

BOWSER, BREWSTER AND B. C.

The Pending Election May Bring Surprises to Both Parties

By F. H. STAPLEFORD

NOW, if it be true, that "an institution is but the lengthened shadow of a man," it is also true, that the fortunes of a political party are so bound up with the personality of its leaders, that politics becomes to a large extent a study in character. Of course, even a strong leader cannot create the issues, but he can put his own stamp upon them. The electors of British Columbia will, on September fourteenth, decide, not so much between policies as between persons. Taken abstractly, the platforms of the two parties are not very different. A year or two ago, they could have been contrasted, but now the voter will have pretty much the same difficulty in distinguishing between them, as Alice in Wonderland had in finding the difference between Tweedledum and Tweedledee. The situation reminds one of Lloyd George's saying that the church to which he belonged was torn by two factions, that he, himself, was passionately attached to one of them, but he could never remember just which one it was, not that this coming election is devoid of significance, for, as a matter of fact, there is a very clear-cut issue at stake. Men are themselves issues. Their record and character are factors of vital importance in a voter's decision. The Liberal party claim, of course, that the platforms are similar, because their opponents have stolen all their planks. But public opinion, and the logic of events, point in a certain direction and both parties must perforce follow. The record of the government, and the result of that policy, as it relates to the present economic situation, will play a large part in the coming election. But the electors are, by no means, focussing their attention upon the past alone. They expect to be shown some way out of the present muddle.

The situation in B. C. is of a kind to keep politicians awake at nights. They cannot at all count simply on party loyalty to carry elections. There has always been a pronounced streak of radicalism in the Pacific Province, but prosperity, widely distributed, has ever had a tendency to put radicalism to sleep. With the pinch of hard times it again wakes into activity. Now, B. C. has had hard times enough to produce almost anything. Working men, who have walked the streets of Victoria and Vancouver desperately hunting work, which could not be found; business men, with their eye on the calendar, knowing that their business could stand just so many weeks or months more of such economic starvation, and then, the deluge; property owners, whose houses stood empty or were filled with tenants who could not even pay their water rates, were not in a mood to be roused into frantic enthusiasm, simply upon hearing the party slogan. The first year of the war saw depression everywhere in Canada, but nowhere was it so grim and bitter as on the Pacific Coast. Men in \$20,000 houses lived in their kitchens, because they could not pay for fuel and light. Men, rated as well-to-do, or even wealthy, the year before, were glad to pick up a job of \$2.00 a day sweeping the streets and there were five men to every one of those jobs. B. C. had practically no factory equipment, which could be readily turned to munition making. It has never been a manufacturing province; agriculture is still in the embryonic stage, and one of its most important industries, timber, was dead because ships could not be secured to export it. It was a situation to make even the most conservative do a great deal of hard thinking, and the Pacific slope is not conservative. The country was exceedingly well aware of the fact, that the old speculating regime was over, and that it was necessary to get down to a productive basis. The ordinary citizen seemed to be aware of this much sooner than the members of the government, who drew regular salaries, and were not afraid, at any rate, of the tax collector. When political meetings were held, and government speakers attempted to blame the war for the whole situation, it was a very cool and critical audience which they met. Speakers who were greeted with enthusiasm a year or two before, now found that their perorations awakened no response, unless it were cat calls and interruptions. It may not have been entirely fair to blame the government for the plight of the country, but it was certainly human and, after all, governments who capitalize prosperity must be prepared to have economic depression put on the debit account. The country was not only critical of past policies, but it wanted to know what the government proposed to do now. The attitude of the man on the street could be

summed up in the sentence, "Well here we are, and what are you going to do about it?" There is no province in the Dominion where public opinion is more alert and keen than it is in British Columbia. The looseness of political ties is seen in the great turnover of votes in the recent bye-elections. In 1912 Vancouver and Victoria, which elect five and four members, respectively, went solidly Conservative by large majorities. Last spring a cabinet minister was, in both of these constituencies, defeated by Liberals, whose majorities were much larger than were those of the Conservatives in the previous election. This means that a tremendous number of men are changing their votes, and will face the elections coming this September with open minds, very largely freed from party bias. There were nine Conservatives returned by acclamation in 1912. There will be no election by acclamation this September, and there is probably not a single seat which Conservative party managers can regard as safe. This radicalism of temper by no means confines itself to criticism of the government, but scrutinizes with equal freedom, although not with the same asperity, the utterances of the Liberal leaders.

Both of the party leaders, then, have in a political field such as this, very difficult roles to play. With public opinion so keen and earnest, resounding common places will win scant approval. In B. C. the politician is sadly exclaiming, "Life is real, life is earnest," but is keenly apprehensive lest, notwithstanding the poet, a political grave should be its goal.

