

The Commercial

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THE IMPERIAL TRADE QUESTION.

The question of some sort of a commercial union to include all countries forming the British empire is just now attracting much attention. Mr. Chamberlain's recent utterances in favor of an imperial zollverein have started afresh the discussion of this question. The great commercial conference which meets in London, England, in June next, will draw further attention to the question, and indeed the discussion of this matter will undoubtedly lead to the most prolonged and interesting debate of the conference.

The question of a trade policy for the empire has long been before the British people the world over, but it is a question which has always been considered as more or less beyond the range of practical issues. We are making progress, however, and what may be considered impracticable to-day may be regarded as perfectly feasible in the not distant future. If the British people desire a trade policy which will bind the empire together more closely, from a commercial point of view, there really should be nothing insurmountable in the way of putting it into effect. There would no doubt have to be concessions all around, but if the general principle of the proposal finds favor with the people, there should be found some plan of putting such a policy into practice.

Of course, there are a vast number of local questions of more or less importance to the various divisions of the empire, which would have to be considered. The vastness of the British empire, the great variety of interests to be dealt with, the antagonistic trade policies of the different self-governing countries of the empire, all of which would have to be harmonized to some extent at least, make the question one which at a glance would seem almost insurmountable in the difficulties presented. Notwithstanding these great difficulties in the way, the feeling in favor of closer commercial relations within the empire has been growing, and we believe will eventually lead to practical results. We cannot expect to attain absolute free trade within the empire at the first step. Free trade within the empire is the ideal view of the question, but if attained eventually, it will have to be accomplished by degrees. Free trade within the empire, pure and simple, would mean direct taxation in the colonies, and the people are not ready for that. Direct taxation as a theory is very good, if the people could be made to believe it. As it is, most people would rather furnish their contributions to the national treasury in an indirect manner, notwithstanding that by so doing they have the additional burden of supporting an expensive customs system. Besides, the policy of protection has too strong a hold in some parts of the empire to lead the people to favorably accept a free trade zollverein all at once.

A varying tariff for revenue purposes, within the empire, in the different countries of the empire, would no doubt prove somewhat confusing. It would be lacking in un-

iformity, and the cause of considerable friction at the outset at least. To suddenly change from the high tariff policy of most of the colonies to a free trade zollverein would also no doubt be very confusing at the outset, as well as disastrous to many established interests.

The great difficulty in the way of arriving at some practical arrangement is no doubt found in the varying trade policies of the different countries of the empire. In the United Kingdom we have the free trade principle firmly entrenched, while in the colonies high tariffs generally prevail. We cannot expect the people of the United Kingdom to submit to a tax on foodstuffs, against foreign countries, unless the colonies are prepared to offer them almost an absolutely free market for their manufactures. On the other hand the colonies will not be prepared to offer even a substantial reduction in the duties on manufactured goods, to the British exporters, unless they receive in return preferential treatment in the home markets, as compared with foreign countries. This would mean a tax upon foodstuffs coming into the United Kingdom from foreign countries, in order to afford some advantage to the colonies, whose exports are chiefly foodstuffs, in return for concessions to British manufactures.

The possibility of securing an imperial zollverein in the near future will depend very much upon the future trade policy of the colonies. If Mr. Chamberlain has voiced the feeling of the people of the United Kingdom, there would appear to be reason to believe that a common trade policy for the empire, on a revenue tariff basis, would find favor there. If the high tariff party in Canada is defeated in the contest now entered upon, it will be a great stride in favor of an imperial zollverein on a basis at least tending toward free trade. It has been alleged that the high tariff policy is losing ground of late in the Australian colonies, and if this be true, together with a possible defeat of the high-tariff party in Canada, an imperial trade policy on a liberal basis may not be so far off as many people imagine.

So far as Western Canada is concerned, the question is not a difficult problem to solve. We export breadstuffs and raw materials only, and import everything in manufactured goods. Freedom to buy as well as to sell in the markets of the United Kingdom would certainly be to our advantage.

Another point to be considered is the effect a free trade zollverein of the British empire would have on the world at large. The effect in the main we believe would be beneficial from the free trade point of view. A zollverein including such vast interests all over the world, would certainly exert a great influence in favor of the removal of the artificial barriers which are everywhere erected against the freedom of trade.

BINDER TWINE.

As intimated in a previous number of The Commercial, the price of binder twine will be somewhat higher this year. In fact, it is now understood that prices will average about 1½ cents per pound higher than last year. This advance is due to several reasons, the most direct cause perhaps being the increased

cost of raw material. Another reason is found in the fact that stocks were well cleaned up last year, both in Canada and the United States. The market was sold up closer last year than it has been for some years previous, and the large stocks of old twine which depressed the market in past years, have been about cleaned out. Still another reason for an advance is the well understood fact that there was no money in the twine business last year. The margin on twine was so small that there was no profit in the business. People do not do business for the fun of the thing, -at least not very long. Occasionally we find a branch of trade carried on at a loss, for a while, but conditions will right themselves. Binder twine has been one of the lines which the last year or two has been carried on evidently on too small a margin to prove profitable to the operators, and it is natural to look for a change. Latest reports from the United States bear out the earlier statements of a firm market, and if present crop prospects are realized there is not likely to be any shading of prices.

ARBOR DAY.

In setting aside one day each spring to be observed as arbor day the Manitoba legislature has done something to encourage tree planting. The exercises recently appointed for the public schools, also promise to be of great service in directing attention to tree culture, as well as in cultivating a taste for this class of work. Manitoba as a prairie country stands greatly in need of a little attention in the direction of the cultivation of trees and shrubbery, and every effort should be made to encourage our people to attempt something in this direction. What a change a few trees and shrubs will make about the ordinary treeless prairie farm? What a pleasing effect it has upon the visitor, to find an occasional farm house surrounded by well kept trees and bushes? Our prairie homes often look dreary to the visitor from other parts, on account of the absence of trees and shrubbery. All this could be remedied in a short time if our people would give attention to the matter. The surroundings of our country homes could be immensely improved and beautified at a trifling outlay in money and time, by giving a little attention to the planting of trees and shrubs. In a few years our treeless country homes could be relieved of that bareness and made attractive to the visitor.

The same thing applies to our villages. There are villages in Manitoba and in other parts of our western prairies in which scarcely a tree or a shrub will be seen, and the effect is anything but pleasing to the visitor. It gives the impression that the people have only located there temporarily, and expect shortly to pull out for some other place. In the larger towns in the early days the same absence of trees was noticeable, but of late years a great change has been going on. People have been paying more attention to the beautifying of their premises, and as a result the city is beginning to take on a more home-like appearance. There are now in the city many gardens and walks well supplied with trees and shrubbery.