

THE ENGLISH EDUCATION QUESTION.

GREAT SPEECH BY THE HON. EDWARD BLAKE.

From the Dublin Freeman's Journal of May 9, we take the following full report of the magnificent oration of the Hon. Edward Blake, on the School Bill, which has now become such a burning question in the English Parliament and throughout the country:

Mr. Blake—I may excuse myself for addressing the House by saying that I happen to have a somewhat prolonged experience upon this subject. For forty sessions, in three Legislatures, in different countries, I have witnessed and taken some part in the discussion of problems which arise in their concrete form by the association of a Protestant majority with a Roman Catholic minority. Long ago I found and took my ground upon general principles, and having adhered to that ground I was not surprised when I heard from the lips of the Minister of Education the other day a statement with reference to

THE RIGHTS OF MINORITIES, which I am afraid was susceptible of another, and what seemed to me in the connection in which he used it, the natural and obvious interpretation. Speaking of the question between Roman Catholics and Jews, as the case might be, and the various Protestant denominations, he said "all minorities must suffer; it is the badge of their tribe." Well, sir, some suffering may sometimes be inevitable in the carrying out of some measure of a great public policy, which the majority of the nation believes to be essential to its progress or its existence. That suffering ought as far as possible to be avoided, but for my part my belief is, as I expressed it twenty years ago in a Protestant community, somewhat different from the tone and the sentiment of the right honorable gentleman. I may venture to quote it, because it represents the ground I took long before, and which I have maintained ever since, and which I hold to this day—"Being strong, we ought to be what the strong should always be—generous to the weak. A measure full, heaped up and running over is the measure to be given by the strong to the weak, and by so acting we will exemplify true Christian principles; we will exemplify true Liberal principles, we will do our best for the promotion of true Christianity, and for the spread of the Gospel." These are the general views with which I approach all questions of this description. This is an English Bill, and we are concerned here mainly for Irish Catholics, who have brought with them from the country from which they sprang traditions of those evil days to which I have referred, and who are naturally jealous to the last degree of their religious rights, and suspicious of any interference with them. I say it is a natural jealousy. It is a natural suspicion which you ought to respect, and as far as possible avert in the course of your legislation. They know what interference brought them in the past, and

THIS FEELING IS IN THEIR BLOOD, and you must not quarrel with them, you must rather be impatient with them, you must rather be anxious in the future to give them no excuse or pretence for imputing evil motives about what you do to day. (Cheers) Do your part, and do it in such a form that you may help to obliterate those sad memories, and create in them a confidence that you will respect their convictions. Those in this country of the Irish race, for whom we speak, are mainly of the poor and lowly. They are the toilers, whose share of this world's goods is small, and perhaps for that reason they look to joys that are to come. (Cheers) Now, I will make no attempt to deal exhaustively with or to touch at all upon some of the topics which are to be debated on this Bill. I may say with regard to the observation made by the honorable member who preceded me that he seemed to have somewhat forgotten in his declamation against parental rights to have some voice in the education of their children that education has been made compulsory by the state. He seemed to have forgotten that, after all, the parent is a member of the state, and he contributed to the taxes of the state (cheers), has contributed to the rates, and that it is out of his taxes and his rates that the state is maintaining the system of education, whatever it may be, which is made compulsory upon the parent. He calls not for a subsidy, but claims that he shall be assisted to perform the duty which the state has made compulsory and which the state has undertaken to perform according to its own fashion. In the debate of 1902, my honorable friend, the member for East Mayo, made a COURAGEOUS and MEMORABLE SPEECH. He then pointed out that as an inevitable consequence of the measure a share of the public control would be demanded, and would be obtained as the result of the system of public and compulsory education propounded in the Bill. The honorable member for East Mayo proposed an amendment in the direction of parental rights, but his voice was not listened to by those for whose interests the Bill of 1902 was passed. But, nevertheless, his voice spoke the truth, for we are now face to face with the position which has been rendered inevitable by concrete facts. A situation was created by the Bill of 1902 which has to be met and dealt with to day, and therefore the honorable member for East Mayo's view has to day been verified. It was, however, not so much the simple proposition, but it is the extent, the character, and the methods of interference and the inadequacy of the safeguards in respect of which, we believe, the Bill is fundamentally vicious, and will trench unwarrantably on the rights of the minority for whom we speak. I am going to confine my remarks to some of the aspects of clause four, and the proposed alteration to a compulsory form which the right honorable gentleman deprecated most emphatically, while at the same time he avowed that he did not believe it would make a differ-

ence in a single school, which meant that in every school area the clause would be put into operation. If it would be put into operation voluntarily what objection is there to making it clear and plain? If that is going to happen everywhere, why not make it the law? We are strongly of opinion that is essential to the security of the minority, which in various parts of the country will have to fight these battles under the protection of this clause, that

