

## LORD SELBORNE ON DISESTABLISHMENT.\*

To defend the Church of England in what is evidently her extreme peril, a champion of no ordinary might has stepped into the lists. Lord Selborne not only comes arrayed in a panoply of historical and legal learning, but brings with him one of the finest of judicial intellects, the reputation for practical wisdom which belongs to a veteran statesman, and the highest authority as a man. The tribe of iconoclastic pamphleteers, with its haphazard information and shallow commonplaces, at once shrinks abashed before him. His work will be read with extreme eagerness and fervent gratitude by all who have an interest in the maintenance of the Anglican Establishment, a description which embraces Anglicans on this side of the water, who feel that the social position of their Church here is largely due to its connection with its dignified and sumptuous Mother Church in the Old Country. They will find the title of the Church of England set forth and maintained historically, legally, and practically, by the most powerful of advocates.

On the historical part of the question it seems to us, though very interesting, not very useful to dwell. The status of the Church in the Catholic Middle Ages is entirely a thing of the past. There was then but one Church, the divinity and infallibility of which were as certain as the existence of the sun in heaven, so that it was as plainly the duty of a Christian government to burn you alive for heresy as it was to hang you for treason. The State did not establish the Church; it was bound by the manifest law of God, and under penalty of divine wrath, to recognise, uphold, endow, and, as her clergy contended, to obey her. The powers, possessions, privileges, and immunities of the priesthood were secured to them not by human but by divine law; to touch them was not a violation of the right of property, personal or corporate, but sacrilege. Tithe was a tribute which the clergy declared to be assigned to them by the revealed will of God, and the payment of which the State enforced in deference to their declaration. Moreover, the Church in England was not the Church of England, it was a segment of Latin Christendom; its head was the Pope of Rome; when it showed its distinctive character, as it did under Becket, instead of being national it was anti-national, and set the Government of the nation at defiance.

This in time came to an end. Nationality revolted against foreign rule, reason against superstition, morality against clerical vice, the economical interest of the country against the inordinate growth of Church property which was devouring England, as it is now devouring Quebec. By the Reformation, while the continuity of the Church remained in contemplation of the law unbroken, its status and the title by which its clergy held their rights and possessions were materially changed. Severed from its European connection it accepted the Royal Supremacy, and became, we will not say the creature, but an institution and a function of the State. Whatever part may have been formally played by the Bishops or Convocation, it is impossible to deny that the system of the National Church, including its doctrine as well as its ritual, was moulded, re-moulded, and finally adjusted by the government of the Tudors. Had the clergy been allowed their own way, they would simply have crushed all attempts at change in England, as they did in Spain, and by much the same means. The synodal action of the Church at once became weak, was subordinated to the ecclesiastical action of Parliament and the Government, and finally fell altogether into abeyance. With the property of the Church—not only that belonging to monasteries, but that belonging to bishoprics and chapters,—the Government dealt as freely as it did with Crown lands; nor can the status of this property since the Reformation be distinguished, as it seems to us, from that of public property of other kinds. We speak, it is needless to say, of tithes and the ancient endowments. The Church of England has, within the last two centuries, received a great mass of private benefactions, her right of corporate property in which is beyond dispute. With regard to the tithes and the ancient endowments, we cannot, after reading Lord Selborne's powerful, though perhaps somewhat forensic argument, persuade ourselves that a case of proprietary right has been made out against the nation.

The really strong argument—if not for keeping things as they are, at least for dealing with the question in a spirit different from that of violent and vindictive Radicalism,—is contained in this powerful passage.

