

PREMIER ASQUITH AND BONAR LAW CROSS SWORDS IN THE FINAL BOUT OVER THE HOME RULE MEASURE

British Premier Hits Out Straight From Shoulder in Stating Position of the Government.

[Below will be found a detailed report of Premier Asquith's and Bonar Law's speeches on the Home Rule bill in the British Commons on February 24th. Since that time Premier Asquith has made his compromise offer, to have Ulster decide by the ballot whether it favors the measure or not. The Unionists have refused this offer, and now ask for a referendum, which is the present situation.]

Mr. Asquith—I am very glad that the fortunes of the bill have been favorable to this motion, as I think this discussion, brief as it must necessarily be, may perhaps lead to the dispersal of some clouds and misapprehensions which seem at the present moment to obscure the political atmosphere. A fortnight ago, in the first week of the session, I indicated in plain language what was and what would be the attitude of the Government in response to the grave appeal to men of all parties which was contained in the speech from the throne. Both the mover and the seconder of the motion have strangely misconceived the attitude of the Government and the party whom the Government represent. They seem to think that we here are to be likened to a beleaguered garrison—(Opposition cheers)—driven by the stress of warfare into an untenable position—(Opposition cheers)—with falling supplies, with exhausted ammunition, with shaken nerves—(Opposition cheers)—and that it is for them—the minority of this House—to dictate the terms of capitulation, and to determine whether we are to be allowed to surrender with or without the honors of war. (Ministerial cheers.) That is a singular inversion, or rather perversion, of the actual condition. (Ministerial cheers.)

What are the real facts. The Government of Ireland bill has been carried through this House in two successive sessions with undiminished majorities, improved and amended, as we think it has been, by the process of parliamentary discussion. (Ironical Opposition cheers.) I have never known a bill of which the same can be said.

At this point there was a loud outburst of ironical Opposition cheers, and evidently some remark was passed from the Opposition front bench.

The Prime Minister—I hope the right honorable gentleman will restrain himself.

Sir E. Carson, amid Opposition cheers and Ministerial cries of "Order," and "Sit down," rose to his feet and said: "Mr. Speaker, all I said was, 'As much as it was allowed to be discussed.' (Opposition cheers.)"

The Prime Minister—The right honorable gentleman mistakes me. My remark was not addressed to him, but to the right honorable gentleman who sits beside him. I only asked him to restrain himself. (Ministerial cheers.)

Mr. W. Long rose to the challenge and another storm of Opposition cheers. He said: "The right honorable gentleman is singularly unfortunate. My right honorable friend did make a remark. I made

the alteration in the position. What was the use of proposing specific concessions—I call them concessions or safeguards, or whatever term you like, however little we thought them needed, when we were told, as we were told over and over again in the plainest possible terms, that no concession of any sort or kind, not even the total and permanent exclusion of Ulster, would in the least degree mitigate the hostility of our opponents to home rule? I am not misrepresenting what took place. The facts are recorded in the Journals of the House. What, then, is the variation in the position today? It is this—so at least it seems to us who sit on this bench, and with whom the primary responsibility rests. After all that has been said and written upon the one side and upon the other during the months of the autumn and the winter we have been led—not to doubt the wisdom or the justice of the proposals that we make before Parliament—but we have been led to entertain the hope that it may be found possible to avoid the double risk of civil turmoil, in the one event, and of national disappointment and despair, in the other, by some concerted and agreed attempt at a pacific settlement. (Cheers.) That is the change, and that is the whole length and breadth and depth of the change so far as the Government is concerned. I said on the first night of the session that we wanted peace, not—though I agree that it is most important—to avert anything in the nature of forcible resistance, but that we might secure for any new departure made in Irish government such an atmosphere of peace and goodwill as will give it from the first a real and a fruitful life. (Ministerial cheers.) With that end in view, and solely with that end in view, as I stated then and repeat now, as the price of peace so understood, the Government are prepared to make suggestions which they hope, without sacrifice of principle either upon the one side or upon the other, may open the road to agreement.

This motion demands that we should produce our suggestions without delay. (Opposition cheers.) If by delay is meant anything in the nature of deliberate procrastination, nothing is or can be further from our intentions. We have no interest of any sort or kind in what is called delay. But, on the other hand, we do think it to be of the highest importance that our proposals should be put forward under such conditions that from the first they can be fully and clearly explained and by this House promptly and adequately discussed. (Ministerial cheers.) Now those conditions, as everyone acquainted with the law and practice of Parliament is aware, cannot be satisfied at this stage of the session until the necessary financial business that has to be done before March 31 is got through. We do not desire, and we do not contemplate, and never have done, any further delay. The Irish bill I agree that before the Easter recess be again presented for a second reading, and that, it appears to us, will be the appropriate occasion for the presentation of our suggestions and for their consideration by this House. (Ministerial cheers.)

