SMITH, GRIFFITH, CHURCHILL TRIO OF GREAT SPEECHES

In the British House of Commons—Lively and Somewhat Bitter Debate on Balfour's Motion to Censure the Government—Strong Language by Strong Orators—Wit and Sarcasm Galore.

THERE was a "full-dress" debate in the British House of Commons on the occasion of the motion by Mr. Balfour, censuring the Government for advising the King to create some peers to carry the veto bill. Mr. Balfour and Mr. Asquith led off in mighty speeches. Three remarkable addresses followed from Mr. F. E. Smith (Conservative), Mr. Ellis Griffith (a Welsh Liberal of much promise) and Right Hon. Winston Churchill, home secretary. They are worth reproducing as samples of British parliamentary speaking on a high level, though more than usually acrimonious:

Mr. E. F. Smith said that text-books were pointed to as authority for the proposition that the Prime Minister was justified in the advice he gave to the Crown. But these same text-writers had laid it down that it was the duty of the Prime Minister chivalrously to guard the prerogative of the Crown with the same jealousy as he would guard his own honor, and not to prostitute it for party purposes. —(Opposition cheers.) The prime minister had spoken of Lord Grey's statement in the House of Lords. He would supplement that by a statement made by Lord Grey on March 11,1892, not when he was doing what less distinguished people had done—bluffing. —(Opposition cheers, and a Liberal member, "The Halsbury dinner.") Writing privately to a colleague, Lord Grey said: "It is a measure of extreme violence. There is no precedent for it in our history, the case of Queen Anne's peers not being in point. It is a certain evil, dangerous in itself as a precedent."—(Opposition cheers.) What was Lord Broughram's opinion of the transaction? "I question whether I should not have preferred risking the loss of the bill rather than expose the constitution to the hazard oof subversion. We should have obtained a compromise by doing so." He might also quote the words of the Duke of Wellington —"They played a game of brag with me, and I gave way."—(Laughter.) This was the Government's precedent. The prime minister had advised the sovereign to tempt the men by rewards to go to the House of Lords in order to give dishonest votes. (Opposition cheers). They were not persuaded by money—that was the cruder and minor form of illegality, which we had carefully set up courts of law to prevent. The form of corruption was more subtle than in the case of those wealthy democrats who in the last twenty or thirty years had coupled denunciation of the House of Lords with the entry at its doors.—(Opposition cheers.) The prime minister was advising the crown to enable him to say to the large army which was said to be on the list of the patronage secretary (the Master of Ellbank)—"We will give you what you want if you will pledge your word that you will do what our previous Liberal peers have not done, and carry out what you are sent there to do." (Opposition cheers.) A Liberal paper that day had described the 74 to 76 Liberal peers who had responded to the desperate ultimatum of Lord Morley as "Live Liberals." (Laughter.) Under what stimulus were they galvanized into vitality? (Laughter.) They remained, like Achilles, in their tents, and did not discover the liveliness of their Liberalism until it became necessary to prevent their colleagues in the House of Commons from following them to the House of Lords. (Opposition cheers and laughter.)

Mr. Redmond a Dictator.

But why waste the time of the house—(ministerial cheers)—by pretending to treat the matter as a constitutional question, when it was really a political question from beginning to end. The prime minister gave this advice because his master, Mr. John Redmond, ordered him to do it. (Opposition cheers.) The prime minister was no more an independent and conscious force than a satellite revolving round a larger constellation. (Opposition cheers.) It was a perfectly well understood commercial transaction. The prime minister sold the propagative for a finance bill. (Opposition cheers.) Would Mr. Redmond inform the house positively and explicitly whether before the last general election he was informed by the prime minister of the guarantee he had obtained from the Crown?

Mr. J Redmond (N. Waterford): I did not intend to intervene in this debate—(Opposition laughter)—but I may be allowed to answer the question at once. The honorable gentleman must not be aware of the fact that the question was asked me the other night here, and publicly, and I gave an explicit and categorical denial to the statement. I hope he will accept it, as his colleagues did oon that occasion. (Ministerial cheers.)

Mr Asquith: If the honorable gentleman tells me that neither from the prime minister nor from any other minister was he made aware before the last general election of the general tenor of this conversation with the Crown I accept it—(cheers)—and I can only condole—

Mr. Redmond: I think that is extremely unfair. (Ministerial cheers.). The question was put to me the other night and I categorically answered it, and I asked you, Mr. Speaker, to insist upon an honorable member accepting my statement. I have repeated that statement now. I ask the honorable gentleman to accept it. If he does not accept my statement then it is a matter of indifference to me.—(Ministerial cheers.)

