

A Rambler's Review

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zie. One drank in great draughts of wisdom sitting, watching, and listening. One thought of vultures and the donkey boys of Egypt competing for the honor and profit of having your legs across the backs of their asses.

Their most successful spokesman was Mr. Higham, a Liberal, who had been trading with Nigeria for forty years. Frankly, he wanted trade. Sir Edward Carson expressed Mr. Higham's view later on, and more brusquely than Mr. Higham himself, when he said that, "the one object of this war is to smash Prussianism, and to smash the interference of Germany with our trade throughout the Empire." Murder will out. Well, Mr. Higham made no interesting speech full of information, but with no gleam of policy. It was very odd to watch how when he referred to Imperial interests, he really meant his own profits and convenience. It was naive and innocent, and not selfish. He simply had never thought it out. Instinctively he assumed: L'Empire, c'est moi, i.e., ma poche—in other words, "my pouch."

It was really an interesting day that Wednesday. The cash nexus was in dispute, and the House was far better attended than usual. There was fighting of the old style. It recalled the grand debate on whether controlled firms should pay the new excess profits tax or not. Listening to Sir Alfred Mond, I thought he had been speaking ever since that other memorable day. Opinion swayed now this way, now that. Finally, Sir Edward Carson's speech destroyed any good impression left by Mr. Higham, and an unexpectedly large majority supported the Government.

The properties are to be sold to neutrals as well as Britishers, because the Government is afraid of combinations, and hopes in this way to keep competition alive. The Liverpool merchants wanted to have the whole swag to themselves, and tried to make us believe that this trophy of war belonged to them. Of course, the properties ought never to have been sold at all. The Government ought to have kept them and leased them. But our war-triumphant Socialism has not gone so far yet as to secure that self-evident business proposition.

That was the chief debate of the week, but there have been some interesting incidents. Mr. Outhwaite is a red rag to the Hunnish bulls. When he gets up they roar like their ancestors of Basha. But he generally gets in. This week he wanted to know the relative proportion of men put into the field by the various allied countries, and was told he was asking an improper question. He had a card up his sleeve, however. Lord Northcliffe had been giving the information to a meeting of the Aldwych Club, and the purpose of the question was to show that Lord Northcliffe could say with impunity what Mr. Lupton and others would have to pay £100 for the pleasure of saying.

The Irishmen are still hostile, and swear to turnout the Government as soon as they can. At present they are improving the pay of the Dublin police, and are demanding that they should be allowed to join the Ancient Order of Hibernians as well as the Freemasons. This is all with an eye upon the future. It is a good thing to have policemen on your side. It is significant that reports of these Irish police debates and comments upon them were censored in the Irish papers.

Mr. Lynch, however, has the double duty to look after Greece as well as Ireland. He holds the King in tremendous contempt, and Mr. Venizelus in

equally tremendous veneration. He wants to know why we have no officially recognized the government of the latter, and the impression is abroad that Royal influences are against that. That is not so. It is not a King but a lady who is troublesome. Poor dear weak human nature! How the weakness of men write the really interesting chapters of history!

I think we are to have a secret session to discuss man-power problems. There have been secret conclaves of editors and journalists with Ministers, and the House of Commons is jealous. So within closed doors we shall probably sit and listen to stories of our successes and failures, our resources and our weaknesses, which the ears of the crowd may not hear and the tongues on the street may not utter. The last secret session was a farce. What we were told we knew before, and what we wanted to know we were not told. Apparently the advantage of a secret session is to enable the Front Bench to look mournful without the country seeing it.

In the House of Commons on Thursday last Mr. Philip Snowden asked the Prime Minister if an understanding had been agreed upon by the Allies that Constantinople, the Bosphorus, and a part of the Asiatic hinterland were to be the reward of Russian services in the war; and, if this was not the nature of the understanding, what were the terms of it.

Mr. Bonar Law: An announcement of this or any other matter on which the Allies may have agreed can only be made in agreement with the Allies.

Mr. Snowden: Has this House and the country no right to know what the objects are for which we are fighting?

Mr. Bonar Law: Yes, they have a perfect right to know, but I think the House of Commons will be willing to give the Government a certain amount of discretion in the matter.

German Peace Terms.

Mr. Snowden asked the Prime Minister if in view of the definite statement of the German Chancellor that Germany was only fighting a war of defence, that she desired nothing more than the security of her national independence and for her legitimate development, that she would restore the occupied territory on the west, and submit conditions in regard to other parts of the war area which might reasonably be made the subject of discussion: and whether, in view of the fact that he announced the readiness of Germany to give guarantees for the future maintenance of peace, he would take immediate steps to promote peace negotiations on these conditions.

Mr. Bonar Law: The summary given by the hon. member of the speech of the German Chancellor appears to me to be inaccurate and entirely misleading. As regards peace negotiations, I can add nothing to the public statements made by the Prime Minister.

Mr. Snowden asked in what respect the summary was inaccurate.

Mr. Bonar Law: In every respect. So far as I can gather, the speech of the German Chancellor was based entirely on the idea of a peace after a German victory.

OBJECTORS IN FRANCE.

Right to Communicate Their State of Health.

