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EACH.

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Wonderful Value.
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SPECIAL.

"Why De We So Often Depreciate Politicians?"

The Rt. Hon. H. A. L. Fisher, M.P., Ex-Minister of Education, says that "Party Politics are Never so Mechanical as they seem to be."

The Principal of the City of London Vacation Course persuaded the Right Hon. H. A. L. Fisher, M.P., ex-Minister of Education, to give an inaugural address on "Politicians," and by his courtesy it was printed in full in the Teachers' World.

It is the most comprehensive address of the kind we have read for some time, and should give pause to many who glibly talk of "dirty politics." Mr. Fisher proves that our public servants are men of fine ideals. In the course of the address he stated:—

"Politics in this country are remarkably clean. There may be men who go into the House of Commons to advance their private ends, but they must be very few. The vast majority of members of the House of Commons are there to promote the most honourable of ambitions—that of rendering service to the public in an honourable way. People talk about the spoils of office.

"There are in the material sense no such spoils. There can be few people who reach Cabinet rank who could not earn a larger income in other ways, and are not the poorer financially for their exhausting labours. We have, indeed, payment of members. Mr. Snowden, I remember, told an audience that so far as he was concerned, his Parliamentary salary went in postage stamps, and that must be a very general experience in the case of members representing large urban constituencies.

"All the apprehensions which used to be so freely expressed as to the corruption of Parliament through payment of members have been shown to be ill-founded. Parliament was corrupt in the eighteenth century, when it represented the well-to-do classes. It is, thanks rather to the vigilance of public opinion than to any ethical improvement in the race upon which we may congratulate ourselves, remarkably free from corruption now.

"There is, however, a comparatively new manifestation in our political life which requires to be watched. The theory of our Constitution is that the member of the House of Commons represents a constituency. He is a local member, the mouthpiece of local grievances, and where a constituency has a very strong industrial unrest he must be prepared to adjust his views.

"Thus the National Union of Teachers and the powerful Trades Unions and the Federation of British Industries are represented in the House of Commons. The brewers, the farmers, the miners, the textile workers have their chosen spokesmen.

"I do not know that any figure has been supplied for the salaries which are paid to Members of Parliament, by organisations which think it worth while to be represented in the House of Commons, but the total figure must by this time be considerable, and the sums so paid have clearly a more important influence in determining the composition of the House of Commons than the small official salaries which are charged to the Treasury, and in many cases do little more than cover the postal expenses of members.

The Servile Hordes.

"Party politics are never quite as mechanical as they seem to be. People will talk about the tyranny of the Cabinet and 'the servile hordes' who troop to the divisions, and an impression is created that modern politics are lifeless and machine-made, and that the last breath has long since exhaled itself from the dying lips of Parliamentary Freedom.

"There is great exaggeration in all this. Every party is composed of a number of active groups forming and reforming themselves differently with each occasion and exercising differing modes of pressure upon the Minister in charge of a Bill. Nor can a Minister, however powerful and however loyally served by his majority afford altogether to disregard a resolute little knot of men who are opposed to any part of his proposals. Four able men, who act together and work hard, can make an impression on any Parliament.

"They can talk, they can interrupt, they can delay proceedings, they can, if they know the House, rouse all the slumbering prejudices and antipathies of their fellow members against proposals which have in them, as most legislative proposals have, a solid kernel of unpopularity. And every Minister works with his eye on the clock. The Government is always racing against time, and fears delay.

"This, then, gives a minority its chance. Though it cannot, in the end, beat the Government of the day on a large point of principle, it can create difficulties sufficient to impel even the strongest Government to make concessions. Moreover, before a Bill is introduced to the House, the Minister takes stock of the Parliamentary position.

"He considers what his own supporters will stand and what his opponents will stand, and frames his measure in such a way as seems to him to be likely to secure for it the largest measure of Parliamentary support. An experienced House of Commons man,

like the late Mr. Walter Long, could tell in advance with great nicety how different sections of the House would regard such-and-such a clause of a Bill and measure the opposition which it was likely to provoke.

A Series of Compromises.