PROTECTION SHOULD BE MADE ABSOLUTELY OPERATIVE. We believe this to be no less important to the whole community. We believe that to leave the question whether the clause should come into force or not, to the judgment of each Council or Local Authority which under the clause is to exercise judgment upon the question, would be to throw into the hands of the bigots and zealots and those who do light in religious controversy a free hand ready to hand to be used for local purposes, for local elections, and this would create difficulties of all descriptions. Nothing could more injurious to the peace of these communities than to leave this as a wholly permissive clause. In my own country of Canada, after struggles of the most desperate character, involving the greatest extremity of bitterness between religious denominations and disturbing the general peace and progress of the country and all political combinations, I rejoice that an agreement was made between those provinces under which

THE OVERWHELMING CATHOLIC MAJORITY of one province agreed to respect the rights and sentiments of the minority by making equal laws for each. It was agreed that that should be made a fundamental element of the Constitution. I agree that there are not the same elements of finality. Such as you have you had better use, and the first of these elements is to determine the initial question, and we know that it means that in the cases in which you determine that there ought to be the right given in certain circumstances that it shall be given. There is the suggested objection that there "ay be on some of the Local Committees cranks who will object, but whatever strength there is in that argument is infinitesimal compared with the evil of

SENDING IT AS A FIREBRAND to the country and the bitter struggles which what you have proposed will create. Do what you think is right and if you think this is not a right clause then reject it, but if you think it is right and just to the Roman Catholic minority that there should be such a provision, then use all your power to enact it. The view which the President of the Board of Education expressed in introducing this Bill rather added to than relieved my disquietude when the clause was read first, because he said "I admit it is asking these minorities to trust in the generosity, the equitableness and the fair-mindedness of the local authority." I dare say in many cases that will be justified, but I know not how far those other compliments to which I have referred may arise. The right hon. gentleman said: "Public opinion would view any obstructive withholding of the permissive privilege." What public opinion? The public opinion of the locality? If so, then the difficulty would not arise. Does it mean the public opinion of the public at large to be made operative by discussion in this House and another Act of Parliament? We know the difficulty of passing

AN ACT OF PARLIAMENT TO PROTECT A CATHOLIC MINORITY against a Protestant majority, and it would not be very readily operative. The right honorable gentleman went on to say: "But they might truly say that it is left to their judgment, even in the case of a four-fifth majority whether or no, and, therefore in canvassing in election, in discussion each rural area has this question in its own hands." The right honorable gentleman also pointed out that although he believed in justice and generosity, the question was really in their own hands, and that it was for them in their own individual cases and with reference to their own community to judge and to decide. Those difficulties that I felt, and which I now entertain have been assuaged in one sense by the right honorable gentleman's speech to the Jewish deputation, in which he said: "Assuming the provision of clause four with reference to the non provided schools to be illusory (and, of course, if they were illusory they would be a fraud) the Jewish body would benefit more largely than any other body, but it was pointed out that it was not a complete protection, because it was not obligatory on the local authority to ascertain the facts." So far the right honorable gentleman has imposed the duty upon the local authorities to make local inquiry for the purpose of ascertaining the facts, namely—the percentage of persons of one persuasion as compared with another. "If four-fifths of the parents of the children desire facilities it was an obligation upon the local authorities." These are ambiguous words. I don't know what obligation the right honorable gentleman means. "Of course, if so minded, might disregard the fair intention of the statute and obstinately hold aloof from doing anything further." Now, sir, the right honorable gentleman acknowledges that may happen. He has described his interpretation of the statute. It is the fair intention of the statute in any case in which the conditions prescribed by the fourth clause are found to exist, the local authority shall agree, then, in saying that they shall agree? (Irish cheers.) "He would take care," added Mr. Birrell, "that their view that a statutory obligation should be imposed upon the local authority to do its duty was put before his colleagues," and he went on to point out that there was some difficulty in dealing with local authorities, and that he did not know what the remedy would be, and so on. If the right honorable gentleman, with all the authority he has, and all the authority he may ask Parliament

to invest him with—if this imperial Parliament is unable to deal with the local authorities, how does he expect the poor Roman Catholics to deal with the Protestant majority in the locality affected? Then the right hon. gentleman said: "It was hard to believe that any great local authority could be so bigoted as to disregard this statutory duty, he would not say obligation, imposed upon them for the education of the country." Well, if it is a statutory duty