Mr. Edmund Harvey (L., West Leeds) has asked the Under-Secretary for War if he would say why, in the case of the seventeen conscientious objectors who were removed under escort to France while still refusing to obey military orders, permission had not been allowed to communicate their regimental postal addresses and the state of their health to their families; whether he was aware that anxiety has been caused to their parents by this absence of news, and whether he would

give instructions that these men may at least be allowed to send news of their health and of their regimental addresses to their relatives, and may be permitted to receive letters from their families. Mr. Tennant replied: I am afraid the facts as stated are not sufficient to enable me to express my opinion as to what took place in these cases, but I know of no instruction which would prevent these men from communicating the state of their health.

FROM A LABOR BENCH.

By J. Ramsay Macdonald, M.P.

Gentle reader! Nobility first this week. Captain the Earl of Winterton has returned from the front and has resumed his Parliamentary duties. Up to now he has shown great interest in Miss Hobhouse and in black labor. He is a war-at-any-price man, and I introduce him now to show the price that he and his friends are prepared to pay.

On Thursday he asked Mr. Bonar Law whether natives had been brought from South Africa to work at military and naval ports in France, and, "if so, will they be brought to ports in this country under the same conditions under which they work in France, and thus release for the army a considerable body of male white workers." "The whole subject is being carefully considered by the Government," replied Mr. Bonar Law. It looks as though "the black squad" were to have a new meaning in British industry. On this announcement there was some buzz on our benches, and the incident closed with an interjection which needs a paragraph to itself.

Mr. W. Thorne: "If all whites did their duty, there would be no need for blacks." After this generous invitation of the Secretary of the Gasworkers, we may expect to see negro gas stokers keeping our civilization going during the winter.

I often think that the most useful part of the Parliamentary day is question time. Then Ministers tell us things—sometimes, and sometimes do not tell us things. This week they have been trying to be silent. Thus: Mr. Lloyd George was asked on Tuesday if there was any precedent for "so gross and deliberate violation of a pledge" as in the case of the men of 41. Says he to himself: "Mum's the word," and said "nuffin." But later on he whispered so that we might not hear him: "It is not." That intervention of Mr. MacCallum Scott's to which I referred last week really has earned a peerage or some equally impressive war honor for him.

Then on the same day silence again shielded a Minister in difficulties. We wanted to know how it was that the War Office was trying to call up men who had been rejected and who had not been summoned for re-examination before the 1st September last. That, too, was a pledge. There were words, words, words. Finally, Mr. Pringle, cutting a long story short and coming to the point, asked: "Is it not the case that the man who knows his legal rights is let off, but that if he is ignorant you take advantage of his ignorance." Thereupon the Minister was affected with a loss of speech.

I linger over Tuesday's questions and produce another treasure. Everybody has now heard of Captain Colthuret who killed Skeffington and invaded his wife when she was putting her children to bed. He is insane, a Court Martial told us, and he is now in a lunatic asylum. "Is he still drawing Army pay?" asked Mr. MacVeagh. "He was retired on the 10th June," replied Mr. Lloyd George. "I did not ask about retiring; I asked about paying," said Mr. MacVeagh. "How can

I say?" said Mr. Lloyd George. "I have been at work all the morning, and I am telling you what I have been told to tell you." "All right," says Jerry, "I'll ask you again." I think we know the answer which like a fugitive rabbit in a hole does not want to come out.

That night from Lord Robert Cecil, we had a lecture on liberty and self-government, democracy and the House of Commons. In spite of the war and Rob Roy's articles, there is a suspicion about that our Foreign Office is not infallible and needs looking after. Some very respectable patriots call it stupid when they are not in war paint, are off the stage away from the pit, the stalls, and, above all, the galleries; and Mr. Ronald MacNeill wanted to be assured that it was handling Greece properly. A good many people don't bother about these assurances any more than they bother about assurances that a man inditing poems to a lamp-post with a bottle in his pocket is a loyal member of a Rechabite tent.

The Foreign Office, however, as that poet would probably do, not only refused the assurances but attacked the policeman—politely, of course, and like a gentleman, but attacked him all the same. Said Lord Robert:—

"We must carry on the government of the country, badly, I agree, but as well as we can do it, and we cannot share that responsibility with the House of Commons or with anybody else—not during the war."

On the 26th July, 1916, the Prime Minister said:—

"When you come to write the history of the war the responsibility for what was done must be shared by all sorts of people, and amongst others by the House of Commons."

"A most improper doctrine," Lord Robert Cecil comments.

I am greatly interested in the problem of Cabinet responsibility. In ordinary times I have no great faith in government by Committees, pace by Bradford friends and Fred Jowett. But we are not normal times. No alternative government is at present possible; there is no open criticism in Parliament; there is a general admission that the "badly, I agree" of Lord Robert's speech is pathetically true. "We claim the right to be allowed to muddle through and to put the responsibility on you in the end," is a doctrine which, to-day, means failure, waste of life, and military and diplomatic inefficiency. It also means that the settlement after the war is to be no settlement at all. But I return to the House of Commons.

On Wednesday the Government introduced to us again its miserable Registration Bill. "It is a poor thing, but it is the best we can do. Please adopt it and let us make the best of it." We wanted to patch it here and there, but the Speaker said "You cannot." Then member after member got up, and with one voice they shouted: "Thumbs down." The Prime Minister had to be sent for. He came in leisurely and sadly. Then he spoke, and pleaded for its life. But the crowd called: "We will not have this thing." So it was led away to the lethal chamber, where disowned products come to their end.

We were sad. What talented parents it had! They are conducting a mighty war and cannot produce a little bill.

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