

Through a Monocle

IT is always a nice question between a Government and an Opposition when criticism becomes obstruction. The aim of a Government is naturally to get business done. It is willing to answer reasonable questions and recognises that the country expects it to answer arguments; but when the Opposition has once stated its objection to a certain policy, the average Government then thinks that it would well become that Opposition to permit the division bells to ring. That it should go on arguing with a view to awaking the people to an appreciation of the issues at stake, usually seems to the ministers-in-a-hurry to smack of obstruction. But the people seldom object to obstruction except when they see its results in the aggregate. That is, if the obstruction is carried on in a lively manner, they genuinely enjoy it while it is going; but when Parliament has occupied their attention for a certain length of time, they become impatient at its "lagging superfluous on the stage" and want to know why it has not finished its business and gone home.

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It is good public policy to give an Opposition all the latitude it desires in criticism. To stifle criticism is not only to permit rascality to work its will in office but to deaden public interest in public affairs. Down at Washington, they have seriously limited the freedom of criticism, on the plea that they could in no other way get their business done, with the result that the American people have wholly lost interest in such criticism as is permitted. When the leader of the majority party can shut off criticism at will, and only such critics as he will listen to can get the floor, a busy people naturally conclude that they need not waste their time on such pre-arranged debating. A free Opposition is the only Opposition to which the electorate will pay any serious attention; and the withdrawal of public attention from public business is, perhaps, a greater loss than the semi-gagging of an Opposition.

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But an Opposition ought to remember that it is its chief business to keep the attention of the country. Here was a mistake made by the ablest man who ever led an Opposition in Canada—Edward Blake. Mr. Blake could not get over the impression that he was addressing a court. He would get up a case which would have convinced an entire bench of judges, and he would take five or six hours to lay it before the House of Commons. Then he would wonder mildly why the Government did not resign. But the truth was that his case was so elaborate that the real court of public opinion had not listened to it long enough to catch more than its drift, while the shorter and livelier defence of Sir John Macdonald had entirely erased any impression it had made from the public mind. The great Blake had failed to remember that he was addressing, not a court, but the mutable multitude who have not more than half an hour a day to give to the national business. An Opposition should talk in head-lines. It should feel itself governed by the restrictions which limit the prolixity of an advertisement writer.

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Thus when the Opposition members delay the business of Parliament until the people have grown weary of reading the reports of "the House," they have defeated their own purpose. They may have been doing good work, and they may have kept the public interested in quite a lively manner; but when the show must drag along for weeks after this interest has flagged, they will find that the last impression of weariness is about all that the session has left with the average busy citizen. The short, sharp debating of the British House of Commons is much more effective. The Opposition speakers there manage to get their case before the people in the course of a single afternoon or evening; and then the House is free to get to other business. This is good political tactics—to say nothing of the time and patience saved. For the Opposition may be certain that when the dragging sessions of Parliament begin to get on the public nerves, the blame will be laid at their doors. The people will never think of

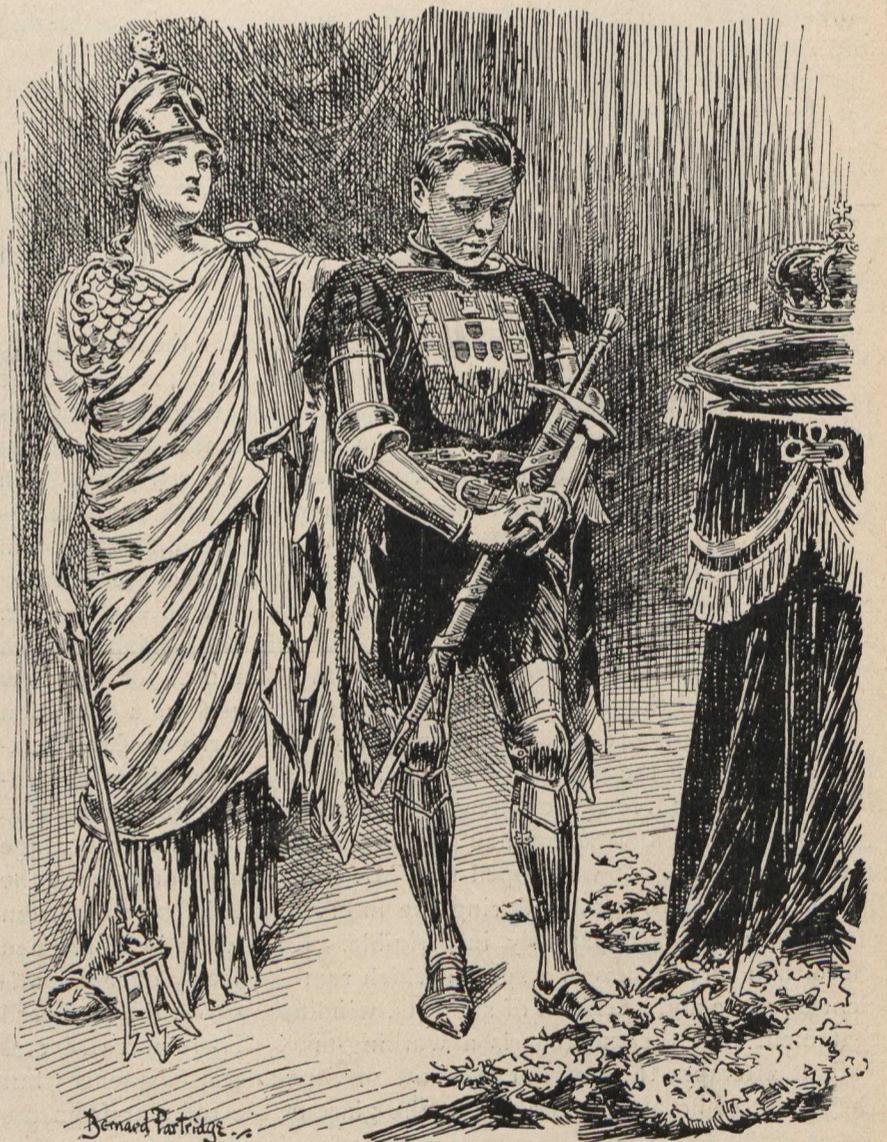
blaming the Government; for they will know that no Ministry will take longer to the discussion of the business it has decided to put through than it can possibly help.

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It is utter nonsense, however, to condemn an Opposition because its programme is more critical than constructive. It is the first and most frequent duty of an Opposition to be critical of the constructive and administrative programmes of the Government. Its very criticisms of the constructive features of the Ministerial programme, constitute a constructive Opposition programme; for these criticisms are presumed in the case of all serious statesmen to indicate the sort of constructive measures that they would introduce if they were in power. An Opposition may be a very good Opposition, indeed, and yet it may not propose any very violent variation from the programme which the Ministry professes to follow. But it may propose to take that programme far more seriously and really to do what the Ministry only makes a pretence of doing. Undoubtedly, it is a strong card for an Opposition to have a strong constructive programme to propose. The Conservatives had such a card in the National Policy in 1878; but neither the Federal Liberals in 1896 nor the Ontario Conservatives at the last elections had anything of the sort. It is the party which provides the constructive programme which must stand the fire of the campaign; but it has the advantage of choosing the battle-ground.

Nidimporte

"COURAGE!"



Bernard Partridge

—Punch.

The English artist presents a pathetic picture of the Young King of Portugal in his sudden Royal responsibility.