

Our Ottawa Letter

Small Prospects of Free Wheat and Tariff Revision

(By The Guide Special Correspondent)

Ottawa, Jan. 16.—The third session of the present Parliament got away to a slow start yesterday. There was even less in the speech from the throne than had been anticipated. As predicted in this letter last week the naval question has been dropped for the time. About that there will be no disposition on the part of the majority of people to worry. A different view will undoubtedly be taken of the action of the government in absolutely ignoring in the message put into the mouth of His Royal Highness the Governor-General the slightest reference to the passing questions of the day—the need for tariff revision and the high cost of living. A few weeks ago, following a general agitation for a government inquiry into the existing high prices, the appointment was announced of a departmental commission to report on the subject to parliament. The matter was not referred to in the speech from the throne. Reference was made to but five bills which it is proposed to bring down: The redistribution measure, a bill to consolidate the Railway Act, bills relating to the civil service and to trust and loan companies, and a bill to provide for additional representation for the four western provinces in the Senate. The bill relating to the trust and loan companies is the one piece of constructive legislation mentioned.

What About Cheap Money?

The notable omissions, in addition to the naval bill, include the bill relating to agricultural credits, upon which Hon. Arthur Meighen is supposed to have been working; a bill to provide for co-operative trading societies, asked for by the representatives of the Western Grain Growers when they waited upon the government in December; the Highways Act, twice allowed to go by the board because the government would not accept amendments made by the Senate; the bill authorizing the acquirement of I.C.R. branch lines; the bill to extend the scope of the Industrial Disputes Act which was announced a few days ago and half a dozen other measures which it has been authoritatively stated would be a part of the sessional program. It was little to be wondered at that the speech from the throne aroused little enthusiasm and that the members of the House of Commons came back to the lower chamber in such a listless mood that they almost forgot to cheer when the new members were introduced. The spell was broken momentarily when Morrison, of Macdonald, and Truax, of South Bruce, were brought in. A motion made by Hon. Robt. Rogers a few moments later to adjourn the debate on the address until Monday was agreed to without a murmur. There seemed to be a general disposition to think that there was not much in the speech to talk about and that it would be necessary to figure out what had been omitted before there could be any real discussion of the problems with which parliament should deal. The omissions will, no doubt, be drawn attention to by way of an opposition amendment to be moved early next week, and which will be discussed for several days.

Manitoba's Free Wheat Resolution

The unanimous adoption by the Manitoba Legislature of a resolution in favor

of free wheat, it is asserted in practically all quarters, is not likely to have much influence on the situation. When Harvey Simpson, M.L.A., gave notice of his resolution it was received with something like a gasp of astonishment by the protectionists of the East. The news caused not a little apprehension. The natural assumption was that the move in the Manitoba House had been made as a result of a suggestion from Ottawa; that if the three Prairie Provinces would get into line and make a unanimous demand for free wheat, the boon would be granted at the present session of parliament. That belief would undoubtedly still prevail down here had the opposition members of the Alberta Legislature not decided to make a trip to the Capital at the present time. They came to Ottawa as advocates of free wheat, but it did not take more than one interview with the government to induce them to drop this request. It is understood that they were told that such a proposal would not secure a majority of supporters if put to a vote in caucus and that for the present, at least, it would be impolitic to advocate such a policy. What, then, is the explanation of the introduction of a free wheat motion in the Manitoba Legislature? As to this everybody is inclined to the view that it was introduced with an eye to the provincial elections which the politicians say will be held not later than mid-summer. Premier Roblin, in having a free wheat resolution adopted, was simply acting off his own bat. He was playing a clever political game calculated to put his government in right with the farmers. The impression it was intended to create would in all probability have lasted had not the Alberta delegation agreed to drop free wheat from their list of demands, thereby laying bare the real situation. Manitoba Conservatives are, naturally, not well pleased with what has happened, and, as one politician candidly remarked today, "That Alberta bunch has queered the pitch." But such is the game of politics, as played by the men who are supposed to consider the real interests of the people. Unless all the signs are wrong it means that any hopes of the abolition of the duty on wheat at the present session may as well be abandoned. The campaign of education will have to be renewed. An excellent opportunity of converting Premier Borden may be afforded next summer, because it is understood that he has promised, if his health is good, to make a trip through the West after the session is over.

The East Objects

A natural query on the part of readers of The Guide would be as to why the prospects of their request being granted this session should be so poor. The answer lies in the simple statement that, under existing conditions as to representation the sentiment of the East is too strong. If a free wheat proposal were introduced in caucus the government would only be certain of the support of the limited Conservative representation from the three Prairie Provinces. Many Ontario Conservatives feel that free wheat may be inevitable at an early date, perhaps at the next session, but just at present the majority of them are not prepared to support the proposal. Then the powerful protectionist interests of the East are opposed to tariff reductions of any kind. The Dominion Millers, while, perhaps, not openly against free wheat, are covertly opposed to its adoption. They say that, owing to the cheaper rates on wheat as compared with flour, they cannot do a successful export trade; and that the home market should be retained for them. All these powerful influences are at work and nothing short of a fear that the Prairie Provinces are really in earnest will make wheat free. That being the case the abolition of the duty need not be looked for before the pre-election session of 1915; if then. In a word, the question is not one of the prosperity and welfare of the people. It is a question of political expediency, and of political expediency only.

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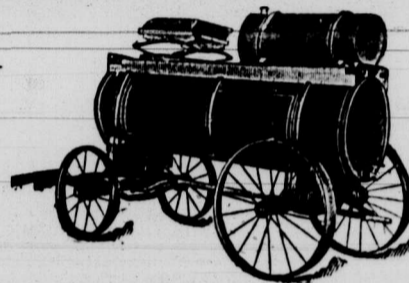


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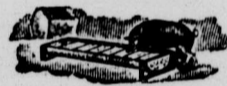
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