Mr. Asquith. Perhaps the right honorable gentleman will be good enough to say in what respect he desired me to accept his advice? (Loud Opposition cheers and cries of "Withdraw.")

The Prime Minister—I am mistaken. I apologize to the right honorable gentleman, and withdraw what I said. (Cheers.) I should be the last person to treat the right honorable gentleman with discourtesy. (Cheers.) I was going to say we had not changed our opinion in the least degree. The Government of Ireland bill is a sound and statesmanlike measure—(Loud, ironical Opposition laughter—which at the same time satisfies a national demand and provides ample securities for the rights and liberties of minorities. (Ministerial cheers.) It is not only a misconception, it is a deliberate misrepresentation of the language which I used on the first night of the session to say that any suggestions we may put forward in the direction of peace are an admission on our part that the bill as it stands is bad or unjust. (Ministerial cheers.)

Nor is there any indication, so far as I can see, that it is so regarded by public opinion outside. (Ministerial cheers.) When the parliament was under discussion I frequently argued that the delay of two years and three sessions which it interposed between the first approval of a bill by the House of Commons and its final passage into law would be found an absolute security, not only against precipitate legislation, but against legislation in regard to which opinion outside—developed by time and by discussion—showed itself hostile to the original decision of the House of Commons. No fair-minded man would say that that has been the case in the present instance. (Ironical Opposition cheers.) I pointed out on the first night of the session that the by-elections in the recess—although, as the right honorable gentleman pointed out to me, they involved a balance of a loss to the Government of two seats—showed an increase instead of a decrease in the aggregate votes polled for home rule candidates. (Ministerial cheers.) Since then during the last week we have had three more elections. In the one case, and the only case in which there was a fair and square fight between the Liberal and Tory candidates, the Unionist majority was substantially reduced. (Loud Ministerial cheers.) In the two other cases, where there were three-cornered contests, the

(cheers)—or who, at any rate, demand that they should be brought to an immediate test. To our friends behind us here I say, if any such assurance is needed—and I do not think it is—that we are not going at the eleventh hour to betray a great cause. (Loud and continued Ministerial cheers and Opposition cries of "To the line.") To those who sit opposite, and who entertain the other view to which I have referred, I say we cannot allow ourselves to be browbeaten into a course which in our judgment will not promote, but will embarrass the purpose which men of all parties ought at such a moment to keep in view. That purpose is, in my judgment, to have Irish self-government, if it can be done—(Opposition cheers)—upon a foundation of consent and goodwill. For my part, I have not said, and I will not willingly say, a word that would make that task more difficult to pursue or more impossible to achieve. (Ministerial cheers.)

The Opposition Leader. Mr. Bonar Law, who has received with Opposition cheers, said: In substance the speech to which we have just listened is exactly the speech which I expected. (Opposition cheers.) It shows that the right honorable gentleman is pursuing a policy which has made his administration famous. It is still drifting. (Opposition cheers.) Every now and then he shows an inclination to take hold of the rudder of the ship for the navigation of which he is responsible, but whenever he feels the winds of hostile criticism—(Opposition cheers)—whistling about his head, the habit which has become a second nature asserts itself, and he drops the rudder and allows the ship to drift at the will of wind or tide. In substance his speech was what I expected, but in form it was different. The right honorable gentleman showed by referring to it that he had read the speech from the throne, but to judge by what I cannot help calling the utterly trivial nature of the speech which he delivered just now, one would think that he had never seen it. He tells us that the three by-elections are no indication of hostility to home rule. (Ministerial cheers.) Whatever honorable gentleman the argument is that "The country is quite evidently hostile to us, but it loves our policy." (Opposition cheers.) If the right honorable gentleman really wished to know what was the real effect of those elections, he had only to be present in this House when the members took their seats, and to watch the hang-dog look—(loud, ironical Ministerial laughter and Opposition cheers)—of that small number of his supporters who had the courage to show themselves. Even take his own argument. He says the country is apathetic. Does he really say that he has the right to force through a bill which will be resisted by force when all that he has behind him is the apathy of the electors? (Opposition cheers.) I do think the occasion deserves to be more seriously treated—(Ministerial cheers)—than it was treated by the Prime Minister.

