

OUR IRISH LETTER.

More Details of the County Councils Bill.

The Most Important Features of Mr Balfour's Speech Introducing the Measure.

The Masses Entrusted With the Power and Responsibility of Local Administration--A Modern Progressive Institution Which Will Ultimately Lead to the Re-establishment of a National Parliament in College Green.

DUBLIN, February 28.—At last, after years of persistent struggle that at times was heroic in its conduct, a British Tory Government has seen fit to bring down a measure of partial self government for Ireland. The men of '98, the martyrs for country and for conscience, the patriots whose blood was so ruthlessly shed, and which fertilized the soil of the Emerald Gem of the Seas to raise a brood of giants, steadfast and forever persevering in the cause of freedom, men whose names cling like ivy about the hearts of the Irish race; these men at last find a justification before the judgment of the universe, and, strangest irony of it all, it comes at the hands of a man who only recognizes it from the pressure brought to bear on the very life spring of his political party. A cycle of years has thundered down the corridors of time, and now, just again as the wheel turns and draws up under the shadows of the scaffolds of a century ago, there is the faint light of dawn that comes before the sunburst, and the spirits of the men who died look down on the patriots of to-day and guide them.

WHAT A WORLD OF CHANGE has the last quarter of a century seen. Even as late as the O'Connell century, when Titans like Butt, Mitchell, the Fulfivans, were in front of the battle, with the great Parnell merely as a lieutenant; when every ruse was used by the Castle authorities to foment internecine trouble, who would have dreamt that a measure of local autonomy would be the panegyric paid at the centenary of the Rebellion. The following lines written in 1875 seem in a measure prophetic:—

"If spirits in that radiant home of light On things terrestrial may a thought be slow, If spirits basking in the 'Eternals' sight May turn a gaze to this dark world below, O'Connell, O'er that isle you loved so, Keep faithful watch that she may ever be The holy isle your pride it was to see; And guide and bless the children of that race Wherever be their now abiding place, And make them worthy still that Gem of Earth, The olden isle that gave O'Connell birth.

The invocation was heard and the campaign of education is at last bearing fruit. The fruit is a little stunted yet. It bears about the same relation to what should be granted to Ireland as a crab apple does to a Ribstone pippen. Both are apples of course, and it is perhaps just as well to remember that the former is capable of great cultivation and much development. It would be idle to deny, however, that Mr. Gerald Balfour's Bill is one of the utmost importance to Ireland, and coming from the source it did was somewhat of a pleasing disappointment; for although not sufficient in itself, the bill is a distinct improvement on what a great many of Mr. Balfour's friends expected from him. Whether

CENTRALIZATION OR DECENTRALIZATION OF AUTHORITY

is the better form of government will for some time be a question politic not easy of decision. An element of democracy permeates the bill, and the people are entrusted with the power and responsibility of electoral authority for councillors all over Ireland for three years. This in itself is a very marked move in the right direction. The true in wardness of the matter might perhaps be laid down under the heading of abolition of nominated power in favor of elective government. Fortunately, too, there are few conditions to hedge round the new law which would make it unworkable. The control of the police does not come under the fiat of the people; and under the circumstances this may be easily understood, for even such good authority as the Irish Weekly thinks that 'such a change would be any thing but an unmixed blessing in certain places.'

mons, much more radical and much more thorough in the changes suggested making for local self government. At that time the opinion of the great bulk of the Irish population was in favor of a central body amenable to the general public opinion of the country, and the same idea exists in even a more magnified form to day; but for all that there must be a certain amount of satisfaction at the stand taken by Mr. Gerald Balfour, especially as regards his manly appeal to the landlord class to throw in their lot generously with the new order of things, accommodate themselves to the inevitable, and use the great influence they possess in forwarding

A MODERN PROGRESSIVE INSTITUTION in preference to the antiquated methods of government hitherto in vogue in Ireland. For years past the people of England and Scotland have had county and district councils,—a system of local government distinctly popular, and now the experiment is to be tried in Ireland. The latent antipathy between landlord and tenant which exists largely, and for which the former are almost wholly responsible, will likely gradually disappear under coming conditions if the landlord class will, take to heart some of the advice given by Mr. Balfour. Good advice it is; and most undoubtedly friendly, for Mr. Balfour's sympathies tend naturally towards the landlords, even while recognizing that the changes he recommends were as inevitable as fate.

