

BALFOUR AND ASQUITH ON AFRICA

Two Notable Speeches by the Party Leaders on the Union Bill—Both in Agreement—A Wonderful Issue Out of the Nation's Troubles.

The second reading of the bill for the union of South Africa was not, as might be supposed, a mere formality. It was a most important event in the history of the empire—one of the great landmarks of imperial policy, whose consequences (as he believed, Mr. Balfour) would be felt long after the present generation had passed away, and had been forgotten. He would be the last to underestimate the importance of the native question, but that was only a fraction of the big question outside it. What was the native question? Should it be brought to a concrete accomplishment of the dreams of successive statesmen belonging to all parties—dreams which had been indulged in for more than a generation, and which now, he hoped, were to receive final consummation. (Cheers.)

Mr. Balfour's Views.

Mr. Balfour said he thought there was not a single member present who did not feel that they were discussing one of the most important events in the history of the empire—one of the great landmarks of imperial policy, whose consequences (as he believed, Mr. Balfour) would be felt long after the present generation had passed away, and had been forgotten. He would be the last to underestimate the importance of the native question, but that was only a fraction of the big question outside it. What was the native question? Should it be brought to a concrete accomplishment of the dreams of successive statesmen belonging to all parties—dreams which had been indulged in for more than a generation, and which now, he hoped, were to receive final consummation. (Cheers.)

America's Equality Doctrine.

It was quite true, continued Mr. Balfour, that the problem presented by the relations between the races of European descent and the dark races of Africa—whether the latter were found in their original home or in the West Indies or in the Southern States of America—was one of extraordinary difficulty and complexity, and one that had no parallel in the history and experience of mankind, and none of those who had studied in a detached spirit the shapes that problem took in the United States or in Africa had arrived at any solution which we could look at as thoroughly conclusive or satisfactory or as likely to dominate the future development of the public as it went on. In the United States, as soon as they got rid of slavery, they were faced with the immediate principle of the constitution, which laid down in true eighteenth century language that "all men are equal." He did not believe that any man could approach this question wisely who really thought all men were equal in that sense. All men no doubt were from some points of view equal, but that the races of South Africa, or of Africa at all, were in any sense whatever the equals of men of European descent, so far as government, society, and the higher interests of civilization were concerned, was really an absurdity which everyone who seriously looked at this most difficult problem must put out of his mind if he was to solve the problem.

Negroes' Wrongs and Gains From White Men.

The last speaker had talked of the wrongs which the natives of South Africa had suffered at our hands. He (Mr. Balfour) was the last person to defend the injuries, and in some cases atrocities, with which in many parts of the world the stronger race had treated the weaker. But the House should not forget that everything which the weaker race had got from the nature of civilization it had got from the stronger race. The injuries had been great, but had the benefits been small? If the races of Europe had really, by centuries of difficulty and travail, obtained great rights and privileges for themselves, they had given some of those rights and privileges to men who were quite incapable of obtaining them for themselves. It was that very quality of races which made the difficulty. If they thought, as he was forced to think, that this inequality of the two races, for reasons which went far back beyond the dawn of history, into the very arcana of nature in which the different races were gradually differentiated, was of a fundamental character, they could not give them equal rights without threatening the whole fabric of civilization. (Hear, hear.) If that was true the problem came before them in this extraordinarily embarrassing shape. How was a race, determined to have for itself equal rights and constitutional freedom, and which thought it ought to extend to every race justice, equity, kindness, forbearance, and everything that education and equality in opportunity could give—how was that race to carry out its idea within the framework of any constitution?

Doubtful If the Cape's Is the Right Way.

