

A POOR EXCUSE FOR AN ELECTION.

SPEAKING at Montreal on May 3rd, Hon. Robert Rogers, Minister of Public Works in the Borden Cabinet, but rather better known to the average Canadian as Premier Borden's "Minister of Elections," labored hard to show that there was excuse if not need for a general election in the immediate future. Mr. Roger's chief argument was with regard to the Senate and his chief grievance against the Senate had of course to do with its action in rejecting the Borden Naval Aid Bill. Under the circumstances The Liberal Monthly may be pardoned for once more quoting from the *Ottawa Citizen* the reply of that newspaper. Coming as it does from a paper which in 1911 strongly supported the Conservative party and which has been generally recognized as a Conservative organ although it announces itself as now Independent, the following clear review of the Navy question, and of the Senate's action is of particular interest and value:

The Senate and Elections.

(*Ottawa Citizen*, May 4th.)

The debate in the party press regarding the probability of a general election this year has resolved itself into the statement by the one side that the other is taking advantage of the War situation to secure a snap verdict, and on the other a reiterated argument that the opposition is afraid to face the electors because of its alleged lack of enthusiasm for the conflict. Obviously neither of these reasons can hold the whole truth. There must, for example, be an explanation for the appeal of the Government to the electors, should such be contemplated. It might be interesting to learn in specific terms just what this reason is. One minister, referred to by the press of his own party as the minister of elections, has made the only attempt to date to justify an election in his declaration that the Senate stands in the way of constructive government measures and that the voters should be given an opportunity to decide the fate of the upper chamber. Yet, on analysis, the minister seems to be taking a very radical step if we consider the offences charged against the Senate in the past. The great argument against the red chamber from the administration viewpoint is its rejection of the naval policy of the Government, but if it is to be accepted that this is the cause or explanation or reason of the probable election it would appear that the administration has brooded almost too long over its wrongs. The proper time for an appeal to the country over this issue would seem to have been immediately after the Senate's rejection of the naval measure.

Still, was not the Senate in its action but exercising its legitimate functions? And can a legislative body be reasonably accused of ulterior motives or of disloyalty, or any of the other heinous offences against the political commandments in performing its duty, as it sees it, within its proper sphere?

Surely not. That the Senate's action was perhaps partisan is not really the point. And the history of Canada's naval measures might profitably be recalled at this time, if a clear idea of what most likely led to the Senate's rejection is to be formed. It should not be forgotten that originally the Conservatives and the Liberals were of one mind on Canada's naval policy—that is, both were of opinion that the Dominion should do something to assume her share of empire defence and responsibility. Sir Wilfrid Laurier agreed to the suggestions of Sir George Foster and Sir Robert Borden in the early days of our naval plan and in 1909 the measure, a government bill, was supported by the Conservative opposition. At this time there arose the Nationalist movement in Quebec, which opposed the Laurier measure and numbered among its leaders the late Hon. Mr. Monk, a former cabinet minister; Hon. Mr. Blondin, a present cabinet minister; Mr. Sevigny, now speaker of the House of Commons, and Mr. Bourassa. The Nationalist opposition developed rapidly and in 1910 Sir Robert Borden, although not allied with the Nationalists, changed his attitude and opposed the measure. The Drummond-Arthabaska election sounded the death knell of the Liberals in Quebec, an event brought about by the strength of the Nationalist party, and in 1911 the Government was defeated.

On assuming power in 1911 Sir Robert Borden undertook a new policy in regard to the naval situation. The Liberal plan of constructing Canadian warships was thrown over, the cadet ships were dismantled and the whole plan of participating in empire defence was abandoned for nearly a year. When, finally, the Government measure—a contribution of funds to the Imperial Navy—reached the upper House it was rejected. This perhaps was a partisan action but obviously the Senate was within its rights. The measure was not a unanimous one. It was therefore not as satisfactory, apparently, as the Laurier measure. On the whole, the Senate was justified in regarding it as a measure which did not fully represent public opinion. But no matter what the causes of its action the upper chamber was merely exercising its constitutional right to either accept or reject certain bills.

To come forward now and base a plea for a general election on the action of the Senate in casting out certain measures is not calculated to inspire the voters with belief in a regard for constitutional procedure on the part of the administration. A proposal to reform the Senate in any event is not so urgent that an election must be called at this stage of our national existence. The Senate has been in operation, displeasing both sides of the Commons impartially, since Confederation. If it is to be reformed or abolished let the reasons therefore be made clear and let the advocates of abolition or reformation go to the country, if they must, on constitutional grounds and not on the plea that the Senate must be punished because it did not obey the particular party in power in the Commons for the time being.