The Position in Ulster. The object of the motion is to convince, if we can, the House and the country that the policy of drift has become dangerous and may be disastrous. Let the House consider what the position is. For two years the population of Protestant Ulster has been engaged night and day, in arming, in organizing themselves for the avowed purpose of resisting the action of the Government. Such a state of things cannot continue without creating a feeling of excitement which is all the stronger because it is restrained in such circumstances everybody knows anything—some accident entirely unforeseen—may produce an explosion, the effect of which no one can see the end. Only the other day was informed that a number of police constables, one of the volunteer camps in Ulster and asked to see their arms. They came fortunately in numbers so small that they were politely told to go and mind their own business, and they went, but if they had come in forces sufficient to suggest that they meant to enforce their demand, then undoubtedly a collision would have taken place, and no one could have foreseen the end of it. (Opposition cheers.) The danger of the position is fully realized by the Government themselves. In the autumn

the Foreign Secretary spoke of fanatical outbursts, and the danger of an outbreak of disorder. He said, "We shall, of course, put that down." That showed that the Government had had that contingency clearly in their minds, and it showed, I fear, that they have got into such a condition that they look to that as a possible method of escape, and that they think it possible that the people of Ulster will put themselves in the wrong, and that then the Government may put them down without alienating the sympathy of the people of this country. (Opposition cheers.) Evidence reaches me every day that in the rest of Ireland a feeling of unrest is growing up which is daily becoming more serious. An indication was given by the action of the constituents of the leader of the Nationalist party. There was to be a service of prayer for peace, and that was regarded by those constituents as an offence, and steps were taken to mark out those who attended. (Opposition cheers.)

John Redmond. The position in Great Britain is scarcely less serious. For the first time for more than 250 years of the great political parties in this country has solemnly declared that it will assist Ulster in resisting by force what the Government

propose to do. (Cries of "Shame," "Law and order," and Opposition cheers.) The party which has given that declaration is, as it happens, the largest party in this House—(Opposition cheers)—and when we are teaching us to divide the United Kingdom into nationalities it is well to remember that that party has a majority of more than 20 of the representatives of the country, and that it comprises three-fourths of the population and raises more than three-quarters of the revenue of the United Kingdom. (Opposition cheers.) Whatever honorable gentleman opposite may think, I consider that that is serious. We have heard a great deal about the incitement to lawlessness which that means. (Ministerial cheers.) I admit every word of it. It has been in no degree exaggerated. On the contrary, in my belief whatever happens now, however favorable the event may be, the fact that the Government have been arrested in their course by the knowledge that they would be resisted by force has struck a blow at our constitution which will leave its effects for many a long year to come. (Opposition cheers.) The sole question is on whom the responsibility rests. (Ministerial cries of "You.") That is a question which if they get the chance will be decided by the people of this country now, and if you succeed in preventing a reference to the people and the calamities which we dread come in consequence—on the answer to that question the verdict of history hereafter will depend. I am not afraid of that verdict. (Opposition cheers.) Never have political parties in this country faced each other on an issue clearer or more serious. Your contention is that you have authority for what you propose to do. (Ministerial cheers.) You claim that you are a constitutional Government carrying out your function in a legitimate way, and that you have the right to demand the obedi-

ence of all loyal subjects. (Ministerial cheers.) In the words of the late Lord Salisbury, "The title both of kings and parliaments to the obedience of their subjects is that kings and parliaments should observe the fundamental understanding of the compact by which they rule." (Opposition cheers.) We hold that by attempting by methods of which you ought to be ashamed to drive a great community out of the union and to deprive them of the right of appeal to their fellow-countrymen you have broken that compact. (Opposition cheers.) You are excluding the powers which have been entrusted to you by the nation, and all loyal subjects are in duty bound not to obey but to resist you. (Opposition cheers.)