Some of the speakers seemed to take the view that this great difficulty had been solved in the Cape constitution, and that it was a monstrous thing for this Parliament even to contemplate the possibility that the Cape constitution might require to be modified. Could they be so confident that the Cape constitution was going to be the right way of dealing with the problem? He was not at all sure; he had considerable doubts about it. Most of the critics of the bill when dealing with the larger aspect of the problem appeared to think that the best way

in which it could be solved was by a rigid, or at all events a strong, control kept by this Parliament upon the great union parliament, which they were in the act of creating. He thought that was quite an impossible policy. Let the House observe the inevitable result of such a policy. They would have the Union Parliament in South Africa possibly insufficiently animated by a zealous desire to do what they legitimately could for the great majority of the inhabitants. They might be reluctant to do all that we might desire. They would also have a Parliament sitting in this country, with no immediate responsibilities in South Africa, and subject to no possible danger to their own persons, their families, or their property. Did members think that this most difficult and delicate problem could really be solved by a fight between those two bodies, each of two equally strong, sitting thousands of miles from the other, with all the difference of perspective, which would make everybody in South Africa feel that their most vital interests were being decided for them by people who were not on the spot and knew nothing about the subject except what they could get from emotional speeches? He believed that was an impossible suggestion. (Hear, hear.)

Must Trust the New Parliament.

I ask every man (Mr. Balfour proceeded), who understands the working of free institutions, who understands the sort of collision that must inevitably occur when this kind of question comes up, whether he thinks the most difficult problem now confronting civilization all over the world is going to be solved by such a clumsy machinery as that of two equally strong, each sitting upon the box, each pulling a rein. (Cheers.) It cannot be done. I do not doubt that there will be mistakes made by the Union Parliament. I do not doubt that they may err in the direction of liberality towards the great mass of the native population, whom we are now entrusting to their charge. I think it is quite possible; it may even be probable. But if I had to choose in what direction I should look for the best hopes of finding a solution of this problem, surely it would be to confide to the great representative institutions which you are now creating all the duties, all the responsibilities of action, all the rewards if that action is to be successful, all the penalties if it is not. (Cheers.) I therefore venture to say, though I must associate myself with every speaker in the regrets that in some respects the bill is drafted as it is, I do not believe that these errors will be put right by either of the two possible courses that have been suggested.

Alternatives Examined.

One of those two is the course of having a dual Government, partly in Downing street and within this chamber, and partly in South Africa, to deal with this tremendous question. The other solution is to put in amendment in the bill, to the effect that the Government would threaten the very existence of the bill. I have not, as the Government have, personal access to those who have been responsible for dealing with this matter. I have not the information at their disposal, and I am not able to make with the same confidence any forecast as to the results of a change in the bill. I am reduced necessarily to considering merely the broad probabilities of the case. I should have anticipated that the case, absolutely stable that you might shake the whole fabric of it without the least fear of its coming to pieces before your eyes. If the Government tell us, as they tell us tonight, that they have these dark anticipations I do not see how any man as earnestly desirous as I am of seeing South African Union accomplished can hesitate to give them, on the responsibility of their utterances, his best support. (Cheers.)

Remains the Difficulties Which are Common to all Attempts at Union.

In South Africa, in addition to all those universal difficulties, there are others which are local and peculiar—difficulties of the feelings between men of different races, and the difficulties of a recent war—difficulties which I declare any statesman looking at the thing before-hand and prophesying the result would have said made it impossible to carry the thing through at all. Race, language, local traditions, local jealousies—are those not difficulties so great that we ought to risk nothing if the result of taking a risk would be to bring about our ears a fabric so carefully constructed on so hard a site and with engineering problems which were so almost insuperable, but which the architect had contrived to overcome?

A Most Wonderful Issue Out of the Troubles.

Yet apparently some of us are going to threaten that fabric in the very moment of its completion. In this matter I personally am going to support the Government with regard to anything which they tell me is essential to the passing of the bill. (Cheers.) I am not going to make myself responsible, directly or indirectly, for wrecking a measure on which the future of South Africa so obviously depends. (Cheers.)

It would be a melancholy thing if any untoward climax should come at the end of the long South African drama, which we all thought was going to have a happy ending. We here in this chamber, just as the ministers who have come to us from South Africa are, have been divided in opinion on such questions as the war and other of the vital issues with which this country and South Africa have been concerned in the last ten, fifteen or twenty years. Whatever opinions we hold as to the past everybody, looking back on that past, will agree with me that this bill—soon, I hope, to become an act—is a most wonderful issue out of all this past, this division, this battles, bloodshed, devastations—all the horrors of war and all the difficulties of peace. (Cheers.) I don't believe the world shows anything like it in its whole history. (Cheers.) But how

has it come about? No great issue comes of one or two alone. It is always a complex of causes that produces great results. I think one cause was that we in this House, however violently we may have differed about the war itself, all agreed that the idea of having in South Africa one European race dominating another, the idea that anything should issue from the war which did not give equal rights and privileges to every man of European descent in that country, was abhorrent. (Cheers.)

