

Isaac Ibbotson, M.P., Interviewed

The Member for Moptown, Ont., Clears Up Some Misconceptions and Does a Little Talking Out in Meeting About Public Service in the House of Commons

By JOHN MELVILLE

WHEN you are trying to do something, no matter how small, to reform the State, it's an awful thing to be misunderstood. Isaac Ibbotson, M.P., has been misunderstood by his fellow members at Ottawa. I have talked with members who confess that they don't quite know what Ibbotson was driving at in the speech that came so near making him famous not long ago. Ibbotson, you will remember, got up to make a reform speech, which reformed nothing, got the cold shoulder from his own party and warm criticism from the other side, and vowed he never would get up in the House to make another such a speech.

Letters have reached the "Courier" office which show plainly that the writers did not understand Ibbotson. They point out how Isaac might have really done something if he had only done what they advise instead of thinking for himself.

Now what was the reason of this? Either Ibbotson must have lost faith in his own convictions when he attempted to put a reform speech across on the House, or else there is some cocksure machinery in the House of Commons that acts as an automatic gag upon the member who doesn't feel the pulse of his own party. Somehow I fancy that a good deal of the fault was Ibbotson's. He ought to have known that he couldn't get up as plain, obscure Isaac Ibbotson and hope to get away with a reform speech without using a megaphone. Any man who undertakes to speak without the backing of his party in the House has one awful contract. He needs to be a more or less illegitimate crank who doesn't give a rip what ridicule he gets, or what tommyrot he may seem to be handing out. He must be more than a critic or a constructive reformer with a conscience. He must be an all-on-fire enthusiast who naturally plays to the gallery and has in his mind's eye just how that fool reform speech he intends to make will look when it's translated into black scareheads five columns wide.

Now I think it all over I candidly don't believe Ibbotson is that kind of man. What would Martin Luther have done if he had been quietly reasonable? How would Frank Carvell, M.P., ever manage to get the ear of the Commons if he didn't slangwhang somebody on the other side of the House just as though he had him in the prize ring? What would R. B. Bennett do if he should get up and talk like a perfect Chesterfieldian gentleman? Would George E. Foster ever have got the halo of the chief debater in Commons if he hadn't laid down the law every time he got up with the ferocity of a blacksmith lambasting a red-hot horse-shoe?

NO, I realized that Ibbotson had been altogether too humble. He had not learned how to play the role of sublime egotist. He had got up to make a big speech without ever having opened his mouth in the House before, and refused to talk through the party megaphone.

This conclusion seemed inevitable from the tone of one of the letters which came from a very reasonable member, as may be seen from the contents:

"The point is well made that a lot of time is wasted by members of Parliament during Session. Many are here with some reluctance and at considerable sacrifice, and are more interested in their business life than in political questions. For the student, the House of Commons, with its library and its close intercourse with men of wide experience, versed in political affairs, gives splendid opportunities. The best speakers in the House are those who are deep readers, and who read not only on the subjects under actual discussion, but whose studies cover the general range of literature.

"The speeches of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Mr. Foster, and Dr. Clarke, among others, have this literary touch which makes them different from other speeches, and gives them a personality wholly distinct. The member who is a student is at once recognized, and the judgment of Parliament is impartial. There are no wise men in one party who are not so regarded in the other, and the light-weight is known to everybody.

"The new member is not expected to make slashing attacks or to lecture the House. It has been said that every member should speak at least twice in each Session after careful preparation. He is wise not to speak too often. If he does not speak in his first Session he is likely to be a silent member for the rest of his political career. He is listened to with interest about things of which he has knowledge. His views on reform are not important until he has earned the respect of the House, which can only come through study, seriousness in debate, and tempered language. Perhaps the mistake which Mr. Ibbotson made was in keeping quiet for a number of Sessions, being recognized as a silent member,

and then attempting a reform speech. He doubtless has some useful knowledge derived from reading and from personal experience, which would have been listened to with interest and would have entitled him to a position among members.

"If there is another Mr. Ibbotson who has ideas of reform, and who has not yet spoken in the House, he had better have a talk with his party leader, and he is sure to receive sympathetic consideration and advice. The road to a high position in the public service is clear to the man who is diligent.

"Mr. Ibbotson's failure was not due to his allegiance to his party, but to the fact that he did not use his opportunities."

I FELT that Ibbotson should be made aware of these criticisms. Having business in Ottawa last week, I managed to come across the member for Moptown in the rotunda of the Russell House.

I must confess that he was a different Ibbotson to the man I had known at school and back on the farm. He wore a cloth hat and a neck muffler and a Sparks Street overcoat and heavy overshoes. And he had an oddly pensive gleam in his grey eyes somewhat sharpened by a mild cynicism.

"Have a cigar?" I offered him one. "I have some letters to show you."

"Oh, concerning my speech?"

He seemed supercilious.

"Trouble with you writer people," he went on, "is, you are governed by impressions."

"You didn't like my article, then?"

"Oh, yes, you told part of the truth. But you didn't get the high lights where they all belonged. In fact I don't know that articles of that kind do much good. You don't get the real psychological proportion. You made far too much of my speech. It was a rotten speech. I'll probably never make another—not on that subject, anyway. Besides—why did you drag the farm in so often?"

He seemed to be on the defensive.

"Well, it does us all good to get back to the land once in a while. Most of those fellows in the House don't know a cant-hook from a handspike. Do they?"