It would seem good policy on the part of the Government to give every opportunity for the fullest discussion of the question. The subject is too important a one to be passed over lightly, and too closely allied to the best Irish interests to permit of uncalled for or unnecessary obstruction from the Nationalist side of the House. It is a tremendous advance on everything that has been proposed yet by a Conservative or Unionist Government, and what has been gained should not be lost again by useless and rancorous discussion or by personal differences among the Irish leaders.

There is one very serious flaw in Mr. Balfour's measure, and that is the proposed

EXCLUSION OF MEMBERS OF RELIGION from the county council. The qualification is a distinct deviation from English precedent, and imposes a stigma on the Irish clergy, a body whom the Irish public are always delighted to see at the helm, and who have done priceless work for the country. The Chief Secretary will hardly insist on this anomaly if its injustice is forced home to his mind by the Irish members.

Following is a synopsis of the test of the bill, and the speeches of Mr. Balfour and Mr. Dillon and others.—

It was entitled 'a bill for amending the law relating to local government in Ireland, and for other purposes connected therewith.' He said: Mr. Speaker, in rising to move for leave to introduce a bill dealing with local government in Ireland, it is hardly necessary that I should enter into justification of the general policy of withdrawing the control of local administration from nominated bodies and entrusting it to bodies chosen by popular election. The question of general policy must now be regarded as *res judicata*. Everybody is conscious that the existing system has become inadequate and is no longer in harmony with the spirit of the age. Under these circumstances, practical men—even those who view with regret the disappearance of institutions which have undoubtedly done good work in the past—(Nationalist cries of Oh)—will see that the problem now set us is how to accomplish the inevitable change in a way which will do most good and least harm. I recognize as fully as many who are less sanguine about the future than I am that the case of Ireland is in many respects peculiar, and that the setting up of local government on a popular basis requires more circumspection than the similar change in England and Scotland. The fact that Ireland is for the most part agricultural and that the agrarian system has created a marked division of sympathy and interest also has to be taken into account.

THE MAIN FEATURES.

I come now to the main features of the bill. As the Scottish system differs from the English, so the system we now propose to set up in Ireland differs from both. In Ireland we do not propose to establish parish councils; for the parish has never been an area of local administration. The bodies we shall set up are county councils, urban district councils, rural district councils and boards of guardians, and the franchise will be the parliamentary franchise, with the addition of peers and women. (Laughter.) The qualifications and disqualifications for membership are practically the same as those in England and Scotland, except that ministers of religion will be disqualified to sit in county or district councils. (Nationalist cries of Oh.) There is no precedent for an Irish minister to sit on an elected body. The four bodies I have enumerated will, in the majority of cases, be practically reduced to three, as the board of guardians will in many cases be the rural district council under another name.

As regards the question of boundaries, it is extremely important that there should be no unnecessary administrative areas, and that the overlapping of administrative areas should be reduced to a minimum. We therefore dispense altogether with baronies as administrative areas, being convinced of the importance of constituting rural districts in direct relation to unions as well as counties. The Local Government Board have already the power of altering the boundaries of unions, and the Government propose that it should be empow-

ered, within six months of the passing of the Act, to alter, so far as may be necessary, the boundaries of existing counties also. It will be the duty of the Local Government Board, in doing this, to secure that the alterations shall be as small as possible.

THE POWERS OF THE COUNCILS.

I will now explain what the new councils are, and what will be the administration which the Bill proposes to set up. Let me first take the county councils and the rural district councils. Speaking generally, the county councils will take over the powers and duties of grand juries and presentment sessions of counties at large, and rural districts will take over the powers of baronial presentment sessions.