Duty of the Unionist Party. That is a plain issue. Which of us is right? You have, at all events, not shown by your action that you are very confident that you are in the right. Do you suppose that any Government of sane men would have allowed this organization in Ulster to grow up year after year if they thought they had a right to put it down? (Opposition cheers.) In the debate on the first two days of the session nothing seemed to me more utterly amazing than the reception which was given to the speech of Sir E. Carson by the two members of the Government who spoke after him. They became almost lyrical in praise of that speech. That showed, I think, some generosity of mind. But it shows something else. What was the nature of my right honorable friend's speech? It was a clear declaration in the plainest language that if you go on he will raise the standard of resistance against you. If you are right, then instead of falling on his neck and gushing over him you should have held him up to reprobation as one of the worst of criminals. (Opposition cheers and Ministerial laughter.) You may laugh, but surely that is true. What greater crime can any man commit than to risk the lives of others in a rebellion which you say is wrong? You yourselves, as I say, are not very confident in the justice of your cause. Consensus has made words of the way by which he knows that those claims will be enforced. (Opposition cheers.) Well, they have taught us a lesson. For us who represent the unionism of Great Britain, what is the effect of his policy would be to repeat words which mean nothing. It is by convincing the Government that we are in earnest, as they are convinced now, they realize that I have not an exalted opinion of them, but they are not fools—they know that without the expressed sanction of the people they cannot force through a policy which is actively opposed by more than half the nation, so long, therefore, as they are drifting, so long as we do not know what they mean to do, the clear duty of the whole Unionist party, in this House and out of it, is to use any means, so long as we think they will be effective, to make it impossible for them to commit what we believe to be a great crime. (Opposition cheers.)

"A Folly and Crime to Delay." In the conditions I have described, if the Prime Minister has any proposals to make which will bring peace, or which he even thinks will bring peace, is it not a folly and a crime to delay their production? (Opposition cheers.) What is the ground given for their delay? It is that in a crisis like this financial business must be done first. Every section of the House would facilitate the financial business and give him every opportunity of settling up and making his statement. But he does not need to depend on us. What a farce it is. (Ministerial cheers and laughter.) He knows perfectly well

that he can secure peace at any moment without any regard to the Opposition by taking one of two courses. If he has proposals to make which, though they may not satisfy Ulster, in his opinion might satisfy the people of this country, Ulster is in the wrong, then all that is necessary is to table those proposals, and at the same time promise that they will not be enforced till he has received the sanction of the people of this country? Why not? If he is afraid and does not want a general election for any reason—for the sake of his Parliament Act or anything else—let him submit the whole question by itself directly to the electors, and we shall abide by the decision. That is a course so simple and, I should have thought, so inevitable that I cannot understand why he does not adopt it.

The Exclusion of Ulster. Everyone knows that it is Ulster which threatened armed resistance, and that if you satisfy Ulster armed resistance will stop. With that question for four months the right hon. gentleman has been playing (Opposition cheers.) More than four months ago at Ladybank he made a speech which was carefully worded, in which he suggested the exclusion of Ulster. He came to the fence, looked as though he was going to jump it, and he jumped. A Minister cannot play fast and loose with a question like this. (Opposition cheers.) In that debate both the Prime Minister and the Chief Secretary clearly showed that so far as the Government are concerned they are prepared to exclude Ulster. The Prime Minister said he would do anything for the sake of peace which was not against the funda-

mental principle of the bill, and he admitted that exclusion was not against it. (Opposition cheers.) The Chief Secretary pointed to us and said: "You talk of exclusion, but that means the inclusion of three-fourths of Ireland." It is quite evident what happened. They were willing to take that course for the sake of peace. After such a declaration for the Government to make any other proposal in home rule, whatever the conditions it might be accompanied by, with a suggestion that it is to be carried without the express sanction of the people, would be regarded by Ulster, simply as a declaration of war. (Opposition cheers.) It would mean that the people of Ulster would say with truth: "This great injustice is to be inflicted upon us by the majority of our fellow-countrymen, not even by the British Government, but at the dictation of the masters of the British Government." (Opposition cheers.)

Time for Trifling Has Gone. We know the difficulties of the right honorable gentleman very well. It is not merely that these honorable gentlemen hold over him the power of life and death. He has another consideration, and one which, I think, does the Government credit. For eight years these honorable gentlemen have been in office—(Opposition cheers)—even at the sacrifice of what they believe to be the interests of Ireland. They have paid their price. They expect their reward. This, then, is the message of peace which the right honorable gentleman sends to Ulster. "We have incurred a debt, a debt of honor—(Opposition laughter)—and you, the people of Ulster, are the only body which alone can pay that debt." That is the position, and everyone in this House knows it. The position. (Opposition cheers.) Does not the right honorable gentleman even yet realize that though the Nationalist vote may save his Government from defeat it cannot save the