He gave me a limpidly cold stare.

"But I'm not a farmer," he said, icily.

"More's the pity," said I. "You were a good farmer once. You'd be a bigger man than you are if you could chuck the lawyer and speak right out once in a while as a farmer should. Look at Thomas MacNutt. He's got as good a head as most of the lawyers in the House, and he has a pretty good opinion of most lawyers. But he'd rather talk the philosophy of the farm than anything else. Look at Andy Broder from Dundas. Isn't he as striking a character as any man in the House?—and a real, old-fashioned farmer he is. Michael Clark—who ever thinks of him as a doctor or merely a free trader? He knows how to top off a stack of oats as well as any farmer in Alberta. But perhaps you'd like to see these letters?"

"I should."

He read the first very impassively.

"I see your point," he admitted. "I should have spoken about horses and cattle. I know them. But I don't consider Parliament a debating society. I don't regard the party system as of great value in developing members. I decline to talk to the party leader, because he has too many men to talk to already and he can't afford to talk about things that don't help the party by making campaign or parliamentary material directly for party advantage. I don't want a high position in the public service. What I want is to see Parliament itself take a high position as an organization of national government. If my being a silent back-bencher and working like a log-bee on committee for the rest of my parliamentary career would help that along, I'm quite willing to pay that price for it. I don't want the spot-light."

NOW he was up and doing, I determined to prod Ibbotson along. I said: "But some men must do centre front on stage. We can't have government by mediocrity."

"Oh!" he said. Then, again. "Oh! Oh! That's just where you and I are going to differ."

Ibbotson's ancestors must have been some sort of martyrs; most likely Covenanters.

"It's these spot-light specialists, sir, that keep the House from developing. These are the men that play hob with democracy in the Commons."

"Oh, what do you mean by democracy?"

"Anything that isn't the hierarchy of a political creed or a party."

"You mean, democracy in each party?"

"Yes, but more. What's to hinder the real democracy of government being recruited from both

parties? Why shouldn't such a democracy agree to differ with either government or opposition when they saw fit, and play the very devil with the whips and the party leaders? That's what I want."

"You think they could do it. But how many, for instance?"

"Twenty. They can be got."

HE came as near suggesting a drink as ever he had without actually doing it. Ibbotson was excited.

"Look!" he went on. "How did the biggest men on either side get the prestige they have? Didn't the party demos literally shove them to the front, just as soon as they showed they had the ability?"

"For instance whom?"

"Well, take one of the most recent elevations, the Solicitor-General. Meighen never could have got where he is if he had depended entirely on either his ability or his conscience. He had both. But by nipping in every time he got a chance, first on poppycock issues, and presently as his blood got warmed up going after somebody on the other side, and after a while tackling a real big issue, he found himself so egged on by the party that he simply had to be expected to do the spot-light whenever he was needed."

"How about Foster?"

"Oh, he'd be in the limelight if he were down in the Antarctic with nothing but penguins for an audience. But unless Parliament is either really or allegedly corrupt he has no platform. George is a natural born knocker. He dominates the party once in a while, but never leads it. He has no particular use for the democracy."

"Take Michael Clark?"

Ibbotson thrust out his overshoes.

"He's the untamed exponent of a single idea. Michael is the free trade brain-storm for the party. I guess whenever Liberalism takes free trade off the shelf—"

"Well, they've been dusting it off a bit lately."

"They have. But if they should ever find it tactically an advantage—"

"Whom do you mean by 'they'?"

"Why, the leaders, of course. I don't assume there is any democracy; neither is there real individualism or freedom of thought. No. If the Liberal leaders ever chuck free trade into the cellar, Michael Clark will be like a broncho in a treadmill. All the same I like Michael. And the trouble is, the House as it stands now could hardly do without him."

I BBOTSON went on off his own bat now to spot out the individualists who had arrogated to themselves the right to do the heavy thinking for the rank and file. These were the men, he said, who had been picked by each party to relieve the rank and file of democratic thinking and had been encouraged to play up their own individualities, very often brilliantly to be sure, but often at the expense of much time, public money and grey matter in the back benches. He did not pretend to say how far each of them had been either a creator of force, or the expression of a machine. But he made very clear his belief that these perhaps twenty or more men had been compelled by the constitutional indolence of the party system to make themselves felt on behalf of the others.

"It's just the same as professional baseball," he said. "These men are the players. The rest of us are merely the grandstanders."

"But," I asked him, "is there no room for such men as yourself?"

"You mean can such mediocre men as myself make any dint on the party machine? None whatever, sir. A man can't be independent and remain in Parliament. He may break out and talk independently once in a while, but he soon gets a crimp put in him."

"But suppose twenty such men as yourself were picked by both parties to do some special lines of democratic thinking, as you call it?"

"That could be done. There are lots of subjects that such a body of men might master for the benefit of the House and the country at large and quite independent of mere party. But I'm not anticipating the millennium."

I HANDED Ibbotson letter number two, the one from an ex-minister. He read aloud one very pregnant passage:

"The theory and practice as well has been, that the provinces of the Dominion should have a certain quota of representation; and the result naturally is that men who are selected to represent certain constituencies feel it incumbent on them to advocate and conserve as far as may be the rights of their respective sections and constituencies. It is therefore necessary for them to deal with matters that are of interest to those whom they represent in particular but which are seemingly of no interest in other sections of the Dominion. A little thought given