LET US MAKE IT PLAIN that it is a statutory duty. That is all we ask. Make it clear that it is what the right hon. gentleman describes it to be. If it is a statutory duty then they have to perform it. The right hon. gentleman at present left it to their free decision whether they should perform it or not. "He was sanguine enough," he said, "to believe that no local authority would refuse the full advantages of the Parliamentary Grant which Parliament intended them to receive. At the same time there was considerable substance on this point, and he would give it careful consideration. I am sure that the consideration has been given to this point, and I hope that the communication which the right hon. gentleman said he would make to his colleagues has been made, and we will be greatly relieved if we learn that this clause is to be made mandatory instead of permissive. The right hon. gentleman then went on to deal with the question of the teachers. I am not, at this moment, dealing with that point. I am now dealing with the question whether Clause four should be mandatory or permissive, and I submit to the House that in the interest of the local authorities, in the interest of the Roman Catholics or churchmen, in the interest of the peace of the country, it is desirable not to throw this bone of contention into every place in which the clause may be applicable; but, Parliament has decided that it is the duty of the local authorities, on certain conditions, to use the clause to make that plain and clear by stating it in the enactment (cheers). I now come to

THE PERCENTAGE LIMIT. The number in each school is not shown, and we have only general results, of which we can only produce the average. The only true thing to be said of the average is that it does not properly represent any one actual case. We cannot tell in how many of the schools there may be a quota above or below four-fifths, and the same observation may be made of the population limit of five thousand. These are considerations that require careful study before they can be exhaustively discussed. I only mention them as considerations which it is necessary to take into account before we can realise the real importance, either of the percentage limit or the population limit suggested. To my mind, and I say it at once, the percentage limit appears to be too high. Again, as to

THE EXCLUSION OF RURAL AREAS. I see no reason for the exclusion of rural areas. There exists a provision for the necessity of establishing a convenient possibility of access to another school as an element for the application of the fourth clause, and that convenience is bound to be ascertained by the local authority. If the convenience is not available in the rural area it will exclude the rural area, just as it excludes the urban, but if it is available in the rural area, then I see no reason why the rural area should be specially excluded from the operation of the clause. It seems an invidious exclusion, as well as useless. It seems

A RESTRAINT WITHOUT ANY REASON AT all. I, at all events, see no reason for it. Then I hold that there is of necessity an element of considerable importance in the question of the census proportion. It is known that the working population of this country includes, perhaps, more than their proportion of the Irish population, which is from the necessity of the case migratory. It is one of the hardships of their lot that they cannot conserve a home of their own. They may be divorced from their surroundings, and obliged to find new homes, following the course of industry from time to time. We have, therefore, to deal with a migratory population, and that migration may result in the proportion being slightly disturbed one way or another at short intervals. Do you propose to unsettle things by having every year or every few months a fresh census or a fresh inquiry, and if you find it is one below the four-fifths are you to disturb everything and upset everything, or do you propose that once established the right shall remain for a reasonable period? I think that the argument of convenience and practicability points to a considerable element of permanence in the settlement of the question once it is settled, and that disturbance should only be at a reasonable and long interval. I come now to the other point, on which the local authority is to decide, and that is the question of convenient attendance at some other school for those who may be excluded by the school keeping the original character which it has and which it is intended to retain. Therefore, you get a concrete question. You have one question, the effect of which I have already alluded to—namely, the existence of the proportion of the children belonging to the several schools. You come next to the question whether there is convenient attendance, and even if there exists that proportion, even if the school is so constituted as to be practically almost a homogeneous school in the case of a Roman Catholic, or Jewish, or a church of England school, even so, is the general minority, though here in the individual case, the overwhelming majority, of the local population to suffer, unless it turns out that school places can be obtained elsewhere at a convenient distance for the small minority. On that subject there is to my mind

A DIFFICULTY IN THE BILL, in that it does not provide for an appeal to the central authority from the judgment of the local authority on the question of convenience of access. It affords a more convenient loop-

hole than the question of the application of or non-application of the clause when the percentage of the school population has been ascertained. This question of convenience is one point on which it is very easy to differ, and I think that more careful and more unbiassed consideration—a consideration better calculated to do justice—would be ensured if the determination of the local authority on this question of convenience were not final, but made subject to an appeal to the central authority (cheers). Now I come to the finally excluded schools. If my suggestions as to the reduction of the proportion of scholars, as to reduction of the population of the area be adopted—vague and general as I have made them, for I am dealing with principles and not with details, which are more appropriate for the Committee stage—if these suggestions are adopted the number of excluded schools might be much reduced; but whatever the number might be, it is considerable at present, and I hold that in conformity with those principles to which I alluded in my opening remarks, it is fitting that those finally

EXCLUDED SCHOOLS, if they prefer to retain what those who built them believed to be vital in their character as Catholic schools, shall continue to retain that character. If they prefer that they shall not come under the Act and be acquired by the local authority, I hold they have not forfeited their right, at any rate as parents, to their share of the rates or their rights as parents even to what I would call a generous capitation grant. Therefore, I hold that they ought not to be left absolutely destitute, as the Bill at present proposes to leave them (cheers). I leave now all the questions connected with this branch of Clause 4, and I turn to what, after all, is more vital still—more vital than the question of the substitution of "shall" for "may." I turn to the question of