Law and political changes may shift burdens from man to man, from class to class, and may in a greater or less degree, affect the accumulation and the distribution of wealth. But they cannot produce, among men generally, equality of outward condition or fortune, any more than they can produce equality of bodily strength, or intellectual gifts, or moral qualities and characters. Poor, absolutely or by comparison, the greater number always and everywhere will be, dependent for no small part of

their happiness and well-being upon their relations to other men;—most of them will unavoidably fall below the higher; large numbers will fall below the average level of intellectual power and attainment, and also of moral strength. If a law-giver were devising ideal institutions for a nation, I do not think he could imagine one more beneficial, than that, in every place where any considerable number of people have settled habitations,—in every such place as our parishes are,—there should be at least one man, educated, intelligent, and religious, whose life should be dedicated to the especial business and duty of doing to all the people of that place all the good he can,—ministering to their souls, and ready always to be their friend and counsellor; setting before rich and poor a higher standard of good and evil, happiness and misery, than that of the world; helping them to understand the value of those best gifts which are open to all, Divine and human love, and true elevation of character; organising around him all practicable instrumental means of self-improvement and mutual help; instructing the young and ignorant; alleviating the necessities of the aged, infirm, sick, and needy; comforting, strengthening, and encouraging the unhappy and the weak; warning against evil example, corruption, and crime; and (as far as may be without impairing the force of those lessons) showing mercy and extending succour to the fallen. Such in idea, in principle, and in general intention, is the institution of the parochial ministry of the Church of England. Such, in that degree which is compatible with human weakness, and with the necessity of working on so large a scale by a great number and variety of instruments, it is in practice.

This, as it seems to us, not anything legal or historical, is the best defence of the Establishment. On the other side are to be set the evils of the political connection. The complicity of the clergy in the attempt of the Stuarts against public liberty and the nobler life of the nation,—the Civil War, too truly called that of the Bishops, the persecution, not less perfidious than it was cruel, of the Nonconformists by Sheldon and his brethren under the Restoration, the renewal of intolerant legislation under the infamous leadership of the infidel Bolingbroke, clerical Jacobitism, the stimulus given by the clergy to the American and French wars,—cannot be passed over as mere conservatism. The brief accession of the clergy to the side of liberty in 1688, when their own possessions had been attacked, did not redeem their general conduct. In the small majority which threw out Romilly's Bill, repealing the penalty of death for petty robbery, in the Lords, there were seven Bishops, who represented only too faithfully the political tendencies of their order. We rue at this hour the behaviour of the Bishops in Ireland to the Presbyterians, and to the memory of those wrongs—carried across the Atlantic in the breasts of the Presbyterian exiles,—was due in no small measure the fatal rupture of the American Colonies with the Mother Country. To the deadening influence of political patronage also must be ascribed the torpor or worse than torpor into which the Anglican clergy as a body fell during the last century, and which extended to the Universities, then, unhappily for both parties, in their hands. This, we repeat, is something more than the natural and salutary conservatism characteristic of an ancient institution. If English liberty and justice are good things, the political record of the Anglican clergy is mournful. History proclaims in its saddest, bloodiest, and most shameful pages that the words "My kingdom is not of this world" are not only true, but true in the most comprehensive sense, true of political alliances as well as of political ascendancy.

A change evidently must come. It must come, if for no other reason, for this, that while the Church has lost the power of self-government and self-adaptation, her head now, instead of being an Anglican king, is a Parliament made up of men of all creeds, and of men of none; she is, in effect, unorganised, and without corporate life. The question for statesmen is how the change shall be made with the smallest shock to the spiritual life of a nation of which the Established Church has so long been an organic part, and without impairing the religious reverence, which, as is pointed out in a sermon preached by an eminent Methodist clergyman in Toronto, and quoted by Lord Selborne, in his appendix, has been ingrained in the national character by the public profession of religion. Tithe, we feel sure, whatever may be its legal history, is an impost which must share the doom of church rates, if it is not voluntarily renounced. It has no stronger historical basis, we repeat, than a pretension of the clergy, founded on a misapplication of the Mosaic law, and superstitiously admitted by the State. But the rest—fabrics, parsonages, glebes, Episcopal or Cathedral estates, together with the whole mass of really private benefactions—may yet be retained; and in return for the renunciation of tithe, self government and corporate life may be recovered. This, we apprehend, is the best bargain that can be made, and there is no time for making it like the present. If the Church stands stiffly to all the claims that legal learning and skill can set up for her in the historical Court of Chancery, the result will be that she will go by the board, and popular religion will be involved in the same ruin.

Lord Selborne opens with an appeal, in the form of a letter, to Mr.

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