Mr. Smith: Of course, I accept without any measure of reservation at all any positive statement of fact which the honorable gentleman has made. It is a little difficult in a question and an answer, when the house is excited, to appreciate quite how precise the honorable gentleman's denial was. At any rate, (Mr. Smith went on), making all allowances for the denial which had been made by Mr. W. A. Redmond in regard to his New Zealand statement, the fact remained that he, having the advantage of some communication with Mr. John Redmond, had stated that it was common knowledge that the pledges had been given by the King. From beginning to end of this trouble the Government would have accepted any settlement which would have enabled them to carry Home Rule without an appeal to the constituencies, and they would have accepted no settlement which did not allow them to carry home rule without an appeal to the constituencies. (Opposition cheers.) Why was it that the prime minister had changed his views so much?

Are the Peerages Being Sold?

No more discreditable incident in the life of any minister of the crown had ever been established than the inconsistency between the prime minister's previous declarations as to taking office without a majority independent of the Irish vote and his position as he sat in the house that day. (Opposition cheers.) Ten years ago the prime minister was exchanging acrimonious speeches with the leader of the Irish party. Was it now suggested that ten years was the limit of the prime minister's consistency? (Opposition cheers.) On the subject of home rule the prime minister had boxed the whole political compass. What had changed him? The desire for office and nothing else. (Loud Opposition cheers.) Where was the process to end—the process of peermaking on behalf of which the prime minister had invoked the prerogative of the crown? The honorable member for Swansea (Sir A. Mond.) an apt mouthpiece for Welsh noncomformity, had welcomed the threat to create peers as enabling the Government to carry Welsh disestablishment. The member for Waterford Mr. John Redmond) welcomed the use of the prerogative as a means of carrying home rule. Supposing the House of Lords exercised their suspensory power for eighteen months, was there any reason why the Welsh or the leader of the Irish party should not advise the creation of peers to meet that difficulty? It was plain that if the leader of the Irish party went to the prime minister with such an intention the prime minister, by his speech that day, had made himself bankrupt on any answer to the demand. No one who agreed with the constitutional argument of the prime minister could take any other view. A plain answer was needed to a plain question. Were the Government taking money for these peerages? (Loud Opposition cheers and some cries of "Lord Northcliffe"). By whatever party in an individual case a contribution to party funds was taken in exchange for an honor the practice was wrong. (Ministerial laughter.) Did the patronage secretary agree to that proposition?

The Master of Ellbank: You had better ask your own chief whip.—(Loud ministerial cheers and laughter, and cries of "What does a privy councillorship cost?")

The Unionist Disagreement.

Mr. Smith pointed out that whether done by one party or the other, the giving of honors in exchange for contributions to party funds was wrong, and he had always urged that view. He greatly regretted that some members of the House of Lords were not proposing to do what he considered to be the logical conclusion of the views which they had hitherto expressed, and which he understood they still held. (Ministerial laughter and cheers.) He regretted it profoundly, and he noted some indications in the Liberal press which were not wholly lacking in instructiveness. The Liberal press had been good enough to take the leader of the Opposition and Lord Lansdowne under their special protection — (ministerial laughter.)— and had discovered qualities and merits in them wholly unsuspected by the writers. (Renewed ministerial laughter.) They thought the time had come to take off the mask, and in the "Morning Leader" on Friday a somewhat interesting statement appeared, the time of its appearance being arranged, he supposed, in relation to the completion of the list which Lord Lansdowne had given to the prime minister was his contribution to the revolution. (Loud ministerial laughter and ironical cries of "Traitor.")

The Speaker: I must ask the honorable member for Banbury (Mr. Fiennes) to use some control. (Opposition cheers.)

Mr. Smith, proceeding, said the "Morning Leader" had said the vote of censure was a little superfluous and unconvincing, because the House of Commons knew the true complicity of the leaders of the Conservative party in the passage of the parliament bill in the House of Lords. That would be the case which honorable members opposite would make in years to come when the Opposition were agitating for the repeal of the veto bill. Another policy might have led to different results.

Bluff All the Time.