Of the various miscellaneous powers, duties, and responsibilities to be transferred to or conferred upon the county councils, I will refer in particular to one or two. The first relates to lunatic asylums. It is proposed that the Board of Control shall be abolished—(Irish cheers)—and that the appointment by the Lord Lieutenant of Boards of governors and officers of asylums should cease. It will be hereafter the statutory duty of the county councils to provide and maintain sufficient accommodation for the lunatic poor in the county, and to manage the lunatic asylums. They will act through a committee of the council, or when an asylum district comprises more than one county through a joint committee. The ultimate control of the executive in cases where the county council fail to carry out their duties is sufficiently maintained by a variety of provisions, and the concurrence of the Lord-Lieutenant will be required in the case of the appointment, or removal, of the resident medical superintendent or assistant medical officer.

RELIEF OF DISTRESS.

The other responsibility thrown on the county council to which I will refer, will arise in connection with exceptional distress. When a Board of Guardians consider that a state of exceptional distress exists in its union, requiring a relaxation of the condition of outdoor relief, they may apply to the county council. If that body considers the circumstances to justify it, they may request the Local Government Board to issue an order authorizing the Board of Guardians, subject to the prescribed conditions, to administer relief outside the workhouse for a limited time from the date of the order. When such an order has been issued, the county council will be liable for one-half of the extra expenditure incurred by the Board of Guardians in administering this form of relief. This will prevent the necessity of passing a special Act every time that the relaxation of the rules regulating Poor-law relief is urgently required. It will also impose a safe check upon the dispensation of Poor-law relief. It only remains to add, as regards the county councils and rural district councils, that the councillors are to hold office for three years, and to retire together. They are to be elected by single member constituencies, except in the case of an urban district returning more than one member to the county council, and forming one county electoral division.

URBAN DISTRICTS.

Referring to the urban districts Mr. Balfour said:—Six cities and towns will be constituted county boroughs—namely, Dublin, Belfast, Cork, Limerick, Londonderry, and Waterford. Mr. E. M. Hester: Why not Newry? Mr. Balfour: Newry falls very much below in population the places I have mentioned. The government of the county boroughs will go on much as before, save that their councils will be elected on the wider franchise already described (hear, hear). In the case of other towns and boroughs every sanitary urban district will be an urban district under the Bill, and its affairs will be administered by an urban district council. The urban district council will have the duty of levying and collecting all rates within the district. It will be seen that urban district councils are more independent of county councils than rural district councils, and therefore urban districts, so far as they constitute county electoral divisions, will be represented on the county council only by their elected representative, and will not have the privilege of the rural district councils of sending their chairman as an additional member of the county council. With regard to the Boards of guardians there will, of course, be in the future no *ex officio* guardians (Nationalist cheers). The duties hitherto allotted to guardians as rural sanitary authorities will be transferred to the district council. The duties in connection with the levying and collection of the poor rate will be transferred in rural areas to the county councils, and in urban areas to the urban councils. In rural districts there will be no elections of guardians as such, because the rural district councils will be the guardians of those districts.

THE FINANCIAL PROVISIONS.

Mr. J. Dillon—I assume that the voting at elections will be by ballot? Mr. Balfour—Oh, yes. Our financial proposals, although necessarily complicated and intricate, will tend, I believe, in practice in the direction of administrative simplicity. In the first place, the occupier is in future to be liable for both county cess and poor rate, whether in towns or rural districts. The two will be collected together as one consolidated rate (hear, hear). This incident of rates will, of course, involve a temporary readjustment of rents until tenancies shall have been determined, or, in the case of holdings under the Land Act, a new fair rent shall have been fixed. In the case of holdings other than agricultural land the problem is simple, and the principle followed is that the rent shall be adjusted so as to prevent, as between landlord and tenant, any change in the burden existing in the financial year 1896-7. That year is taken in the Bill as the standard financial year, and all adjustments of rent are to be made on the assumption that there will be no increase or decrease in the poor rate and county cess taken together as compared with the total rate in the pound for the county cess and poor rate taken together in the standard year. The effect of this will be that the whole of any decrease in the rates will go to the benefit of the occupier, and the whole of any increase will go to his disadvantage. Of course, when

the rent comes to be refixed in the case of holdings other than agricultural land, it will be refixed having regard to the burden of the rates, and