country from disaster? Nor can it save him from dishonor. (Opposition cheers.) He holds in his hand alone the issue of peace or war. (Ministerial cries of "No.") Surely the time for trifling has gone. (Loud Opposition cheers.) If he means war, if he agrees with his supporters who have put down this amendment, as his speech rather indicated, the sooner we and the country know it, the better. If, on the other hand, he believes, as he hopes for peace, why this constant halting between two opinions? Why cannot he say what he means? (Opposition cheers.) In my belief this country today, not from any intentional wickedness on the part of the Government, but from the weakness which will not face the facts, is in the face of a greater danger than that with which we were threatened when Lord Chatham in connection with the American war used the words with which I shall now close: "I wish, my lords, not to lose a day in this urgent, pressing crisis. One hour now lost in allying the ferment in America may produce years of calamity. I will knock at the door of this sleepy and confounded ministry. (Laughter.) I will rouse them to a sense of their impending danger." Lord Chatham knocked in vain. I hope the result will be different today. (Opposition cheers.)

Mr. O'Brien (Independent-Nationalist, Cork) said, speaking for himself and his honorable friends, they were ready, with one vital reservation, to support the Government in any concessions which might propose, and the more generous and far-reaching those concessions might be, the more warmly would they support them. But he regretted that these proposals had been delayed so long. The Government had now recognized what had been pressed upon them again and again for the last two years, that the bill as it stood did not contain any substantial attraction for the people of Ulster. It was the duty of the Government to take the initiative in making an offer, and in entering into negotiation for a settlement. The Government had been in the direction indicated in the King's speech, was taken six months ago by Lord Loreburn for an unconditional peace conference, and ought to have been ready to meet with his old colleagues. (Opposition cheers.) If the appeal either by referendum or election were successful, the Government would have detached the Unionist party from the policy of civil war in Ulster, and they would have furnished themselves with a new and frank ally which he was sorry to say they did not now possess. He wished to press on the Government the necessity of making the more lavish the concessions they made, both for the purpose of satisfying reasonable Protestants and of federalizing the bill, the better the chance of carrying the bill. He was ready for any concessions that would make the Protestant minority an invulnerable power. He was ready to go beyond words as would be any shipwreck of the present unparalleled opportunity for a general and permanent reconciliation between the two countries. If they were forced to choose between the loss of the bill—measure as it was—and consenting to the exclusion of Ulster or any part of Ireland under any disagreeable or frankly shift whatever, then, hard and bitter though the choice would be, it was his way of thinking would be better to go out into the wilderness again.

Mr. Pirie moved the following amendment: "In view of the Prime Minister's stated intention of submitting suggestions for the better solution of the difficulties attending the passing of the Government of Ireland bill, this House avails itself with confidence such proposals, and trusts that they may lead to the peace and contentment of Ireland, and to a permanent settlement of the problem of extension of national self-government." The only amendment which was supported that neither party might feel that their ideals were shattered, and to build up by wise diplomacy a national feeling which both the great parties could accept. He really believed that at the present moment the leaders of the Ulster party were exercising a restraining influence on the inhabitants of that district.

The Motion Defeated. The House divided on Mr. Pirie's motion, and there voted: For the motion 238 Against 311

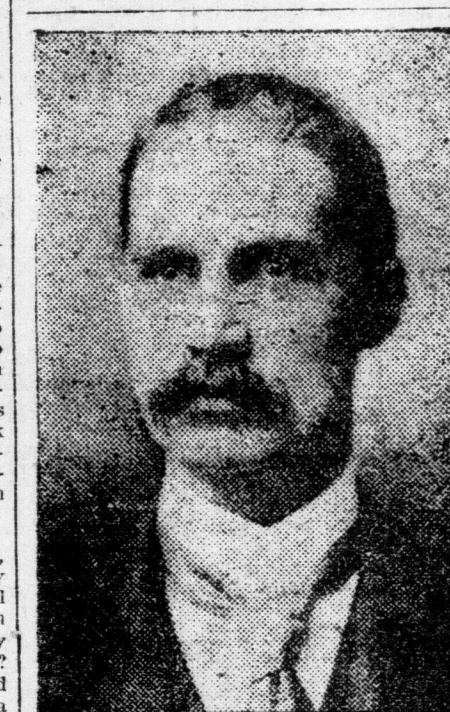
Government majority 73 The Speaker proceeded to put Mr. Pirie's amendment, but when the majority challenged, he said: "If the motion is opposed it becomes opposed business after a vote." There was some laughter, and the amendment was not proceeded with. The House rose at 11:30 o'clock.

Carson Interrupts Speech and Long Gets Blamed for It—The Debate Wax-es Warm.

Carson Interrupts Speech and Long Gets Blamed for It—The Debate Wax-es Warm.



JOHN REDMOND.



BONAR LAW.

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