

THROUGH A MONOCLE

LIBERALS AND THE COMING ENQUIRY.

MORE politics? Yes, by the great horn spoon. I am taking an interest in politics these days which is more than most of my fellow countrymen are doing. And the particular topic which engages my attention just now is the "grouching" fashion in which the Liberals at Ottawa are receiving the proposal that a series of Commissions shall investigate their conduct when in office. If I were strategical adviser to His Majesty's Loyal Opposition, I would certainly have suggested that they should welcome any proposal that their deeds in the body—politic—be made the subject of an official enquiry with wild shouts of laughter and derision. I would have tried to get them to rejoice openly on the house-tops that their "stupid successors" were about to waste a lot of valuable time and much more precious public attention in hunting for crimes which were never committed and seeking mistakes which did not occur. That attitude might not have been accepted at a hundred per cent. by the cynical populace; but it would surely have looked better as a "curtain raiser" to the inevitable investigation than the grudging and almost fearful position they have so steadily assumed.

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IT may be "good politics" for the Opposition to create the impression that the proposed Commission and its auxiliaries will be fiercely partisan. I presume that that is all the Liberals are aiming at. They do not really expect to draw its teeth or avert the "evil eye." But surely its partisan nature would have been taken for granted by the country without all this emphasis. Our politics being what they are, each party is always as partisan as it deems effective. When it appoints a non-partisan body to perform a task which may have party results, it is because it calculates that this conspicuous departure from the traditional course will gain more than will be lost in not following up promising clues vindictively. Such an investigation as the Conservative Government proposes, was bound to be partisan; and the country will be quite aware of this fact without having its attention called to the fact by the "stage" shiverings and open forebodings of the late Ministers and their friends.

PERSONALLY, I am not opposed to a partisan investigation on such a subject. If the bitterest partisan blood-hound who can be found, is able to drag from its hiding-place any evidence of wrong conduct on the part of the late Government, I want him to do it. What does it matter how much he enjoys his job, so long as he "delivers the goods?" The detective is always a partisan of the side for which he is working. It is his business to find traces of the criminal; and the only thing we do not want him to do is to invent evidence. All the real proof he can bring forth, will be entirely welcome. So I am perfectly willing that this Commission and its "flying squads" should nose about through the departments, and the widely scattered public works, and the manifold governmental buildings, and anywhere and everywhere in which there is promise of an exposure. All we want are the "damning facts," and we want all of them.

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BUT they will not hold the balances true, you may say. Of course not. Why should they? What balances are there to "hold true?" This is not a judicial enquiry in which they are to weigh the good against the bad, and decide whether or not the late government was on the whole worth its "keep." They have no business with the good whatever. They cannot report to us anything in this fashion. "We find that the ——— Department allowed ten thousand dollars to be stolen by friendly contractors, part of which they returned to the party chest; but we also find, by way of offset, that this Department did exceedingly good work in another part of the country which more than wiped out the failure we record." It will not be the business of this Commission to measure virtue against vice, and deliver a verdict as to which predominated. It has nothing to do with virtue. Its sole business is with vice. It is a muck-raker only.

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SO I do not see how it can be too partisan. Its report—when it comes at long last—may be violently partisan, and so entirely miss fire. But who cares about the report of an investigating Commission? It might just about as well—as a rule—print the evidence and omit comment. It might almost better do this when it is suspected of party

