigid hands as those who did so in Nova Scotia. In 1845, or about that time, inducements were held out by the governing party to bring the liberal leaders into their fold. The offer of Attorney General was the bait held out to Mr. Wilmot, a seat in the Cabinet to

Mr. Fisher and likewise the same to Mr. George Silman Hill of Charlotte. Alas the trap sprung and our best men were caught, and the Liberal party received a rude shock and was thrown back for several years longer, but not killed, for it recovered new strength and came out on top as the Howe party did in a few years afterwards. This "Coalition" like its mongrel sister in the other Province likewise came to grief. Party lines were too well defined in those days for leaders of either side to step across without tripping up. The electorate was composed of men of fixed principles—not one thing to day and another to-morrow—and knew the full meaning of "Coalition Governments" and were anxious to avoid them altogether.

Again, in 1865, our friends in Canada were desirous of bringing about Confederation of the North American Provinces. Their leading men—such as Sir John A. McDonald, George Brown; and in Nova Scotia, Sir Charles Tupper, Adams Archibald; and in New Brunswick, Sir Leonard Tilley, Peter Mitchell, John H. Gray—men who had always been of opposite political opinions in their respective Legislatures; but upon this question all could fraternize, and they succeeded in their desires. From that time forward for many years the elements composing the old respective political schools of thought, formed what may be called a "coalition," the Tory party always preponderating in numbers and influence in the successive Cabinets. Like the chameleon which receives its color from the bark of the tree upon which it feeds, so with the Liberal party, its old complexion was altogether changed—even at the present moment, for there has been no true Liberalism since it broke ranks at the time of Confederation. Certainly no staunch member of the old Liberal party can call a government like the present one liberal, that embraces men who had always opposed liberal principles!

Having thus given a few historical instances to show what in our opinion constitutes a coalition government, we now ask the reader to compare the cases mentioned with Mr. Emmerson's interpretation of the term, when he says (as per the St. John Globe of December 3, 1897) "the government is coalition, and we have no desire to sail under false colors." This is mere hyperbole.

In order to prove that his craft will stand good—A No 1 at Lloyd's—the premier will have to produce a better showing than this as to the nationality of his flag. Before he can expect to obtain a register he will be required to answer the following questions:

How long has his craft been on the high seas? Who was her former skipper, and did he understand his business? Did he always keep in deep water? Is the present commander a man of experience and capable of navigating a vessel in stormy weather? How many new planks and patches have been put into the hull within the last dozen years? Is she water tight and in no way leaky? What's her ordinary rate of speed? Does she mind her helm well? Did she ever sail under any other flag than that of "coalition"? How long is she likely to continue sea-worthy? These and such like questions must be answered satisfactorily before a certificate for good sailing qualities can be granted to our Premier and that his vessel is not sailing under false colors. For the present however he might as well tell us that because his government is made up of men of different religious denominations—Baptists, Methodists, Roman Catholics—it must necessarily be a "Free Church" government, as to say that because one man professes to be a liberal and another a conservative—even if there be six of one party and half a dozen of another—it must be a "coalition"—or ask us to believe that a man's looks proclaim his nationality, his financial standing, or the language he speaks! Does it follow because a member of the government says he is a Liberal, or a Conservative, that makes him one? What is the ground of faith upon which he plants his standard? Is he to be judged by the party vote he casts, or by his profession, or by his shouting at election times? If a man's politics are to be judged by any of these signs then we have a motley combination of ideas with regard to the sterling principles of public men. The Premier is not so ignorant but must know that a man may be a Liberal today and a Conservative tomorrow. Liberal members of his government were Conservative not very long ago, but are now Liberals (using the terms in their vitiated sense)—the same can be said of the Dominion Cabinet, but is that Cabinet called a coalition? In this Province,

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however, every member of the government is a coalition in himself, mere shooting stars continually flitting from one quarter of the aetherial heavens to another, and far from having the character of fixed stars, but belonging to the minor constellations. But again, what have been the great political principles out of which has been evolved Mr. Emmerson's Cabinet that he should call it a coalition—coalition for what purpose—to carry what measures for the good of the country; and who are the able men on both sides whom he considered it necessary to make choice to assist him in his gigantic struggle to carry these wonderful measures? On the contrary, were several of his colleagues ever heard of politically and publicly before they were taken into what he calls his "coalition," and how does this medley compare in structure with the historical facts above given? To sum up—the present Government is a mere piece of mosaic made of political odds and ends, of no standard political faith whatever—mere itinerants, whose needs control their principles—they stick up for the side of the bread and buttered; and this is what Mr. Emmerson calls a "Coalition Government."

CONSTITUTIONALIST.

Fredericton, Dec. 23, 1897.

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She—You must forgive me for being so unentertaining to-night, Mr. Sweetly; but I've had such a cold all day, and I'm all ways so stupid when I have a cold.

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"Have you any money?"

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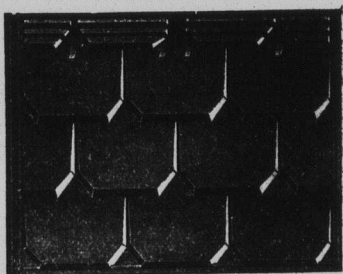
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