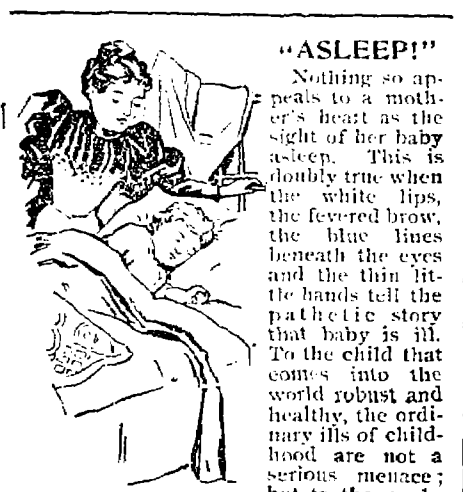
THE GAIN OR LOSS

arising from the increase or decrease of the rates will be distributed between landlord and tenant according to the ordinary laws of supply and demand. As regards agricultural land, the case is complicated by the sums which it is proposed to pay out of the Imperial Exchequer in relief of the rates on such land. There will be distributed for the benefit of the spending authorities in each year out of the Imperial Exchequer a sum equal to one-half of the county and poor rate deemed, for the purpose of the bill, to have been paid in respect of agricultural land in the standard year. This sum is called in the bill the agricultural grant. So far as is possible, provisions are inserted in the bill for ensuring that the benefit of the agricultural grant shall go to the occupier as regards the county cess, and to the owner as regards the poor-rate. When a person is occupier and owner he will get the double advantage. I have now to mention two other changes which we propose to introduce into the existing rating system. The bill provides for what is called union rating and district rating. By union rating I mean that those expenses of the guardians which are now levied separately on an electoral division, will be charged on a common fund raised equally from the whole union. By district rating I mean that the cost of roads and public works, instead of being charged to particular baronies, will be charged equally over the whole rural district, which will in most cases comprise several baronies. Electoral division rating will disappear if the provision in the bill to make occupiers only liable for rates becomes law.

The conclusion to which this experience points is that union rating, so far from leading to extravagance on the part of the guardians, points, on the contrary, to economy. The guardians are

QUITE READY TO BE LIBERAL.

when no part of the cost is to fall on their own division; but when the cost is spread on every division then they become vigilant watch dogs of the rates (laughter). I am convinced that the establishment of union rating will be a highly desirable reform (Nationalist cheers). At present in very poor districts, where most of the holdings are under 14 valuation, the landlord pays perhaps four-fifths of the poor rates; and his property all over the country is liable to be seized for this charge. This is now to be at an end. The landlord's contribution, or rather the agricultural grant which replaces it, is to be fixed and unalterable, and unless this is done exceptional measures of relief will in some shape or form become in certain congested divisions an almost annual necessity. Each of these changes will have the effect of shifting burdens—lightening them in some quarters and increasing them in others. This calculation must be made on the assumption that union and district rating already exists in the standard year, and this is accordingly provided for in the bill. It affects the amount of the agricultural grant, not by way of diminution, but by way of increase. This is due to the circumstance that the poor rate in towns somewhat exceeds that in rural areas and consequently union rating will relieve the towns as compared with the country to the extent of £20,000 per year. One-half of this sum, which under union rating will have to be borne by agricultural land, becomes under the bill a charge upon the Exchequer, and the total amount thus added to the grant is estimated at between £11,000 and £12,500 a year. I don't think the relief thus given to the towns can reasonably be begrudged, especially as there is a set-off to it arising from the definition of agricultural land in the bill. I anticipated that the total amount of the agricultural grant will amount to about £730,000 annually. As in England, so in Ireland there are certain charges which it is proposed to exclude in making the calculation, such as charges for extra police and compensation for malicious injuries. The proceeds of local license duties were by the English act of 1888 transferred to the local authorities in lieu of certain grants in aid annually voted by



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PARLIAMENT. IT IS PROPOSED TO DO THE SAME IN IRELAND.