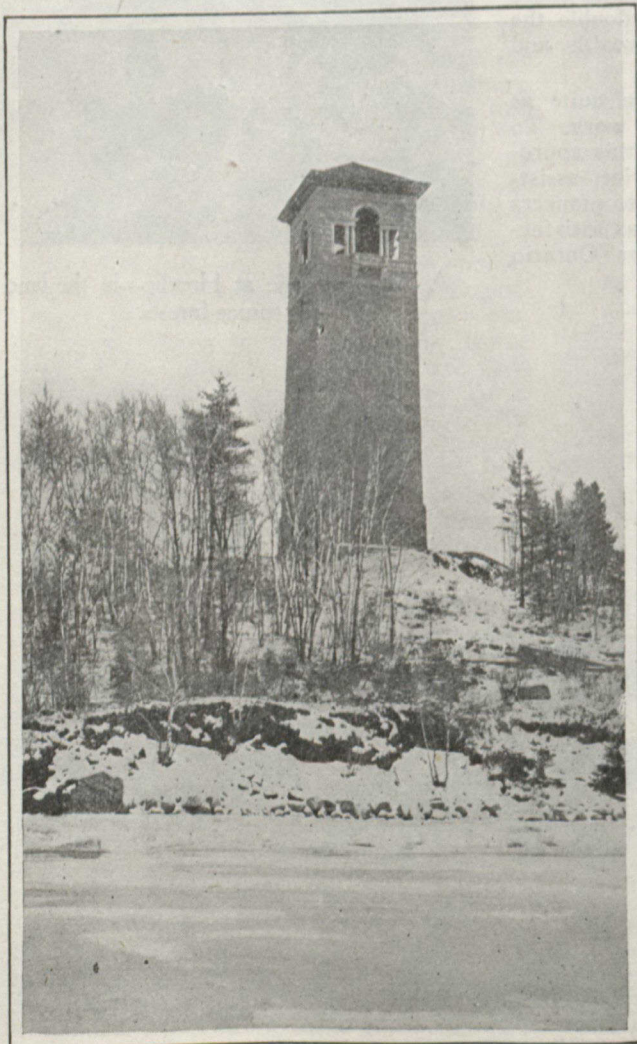
bias. The opposing reports of a Parliamentary Committee show this to perfection. We get a majority and a minority report, reaching quite different conclusions; and we pay absolutely no attention to either. They are merely the addresses of counsel. We ourselves must deliver the final judgment, and we do so on the evidence which we have been reading from day to day. In this case, we will get a majority report only; but the Liberal press and Parliamentary party will probably make up the omission in time. In any event, the mind of the people will have been carried one way or the other as the work of the Commission goes on, and its evidence is printed in the daily press. We shall judge by the facts they uncover; and by nothing else. And no amount of good behaviour can obliterate the effects of one bad deed, any more than you can make the water in your glass clear, after you have flung a drop of ink into it, by adding more pure water.

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WILL they give the witnesses and the documents fair play? Unless they are hopelessly stupid, they will. To refuse a witness a chance to explain, or to suppress part of a document which can afterwards be produced to confront and confound them, would be to entirely kill the usefulness of their work for little promise of profit. It must be remembered that they will not be investigating in an unknown land where no one has ever been but themselves. The late Ministers and their friends will probably know more about the whole subject, after the Commission has spent months on it, than the Commissioners themselves will ever imagine. We may be very sure that no serious falsification of evidence will be allowed. The party organization of the old government has not gone to pieces; and it is for just such tasks that we keep up the expensive dual party system. It will be their business to see that their witnesses are not stifled nor their documents mis-read. Thus I do not see that we will suffer much even if we take the worst possible view of the character of the Commission. But that view may not be the true view. The Commissioners may possibly have the perspicacity to perceive that their best course will be the most rigid fairness coupled with the most thorough enquiry. As for the late government, we will not expect it to have been a Government of Angels. All these things are comparative. The question will be—Have they given us—in the language of the late Sir Oliver Mowat—"as good government as was practicable?"

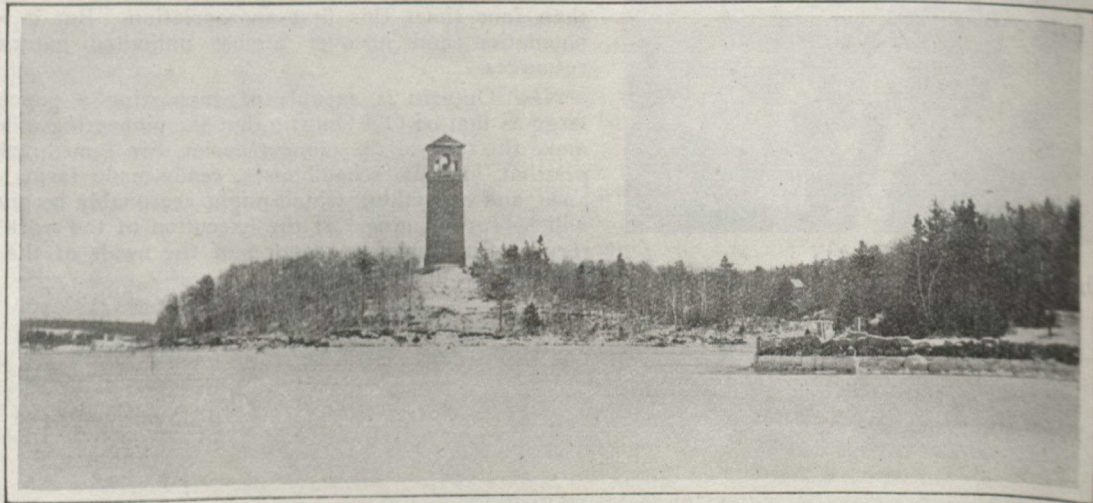
THE MONOCLE MAN.

THE HALIFAX MONUMENT TO RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENT



As it looks from the water (or ice). It symbolises three hundred years of government and architecture.

Photographs by H. W. Hewitt.



Built on a Promontory in the Park donated by Sir Sandford Fleming.



Looking out into the sea from the base of the Tower.