It would have been wiser not to have given way to this campaign of bluff. Two days ago the statement was made in the "Daily News" that whatever else happened before the parliament bill went back to the House of Lords, the prime minister and the cabinet had made up their minds that they would take no risks in the House of Lords, and that the peers would be created right away. It had been bluff first, last and all the time. (Opposition cheers.) If they had insisted from the start on the creation of peers he entertained the gravest doubt as to whether they would be forthcoming, and he would not have hesitated to invoke the undoubted right and power of the committee of privileges to inquire into the legality of hireling creations of that kind.(Laughter and cheers.) If he were told that the logical outcome of a policy of that kind was another creation he would say he did not share the pessimism of the prime minister, because he believed the country would still respond to a declaration of war against the party which sold their master for thirty pieces of silver.—(Ministerial laughter and cheers.)

Mr. Ellis Griffith on the Opposition.

Mr. Ellis Griffith (L—Anglesey) said that from the last part of the honorable gentleman's speech it appeared that the party opposite were censuring each other. (Ministerial laughter) Was this vote of censure a means of covering the rowdyism in the Commons and the revolt in the Lords in order to try and convince the electors that there was some unanimity on the Unionist side? What need the Government care for a vote of censure which emanated from two hostile camps such as they saw opposite? (Ministerial cheers.) They did not want to prove their hatred of the Government, but to demonstrate their love for one another. (Ministerial laughter.) Did the vote of censure come, to quote the words of the "Observer," from "the fools who fight or the wise who flee?" What did it matter to the Government whether it came from wisdom on a hedge or from folly in a ditch. (Loud ministerial laughter and cheers). He thought the honorable member had reached the limit in vituperation. That was the worst of living in a ditch or a gutter—one got the language common to his place of residence. (More ministerial laughter.) Was this vote the official act of the Opposition? Lord Milner accused them of impotence and vacillation, and said they facilitated an outrage upon the constitution. (Ministerial cheers.) Lord Halsbury, speaking of the titular leaders of his party, men who had put him in high office, had said that he would as soon go to them for advice as to his grandmother. She must have been a very wise counsellor; otherwise it was impossible to explain how her descendents had such amarked aptitude for the public service. (Loud ministerial laughter.) (This was an allusion to the number of relatives whom Lord Halsbury had put in office.)

The Purpose of the Motion.

What was the origin of the vote of censure? He understood that it was a great triumph for the "No Surrender" party, and it was the only triumph they were likely to get. As to the purpose of the vote, he suggested that it must be to evolve a new leader for the Tory party. He did not see Mr. Hunt in his place, but it was to be kept in mind that his offer had not been definitely refused. (Ministerial laughter.) The only point to be decided by vote of censure was whether the epithet revolutionary could properly be applied to the principle underlying the proposed legislation, to the plan contained in the bill, or to the method by which they proposed to pass it into law. The view taken on the other side seemed to be that any change, however extreme, proposed by a Tory was reform, and any change, however moderate, proposed by a Liberal, was revolution. The noble lord opposite (Lord Hugh Cecil) had expressed the opinion that the Tory party should have a spirit like Deborah. Did the noble lord know the history of this lady? (Laughter.) She was a ruler, and she was a lady who composed a song in praise of Joel, who drove a nail through the had of Sisera.—(Laughter.) Did the noble lord mean to say that he advocated measures of that kind for the Tory party?—(Laughter.) Were the noble lord's words historical rhetoric, or meant as a parable? If the latter, were the Liberal party to represent Sisera? But Sisera was asleep, and very wearied, and the Liberal party were very active and wideawake. (Ministerial laughter and cheers.) The uncontradicted dicta of the text books and the unbroken chain of precedents were all in favor of the course the Government were taking, and he was profoundly convinced that their policy was based on historical and constitutional practice Today a divided and distracted party, without any efficient leadership, were endeavoring to censure a party united under a leader, whose authority was unchallenged and unchallengeable. (Ministerial cheers. That leader had exercised patience, moderation, and forbearance. (Ministerial cheers.) But these virtues must not be exercised too long. The time for resolute and determined action had come.—(Ministerial cheers.) The bill must pass.—(Ministerial cheers.) For thus only could the Liberal party be able to keep faith with the people of this country, and prove to the people that there was not only the form but the substance of democratic government in this country. (Loud ministerial cheers.)

Mr. Churchill's Answer.