THE man who leads the Conservative party presents a curious study for the psychologist. One look at that great square head, with its strong face resting upon those massive shoulders, would convince one that the Hon. W. J. Bowser is not a man to be easily catalogued. In many respects he is the antithesis of his predecessor in office, Sir Richard McBride, in whose cabinet he had been Attorney-General since 1907. Sir Richard was courtly, urbane and polished, and had such a graceful and friendly way of receiving a deputation that its members, delighted at his sympathetic hearing, would not have the discourtesy to analyze his statements, to find out precisely what he had promised. It was only when they had left that magnetic presence and had begun to discuss on the steps outside exactly what the Premier had said that they would begin to realize they had not really been promised very much. The present Premier is blunt and decisive and when he makes a public statement, it does not take a doctor of philosophy to understand what he means. His very appearance suggests ruggedness and power. This does not mean that the Premier disdains diplomacy, for a more adroit and subtle politician does not exist in Canadian public life. He does not possess the personal popularity of his former leader, and both within and without the party he has very numerous enemies; but when a choice of successor for Sir Richard had to be made, Mr. Bowser had but to choose himself and inform the party. There was certainly no other man in the party on a par with him in intellectual power. If one wished to get an estimate of the man he could, in the course of a single afternoon, by interviewing men of prominence in Vancouver or Victoria, collect the most divergent and conflicting view points in regard to him. One significant thing would be that there would be no neutrals, every one interviewed would hold decided views in regard to him. He has so impressed his personality upon the public life of British Columbia that few indeed there would be to whom his name brought no concrete content of judgment. Even if one walked down Chinatown and interviewed its slant-eyed inhabitants, he would find that even here this man was known and discussed. The veil of Oriental passivity would not lift at the names of Sir Robert Borden or Sir Wilfrid Laurier, but mention Bowser, and a ray of understanding will lighten up their faces. If we chose out of the divergent views the two most frequently expressed and most clearly enunciated, sometimes indeed with considerable heat, they would line up about as follows: One view would be, that this man was the evil genius of the Conservative party, that he has been the guiding spirit of the most corrupt government that any province has ever been cursed with, that British Columbia has been fairly plundered, until the only things left are

the mountains; the timber, mineral and land wealth of the province have been scattered with a lavish hand, to satisfy the greed of the hangers on of the government, and that the directing head of all this plunderbund was Mr. Bowser. The other view is that Mr. Bowser is an essentially honest man, who, unfortunately, was not able to carry through his real policy, because of other influences; that Sir Richard McBride had so commanded the allegiance of the Conservative party as to be in the position to dictate its action, and that he, and not Mr. Bowser, was responsible for that policy, which has alienated such a vast amount of the country's wealth. It is further urged that this speculative policy of the government was really what was wanted, and that no government could have held power through those frantic, get-rich-quick years, which did not minister to this gambling mania. When Mr. Bowser is in full control of the government, they say that a very different condition of affairs will result.

THE onlooker who seeks an unbiased view will see in both of these viewpoints a large element of truth. Mr. Bowser has been for many years the brains of the Conservative party of British Columbia. His influence both as a cabinet minister and as a man have been very great. The policy of the government has been admittedly disastrous. Can Mr. Bowser, who had such a potent influence in shaping that policy, now lightly escape responsibility? Mr. Bowser, the Premier of British Columbia, cannot disown Mr. Bowser, the Attorney-General of the previous years. Some, at least, of the economic disasters of B. C. can be definitely laid at his door. As one of the Liberal politicians has urged, the present endeavour to escape responsibility would remind one of the Jewish procedure on the great Day of Atonement, when they selected a goat and symbolically loading it with the sins of the whole people, drove it out into the wilderness. The attempt has been made to make Sir Richard fulfil the functions of that goat for the Conservative party. But the people of British Columbia will not so lightly relieve those who remain of responsibility. This present election may show that in spite of all his efforts Mr. Bowser "found no place for repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears." On the other hand, it is quite true that in the boom days the pressure on the government to give way to the speculative spirit was exceedingly strong. If the railway and land policy of the government has proven disastrous, that policy was, none the less enthusiastically endorsed by the people of British Columbia in two general elections. The record of Mr. Bowser since he has had a free hand has been an exceedingly good one. The session last spring of the British Columbia Legislature, under his leadership, has a great output to its credit of really constructive and useful legislation. He has played fair with the temperance party, and from the time his pledge to them was once given, to pass a prohibition act (subject to a referendum) which would meet their wishes, he has never wavered in his course, despite strenuous opposition within the ranks of his own party. Mr. Bowser is no weakling. He has a disciplined and powerful will. He has conspicuous ability and a thorough and intimate grasp of the situation in British Columbia. Whatever be his previous record, since he has assumed the Premiership, his leadership has been wise and able. The question which the people of B. C. will have to decide is as to whether this new attitude of his represents the real convictions of the man, or whether they represent concessions extorted from him by an awakened and vigorous public opinion. One thing is certainly true, the Premier loves power as few men do. Whatever be his own predictions, he will break no lances in foolish knight errantry, but will conform to whatever is necessary to hold his mastery of affairs.

Mr. H. C. Brewster, member for Victoria, and leader of the Opposition, presents a much simpler problem in character analysis. He was first elected in 1907, representing Alberta until 1912, when, running in another constituency, he was overwhelmed in the great Conservative landslide. Last spring, he again took his seat in the legislature, having won the bye-election against the Hon. A. C. Flumerfelt, Minister of Finance, by a two to one majority. He is a successful business man, being largely interested in the canning industry and other business enterprises of the Coast. He has an absolutely clean

(Concluded on page 23.)