(Nationalist cheers.) In Ireland the proceeds of local licenses amount to £200,000, whereas the grants in aid, except for the maintenance of roads and

CELEBRATE FOUR LAW CHANGES.

which are no longer to be voted, amount to £244,000. This deficiency of £44,000 is proposed to be covered by adding to the proceeds of the local licenses a fixed annual grant from the Exchequer of £70,000. In addition to the £44,000, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has consented to allow Ireland a further sum of £35,000 a year by way of margin. Adding this fixed annual grant to the £200,000, we reach the total of £279,000. Out of this total it is proposed to defray the charges now met, and of the grants in aid, and the following additional charges: (1) One-half of the salary of one trained nurse in every union in Ireland, actually employed and possessing prescribed qualifications (Nationalist cheers); (2) where the aggregate rate levied in any year in order to meet the amount of any railway or harbor charge exceeds sixpence in the pound, a sum equal to one-half of such excess. It is proposed that the grand juries shall meet for the transaction of fiscal and administrative business for the last time at the spring assizes of 1896 (Irish cheers. Mr. McNeill: It ought to be sooner) (laughter). The grand jury on that occasion will be called on to present for maintenance only, and not for construction of new works. The election of new bodies will follow in March, when they will have at their disposal so much of the agricultural grant as will have accumulated during the previous half year. The payment of the equivalent grant under the Local Taxation Act, 1896 will cease in September in the present year, and the agricultural grant will then take its place and begin to accrue. The interests of the existing officers have, of course, to be protected. The existing secretaries of grand juries are to become and continue secretaries of the county council for the space of one year after the commencement of the new régime. Special provision is, however, made for the Baron High Constable and poor-rate collectors. It will, no doubt, be said that the Government have set themselves a somewhat formidable task. The reform of local government in England was the work of two Bills, and the same case with regard to Scottish local government reform. The ground for this measure has already been explored, mapped out, and walked over in the Local Government Acts for England and Scotland. Granted the general provisions of the measure, the mere

MACHINERY CAN BE PROVIDED

by means of the words or clauses of existing Acts, altered in form, but not in substance. No doubt the machinery when it was first devised was a very proper subject for full and exhaustive discussion, but the discussion has already taken place on the English and Scottish Acts, and I think we are now justified in assuming that if the House desires to pass the Bill it is not necessary that the same discussion should take place over again. At all events, we have ventured to proceed on that assumption, and where machinery has to be provided or regulations are required to be enacted of a formal and non-contentious character we have given wide but at the same time well-defined powers. This will have the effect of greatly lightening the Bill, but at the same time we have hedged it round with precautions which

will prevent the withdrawal from the full discussion of the House of Commons of any matter proper and useful to be discussed. I think it will not be denied that the proposals I have outlined carry out the undertaking given by the Government to Ireland—a system of local administration substantially similar to that of England, and based upon the same broad and democratic foundation. The Irish Local Government Bill of 1892 was overruled with safeguards—(Irish laughter)—which at the time were considered necessary—(renewed laughter)—in order to meet the not unnatural apprehension of the land-owning class that they would be made the victims of oppressive extravagance on the part of the new popular body. These safeguards have disappeared from the present measure—(Irish cheers)—but in their place other safeguards have been substituted which the Government believe will be more efficient and less irritating (hear, hear). Speaking for myself, I am by no means certain that the prophets of evil in matters of extravagance will turn out to be right. I shall not be surprised if the new bodies prove to be more parsimonious than the old (Nationalist cheers). The experience of England and Scotland shows that in rural districts the local gentlemen are the leaders of the people, and the people regard them as such. In the past this has been the case in Ireland, and it may be again. (A Nationalist member: 'Not likely.') Everything depends upon this (cheers): Will they look askance at the new order, and stand aside in sullen silence, or play the more manful part and seek the more manful part (cheers). They may perhaps meet with rebuffs at first, but I believe they will prevail in the end. I am rejoiced to know that friends of mine in Ireland and in this House are determined to play their part in the local government of Ireland, and if this spirit is general, I, for one, firmly believe that the changes we now propose will carry a healing power rich in blessing for the future of Ireland (cheers).

[Conclusion on page 3.]

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