Mr. Churchill (home secretary) said they were charged by members who had held high office with being traitors—(Opposition cheers)—and cheats —(Opposition cheers)—and tricksters (renewed Opposition cheers)—and they had been compared by the honorable member for Walton to Judas Iscariot—(laughter)—but they felt that this language, although it might relieve the feelings of those who used it, bore no relation to the realities of the case, and they were confident that the permanent convictions of honorable members opposite would not indorse it in the future. They had no wish to provoke honorable members opposite, nor would they allow themselves to be provoked, and still less to be turned for one instant from their path by mere cries of anger, however striking. He would like to pay a sincere tribute of admiration to the courage of thee honorable member for Walton and the honorable member for Dover. All forms of courage were praiseworthy, but there were two features about the courage of these two right honorable gentlemen which deserved the momentary notice of the House. (Laughter.) First, it was that kind of courage which enabled a man to stand up unflinchingly and do a foolish thing, although he knew it was popular—(ministerial laughter and cheers)—and secondly, it was that kind of courage which could not only be maintained in the presence of danger, but could even shine brightly in its total absence. (Laughter.)

Liberals Only Seeking Equality.

The motion of the right honorable gentleman asked the House to say that the advice which the Government had given to the crown was a gross violation of constitutional liberty. How did they stand on that? They believed that the object for which they were contending—(Opposition cry of "Toe the line")—was perfectly legitimate and fair. They were seeking no privilege. They were looking for no facility which the Opposition did not already and had not long enjoyed. All they sought, demanded, and all they were going to take was political equality for all parties in the state. (Ministerial cheers.) They wished that a Liberal House of Commons should have the same powers as—not more than—a Conservative House of Commons had already enjoyed, and they would not tolerate any longer the continuance of a system whereby a large part of the electorate was permanently relegated to a status of political inferiority, a status which deprived them permanently, even when they had a majority in that House, of any constitutional means of obtaining redress for grievances under which they had suffered so long. (Ministerial cheers.) That was their object. Surely there was nothing in it which merited censure by any level-headed, fair-minded man? So far as the Government were concerned, they would rather have the constitution as it was than take any of the concessions, promises, repentances and so-called reforms with which they had from time to time been favored. Because the Government knew some time ago that they would be able to pass their bill through the House of Lords, the discussions had been denoncued as a mockery and a farce. Had that not been the position of the Conservative Government in regard to every measure they had brought forward? All the assurance which the Government asked for was to be placed on the same footing as the Conservatives had always been accustomed to occupy. The Conservatives had always known that what they could carry through the Commons they could carry through the Lords, and now they were furious that the Liberals occupied the same position. He had no doubt the day would come when the Government would be reproached by some of those to whom they looked in the country for the singular moderation with which on this memorable opportunity they had used their powers, and for the fact that at this opportunity they had still left the Conservative party possessed of advantages which were denied to the Liberals. The course for which the Opposition wished to censure the Government was the only course open to them to escape from the absolute deadlock in which they found themselves, and if they had refrained until the last possible moment it had not been because they shrank from a special creation of peers.

Why Shrink from Making Peers?

It was not, continued Mr. Churchill, because the Government had doubted inthe last resort either the propriety or the legitimacy of uch an expedient. It was only because the Government, being better constitutionalists than some of their critics, had not been willing to use the reserve power of the crown until the need had become overpowering and the justifificaton indisputable. Why should the Government shrink from the creation of 400 or 500 peers? (Loud ministerial cheers.) At any rate, that would be one way of arriving at that impartial second chamber, evenly balanced, in which the Liberals would have as good a chance or as bad a chance as their opponents. At all events, it would be one way of putting the House of Lords in touch with the real balance of forces and classes and parties in the country, and although, no doubt, a chamber of 1,200 appeared somewhat unwieldy, it might form a very convenient panel from which a smaller body might be selected for actual business. In short, all that Liberals wanted for the smooth working of the parliament bill was something of that character. He could assure the noble lord (Lord Hugh Cecil), whose excitement was always pleasurable to witness—(ministerial laughter)—that there were a great many on the ministerial benches who, if they had occasion, would be only too happy to exact the forfeit. But it did not rest with the Government; it rested with—(Opposition cries of "Redmond")—it rested with the House of Lords. (Renewed Oppositon cries of "Redmond.") How could the decision of the House of Lords next Wednesday rest with Mr. Redmond? Had the honorable member for Waterford been tampering with the Diehards? (Loud ministerial cheers and laughter.) Mr. Churchill went on to quote from a letter to the Times, in which Sir William Anson admitted that if another general election took place at once the composition of the House of Commons would not be altered appreciably, and that therefore the Lords ought, however reluctantly, to accept the verdict of the nation. Why, Mr. Churchill asked, had those words not been spoken before? Why had they not been spoken by a leader of the party more versed in parliamentary and public business than any other man in the House of

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