Tribute to South African Leaders.

The other great fact, of course, was the admirable statesmanship shown by the leaders of opinion in South Africa. (Cheers.) Whatever their opinions, on whichever side they fought, they have never allowed what we thought to be the almost inevitable bitterness incident to such strife as ended in 1902, to interfere with their clear vision of what was absolutely necessary for the good of all the white population in that country. (Cheers.) Men of the most widely divergent opinions in the past, and possibly of widely divergent opinions as to the only possible way of dealing with South Africa was to play its part in the world, as it most assuredly will, is by a system of equal rights and that freedom which we have given now in full measure to every colony in which the European race is the predominant element. It has been an extraordinary development, and I do not think that even now the magnitude of that result is adequately appreciated by students of history or by contemporary critics—a result which I think stands absolutely alone. I believe that this unique historic phenomenon, embodied and given substance to in this bill, is going to produce the most admirable fruits in the future. (Cheers.)

Whatever solutions we may have about the solution of the problem of race—and I believe that we may have whatever difficulties we may foresee in the future—the fact that the black population is about five times as large as the white population, and is likely to remain, so far as I know, in excess of the white population—

Mr. Lyttelton interrupted Mr. Balfour and whispered something to him. Mr. Balfour—Of course, my right honorable friend has quite rightly interrupted me. By the race question I did not mean the English and Dutch question. In the question of politics we talk of Dutch and English as a race problem, but, of course, that is not a race problem at all. (Cheers.) The blood is the same—(cheers)—and race in the true sense of the word does not come in. I am talking of the real race problem.

Better Not to Meddle.

Darkness hangs over that problem—the problem of European as against men of a wholly different potentiality of culture—and I do not look forward to it with any assurance. I doubt whether anybody looks forward to it with any assurance. All we can do now is to make the best of the situation, and I am convinced that, speaking broadly and without reference to this or that particular amendment suggested in the bill, the only possible way—the only glimmer of hope—of dealing successfully with the real problem of South Africa is not to attempt to meddle with it ourselves, but having made this union parliament, to trust the men of like way of thinking with ourselves to rise to the occasion—which will most undoubtedly come—and to the best of their ability meet this new problem with all the courage and all the humanity and sympathy possible, unhampered by interference from this island, interference which, however well meant, may be ignorant or whether it be not put forward by those who are put forward by those whom we endeavor to control. (Cheers.)

Premier on the Position.

Mr. Asquith: The right hon. gentleman (Mr. Balfour) has referred in eloquent and generous terms to the articles embodied in this bill as the fulfilment of a long-cherished dream—a dream the full accomplishment of which in this year 1909, would have seemed ten, or even five, years ago to most practical judges of affairs, one of the ideal and most fantastic of visions. (Cheers.) The bill embodies that arrangement, and after listening carefully to all the criticisms which have been made in the course of the debate to this or that detail in it I can not bring myself to think that there is a single member in any quarter of the House who when the question is put from the chair that the bill be read a second time will take upon himself the responsibility of raising his voice against the attainment of this most beneficent end. (Cheers.) As the right hon. gentleman has referred in eloquent and generous terms to the articles embodied in this bill as the fulfilment of a long-cherished dream—a dream the full accomplishment of which in this year 1909, would have seemed ten, or even five, years ago to most practical judges of affairs, one of the ideal and most fantastic of visions. (Cheers.) The bill embodies that arrangement, and after listening carefully to all the criticisms which have been made in the course of the debate to this or that detail in it I can not bring myself to think that there is a single member in any quarter of the House who when the question is put from the chair that the bill be read a second time will take upon himself the responsibility of raising his voice against the attainment of this most beneficent end. (Cheers.)

Spasmodic Interference.