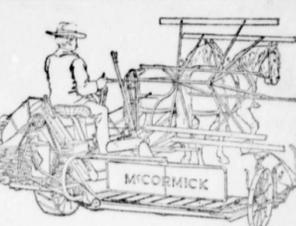
THE APPOINTMENT OF TEACHERS, because that is the root of the whole matter. What is wanted is that a school shall retain its existing character as a school of England school, as a Jewish school, or as a Catholic school. What must be acknowledged is that it cannot substantially and effectively retain that character unless the teachers are such as to give confidence to the school, and that as long as that must be acknowledged it is plain that there ought to be more security for the parents' right to have teachers such as will keep the school of the character which it now has, and which they intend to retain. The provisions of the Act to that effect are exaggerated. I think there ought to be a provision for

A PARENTS' COMMITTEE, with a negative or an affirmative voice in the choice of the teachers. Remember you are hoping to make provision for what will last, if not in perpetuity, for a considerable time. It is a provision by which the Local Authority will perform not merely the displacing duty of displacing teachers from year to year and from month to month and from week to week, but there will be numerous cases in which there will be places to be filled up because of teachers becoming old or dying or from other causes. Now there ought to be some provision with reference to the choice of the teacher to fill these vacancies, and I have suggested such a provision. I am glad to know—quoting once again from the valuable speech of the Minister of Education to the Jewish deputation—that his view is that as regards the intention of the statute with regard to the Jewish teachers

THE WORDS IN CLAUSE 4 WOULD REQUIRE STRENGTHENING. He said: "With regard to the Jewish teachers the words of Clause 4 will require strengthening, but the intention was that they were now, carried on just as they were now." That was to say, not merely for a long time, but for long as the arrangement lasted. He agreed that there was a loop-hole for any amount of pig-headed obstinacy and bigotry, and jealousy and unfairness, but it was certainly the intention of the clause that the teachers should remain the same as they were, and that those who were alone qualified should give the particular religious instruction which had been given in the schools." I only demand that these words should be made good. I only demand practical security with reference to the future that these words should be made good. As to methods, that is a matter for Committee, but I think it can only be by the parents having a voice in the choice of the teachers. There is a lack also, I think, in the provision for TAKING OVER NEW SCHOOLS in the event of population increasing in districts, besides the natural growth of places by industrial enterprise. There are other changes such as by shifting of population, and while some towns have fallen away, others have grown; and in dealing in any way worthily with this question you must consider the rise of a new population, which would require the same right and protection as is given to existing schools by this clause. I venture to suggest, therefore, that the clause is entirely defective in point of security, and leaves the Bill in a condition in which it is not adequate for the object of settling the question for a reasonable time, and so relieving this House from such discussions as the one we are now engaged in (cheers). I earnestly hope that the difficulties to which I have alluded, and others which I have deprecately abstained from presenting to the House upon this occasion, may be met at some further stage by the right hon. gentleman and his colleagues, for these defects are at present insuperable defects. They are defects which affect the rights and consciences particularly as to the choice of teachers of those for whom it is impossible for us to overlook. They are defects, therefore, which render it impossible for me, at any rate at this stage, to vote for

THE RECORD READING: but I repeat the hope that in the continuation of the discussion in the tone adopted by the honorable member for

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As I read in the Times that a certain man threw himself from on high—from the Monument or from the cliff that juts out a thousand feet above the shelving beach. But I get to dissent. What! You tell me throw himself down? Nothing of the kind. No man can throw himself down. The expression is not felicitous, nor rigorously accurate. The plain fact is, such a thing is impossible. He can no more throw himself down a thousand feet than he can throw himself up a thousand feet. His share in the tragedy is a very modest one indeed. He merely steps . . . beyond the jutting rock and so placed himself within reach of this great power lying in ambush. This power, hidden and unknown, yet in its omnipotence and ceaseless vigilance reminding us almost of God Himself is what we speak of as "the attraction of gravity." This it is that stretches out its arms, as it were, seizes him in its irresistible clutches, and hurls him headlong, with the force of a giant, through a thousand feet of space, and dashes him violently to the ground, where now he lies crushed to atoms. The sincere Christian, fearing Him who can hurl not his body only, but his soul also, into hell (Matt. 18: 28.) is quite as "astonished" as our profane who fears to tread too near the treacherous edge of the cliff. If, indeed, a man will admit the unseen and inscrutable power in one case, and will not temptuously reject the unseen and inscrutable power in the other, for no better reason than because it is unseen and inscrutable, we may justly charge him with inconsistency and folly.—London Tablet.

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