"A Bill, then, is already a series of Parliamentary compromises before ever it is submitted to Parliament. Department officials, the Minister himself, the Government draftsman, and in the case of important measures, a Committee of the Cabinet, have gone over the measure clause by clause, deleting, adding, amending, with a view of ridding the measure of its more unpopular and unworkable features.

"Nor is the need for circumspection very much reduced by the size of the majority which supports the Government of the day. In committee some of the most formidable criticism often proceeds from the Government side of the House.

"A year in the House of Commons is a wonderful education for anyone. The whole business of the Empire passes before the member for review, and a man must be lost to all sense of intellectual and moral proportions for here were always the visitors in the Galleries, coming, it might be, from every part of the Empire, whose favourable impression was worth the winning.

Rarely Come from Politicians.

"But what is a more potent source of energy and direction is the thought that in politics much can be done for the service of man. The great ideas which move the world and exalt the character rarely come from the politicians. They come from the poets and thinkers and religious teachers and artists.

"They are conceived in meditation and in solitude, and imply a self-sufficiency and freedom of mind to which the politician, exposed to the stresses and strains of active life, can never hope to attain. What the politician can do is something different. It is not his business to be original, to give a new mould to society or to human nature, or to make voyages of discovery into the unknown; but, finding a great conflict of interests in society, it is his mission to attempt to harmonise those interests under the idea of justice.

"It is here that the justification for the existence of a political class is to be found. The politician's mission is to make intelligible the claims of different classes and individuals in the State, and to obtain for them such measure of satisfaction as is consistent with the common weal.

"The great statesmen of the world have had a very concrete sense of human realities. They have not lived in a world of abstractions, but have always kept before them the vision of men and women and children, for the most part poor and struggling, and, therefore, quick to feel the inequalities and imperfections of Government.

To Improve the Common Lot.

"The stuff of which politics is made is in reality very simple. Bread, coal, clothing, meat, houses, and land. To help improve the common lot—this is the ambition which makes, and will continue to make, the biggest and most generous men in any society desire to take up politics.

"There are degrees of public spirit. There are some people in whom it is instinctive and a form of genius. Thus Bentham at the age of eighty-two wrote: 'Never has it happened to me

to witness suffering on the part of any creature, whether of my own species or any other, without experiencing, in some degree or other, a sensation of the like nature in my own nerves.'

"And Mr. Gladstone was nervously affected by the success and hardships of others to an astonishing degree. Now the ordinary politician is not gifted in this way. He is not public-spirited by instinct, because this is a note of moral genius, but he belongs to a profession whose raison d'être is to be public-spirited. It is as much his business to cure the ills of the community as it is the business of the doctor to heal the bodies of the sick. However disagreeable or immoral he may be as an individual, he is enlisted under the banner of the public service, and should be shot as a traitor if he deserts the colours.

"It is right, then, that our politicians should be in the limelight, and that what they say and do should be on record. Nobody is obliged to go into politics; but if a man becomes a politician he incurs a responsibility, and is accountable to the public for his public conduct. I do not think that his private life concerns us except in so far as it stands revealed in his political activity. What we have a right to ask of him is that he should postpone private advantage to the common good. We have no right to pry into his domestic affairs, and I wish that these were not so frequently brought before us.

"The political life is full of glory and abrupt disappointment. Let me close with a quotation from a speech of Oliver Cromwell, delivered on Jan. 22, 1655, when, after the elation of a successful war, the spiritual reaction had begun to manifest itself:—

"When I first met you in this room it was, to my apprehension, the hope-filled day that ever mine eyes saw, as to considerations of this world: for I did look at—as wrap up in you, together with myself, the hopes and the happiness, though not of the greatest, yet a very great, and the best people in the world. And truly and unforgotten I thought so; as a people that have the highest and clearest profession among them of the greatest glory, to wit religion; as a people that have been like other nations, sometimes up and sometimes down in our possessions in the world, but never so low, but we might measure with other nations, and as a people that has had a stamp upon them from God; God having, as it were, summed all our former glory and honour in the things that are of glory to nations in an epitome, within these ten or twelve years past, so that we know one another at home, and are well known abroad, and we be not very much mistaken. We were assured—as I, and truly as I believe many others did think—of a very safe port. . . . But we, and these nations, are for the present under some disappointment."

The artificial flower is now falling from the back of the shoulder.



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