It is a matter on which I should be very loth to dogmatize. But I am not sure that I take quite so strong a view as the right honorable gentleman does of the inherent difficulties of the situation which exist between races of this kind. (Ministerial cheers.) On the contrary, the experience we have gained in Cape Colony does show that differences which are certainly im-

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planted by nature, and which sometimes seem permanent, may yield in a greater or less degree to judicious treatment and to wise and humane arrangements. (Cheers.) There is in many of these races—I don't say in all, but certainly there is in some of the races which inhabit South Africa—a capacity, a potentiality of progress which it ought to be the object of every wise Government and representative institution to encourage and stimulate. (Cheers.) I don't think there is any real difference of opinion between us on that point.

Mr. Balfour—No.

Mr. Asquith—Where I entirely agree with the right honorable gentleman is that, as I think, both common sense and experience shows where that state of things exists, however hopeful you may be of improvement in the future, you ought to allow the community itself with whom the responsibility lies, which will benefit by improvement and which will suffer by deterioration, to determine how from time to time, and summing that this progressive process is going on—its representative and parliamentary institutions should be adjusted to the existing state of circumstances. Any control or interference from outside, particularly interference from a distance, spasmodic interference—because we have so many things to do, so many interests special to ourselves, that at the best our interference is capricious (cheers), spasmodic, often ill-informed and sometimes sentimental. Interference of that kind is the very worst of all interference in the interests of the natives themselves. (Cheers.) On the one hand it threatens to wreck the happy progress of free institutions, leaves a constant source of smarting resentment in the minds of those to whom you have granted a full measure of self-government. On the other hand, with the best intentions in the world, you will often do more harm than good to the clients of your mistaken exertions.

May I add this? You are much more likely to have a satisfactory development of the native question and the various problems arising from it in South Africa, when the question is taken in hand, not by the several states individually and independently, but by a common body, representing South Africa as a whole. (Cheers.) You will then gather together a much greater volume of knowledge and experience, you will have a larger representation of different interests and points of view, and you are very likely to have a somewhat wider outlook and more statesmanlike view of the manner in which this question ought to be handled. (Cheers.) One of the many incidents and advantages of union is that it will probably be the harbinger of a native policy more consistent, and some of us may think it more enlightened, than that which has been pursued in the past. (Cheers.)

The franchise and the Protectorates. Dealing with the specific points which had been raised in the course of the discussion, Mr. Asquith said that as regarded the franchise and the protectorates he did not think the provisions in the bill were open to serious criticism at all. The franchise remained as it was, and the Cape native franchise was protected by the requirement that any law altering that franchise must be passed by a two-thirds majority of the two Houses.

sitting together, and by the fact that such a law would have to be specially reserved for the assent of the crown. As to the protectorates, they stood on a different footing. The natives in the protectorates were not subjected to the jurisdiction of the Cape Government and Parliament. There—and I hold this most strongly—we stand in the position of trustees. (Cheers.) We have given them promises and pledges, and we are bound to see that those promises are fulfilled and those pledges not violated. (Cheers.) If I thought there was anything in the bill or schedules which was inconsistent with or would hamper the performance of the imperial obligation I should be the first to agree that it was a difference not in detail but in principle, and that it was impossible to make concessions. (Cheers.) But I did not find that that was the case. The schedule was intended as a safeguard to the transferred protectorates, and the important point was that a transfer could not take place at all unless the King, with the advice of the privy council, which meant the cabinet—executive, which meant the privy council on the part of the Imperial Government had a voice, and the ultimate voice, in relation to these matters. South Africa did not

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deny our title in the least; on the contrary, on the very face of the bill it admitted that title, and invited us to exercise it.

Regret at the Color Bar.

Now I come, continued Mr. Asquith, to what has been the main object of attack, and that is the color bar, the non-eligibility of those not of European descent, to sit in the Union Parliament. I am bound to associate myself with what has been said by every speaker in every quarter of the House, and I express deep regret that this provision has been inserted. I believe opinion in this country is almost unanimous in its starting a new state it has, to say the least, an invidious look, that a man who ex hypothesi has

obtained the suffrages of a majority of a particular constituency, should not be allowed to sit in Parliament because of the blood that flows in his veins. There is no difference of opinion on that point.

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