

Our Ottawa Letter

Government Refuses Free Wheat and Free Implements—Western Conservatives Silent
(By The Guide Special Correspondent)

Ottawa, April 24.—The budget debate which has been in progress for over a fortnight was terminated at midnight on Friday when the government forces, by a majority of 42, rejected an amendment proposed by Sir Wilfrid Laurier. The amendment was as follows:

"That this House is of opinion that, in view of the prevailing economic conditions of the country it is advisable to place wheat, wheat products, and agricultural implements on the free list; and that without doing injustice to any class, steps should be taken to alleviate the high cost of living by considerate removal of taxation."

It will be observed that the Liberal leader and his party, while adhering to free wheat, free flour, and free agricultural implements, does not in this amendment commit the party definitely to the policy of free food, as enunciated by him in his Hamilton speech, and which he described at the time as "a policy for the moment." As a matter of fact Sir Wilfrid did not on any subsequent occasion come out flat-footed for the placing of all foodstuffs on the free list and the supposition is that this policy does not appeal to all members of the party. The probable explanation of the somewhat indefinite wording of the amendment is that the opposition is not anxious to antagonize any more than is necessary the manufacturers of the East. Another reason, undoubtedly, is that the free food policy would make it possible for the Conservatives to conduct an effective campaign amongst the farmers, more particularly of Eastern Canada, with arguments to show that such a policy, if brought into effect, would lessen the market value of the products of the farm. Sir Wilfrid has evidently figured out that the free wheat and free agricultural implements declaration will provide him with good fighting ground in the West at the next general election, while the astute general declaration in regard to the tariff has been so framed as to do the least possible damage in the industrial centres of Eastern Canada. The omission of any reference to the necessity for, or desirability of, an increase in the British preference will doubtless be noted with regret by the people of the West.

In the course of an able speech the Opposition leader espoused the cause of the farmers in their demands for free wheat and free agricultural implements. He censured the government for its failure to take any definite steps to cure the existing economic situation and to help the country thru the present depression. Mr. White, while admitting these things, had stated that there was no occasion for alarm; that we could well afford to wait in peace for the reaction, and that as regards the amount of reform he would make, it would be simply to tighten the screws upon a few items of the tariff and to make some semblance of reduction upon farm implements, "a reduction so insignificant that it in fact added insult to injury."

The Mixed Farming Bogey

Later on Sir Wilfrid said that the demand of the farmers for wider markets had been rudely denied them. Instead they had been given advice with a plenteous hand. They had been told to go into mixed farming. He thought it could be depended upon that the western farmers will go into mixed farming as soon as they find it more profitable than wheat raising. Sir Wilfrid maintained that the Canadian miller would be able to hold his own with the American miller in the event of free wheat being granted. In closing, he said that the tariff is not immutable like the laws of the Medes and Persians. It should be readjusted from time to time to bring it into harmony with changed conditions. It was said that the tariff was all his own creation. The tariff was of Liberal creation in 1897, but eighteen years have passed since, and the time has come when we must have a revision in order to correct errors and to meet changed conditions. The party, he said, was ready at any time to accept a challenge made by the minister of finance

and to go before the people on the issue. Hon. George E. Foster, who replied, was rather effective in his criticism of the leader of the opposition, because of his changed attitude in regard to free food. In Hamilton he was very courageous. There he expressed the belief that the only relief for the consumer must come by taking the tariff off food products and letting the people have their food duty free. "But," said Mr. Foster, "where is he today, and why is he on more backward ground today than he was two months ago? He has no answer but the politician's answer—the men behind him and the men from whom he expected support have told him: 'Wrong again. Right about face,' and he has made the right about face. There is the courageous, heroic leader of the party of reform. Convinced by logic and the experience of thirty years as to what he ought to do, he yet snuffs himself out and leads along at the tail of a small drove which is carting free wheat, free agricultural implements and 'considerate removal of taxation.'"

Misquotes Flour Prices

Mr. Foster got into a difficulty in dealing with the flour question, by unintentionally quoting prices of flour in Great Britain under the impression that the prices he read were reduced to the barrel basis whereas the reduction was to the 280 pounds basis. At first he maintained that his figures were right but finally admitted that they had been put in his hands just before he commenced to speak and that he had not had the opportunity to verify them. It was a most unusual thing to see Mr. Foster, who is undoubtedly a great master of statistics, fall down on such a simple matter as the quotation of prices on flour. He did not enjoy the situation himself and it was noticeable that he "lost his stride" during the remainder of his speech. Mr. Foster went over the usual arguments against free wheat and free agricultural implements. Referring more particularly to the opening for Canadian wheat in the United States he said that there was a vast unfilled market in wheat and flour importing countries for the Canadian product. One thing he thought certain, taking it by and large, "the country which has a surplus of any product must seek its market in that country which has not a surplus of that product. It is not defensible that a country which has a surplus of 200,000,000 bushels of wheat should seek its natural or profitable market in a country that has a surplus of about the same quantity."

White's Policy Sectional

It is impossible to make more than a casual reference to the speech of Dr. Michael Clark, which was undoubtedly one of the most effective criticisms of high protectionists and their theories ever heard in the House of Commons. He said he desired to call the attention of the house to the fact that in his tariff changes the finance minister seems to have been absolutely innocent of the thought that there are either farmers or consumers in this country. The tariff changes have been carried out in the interest of producers of certain commodities. In the case of free wheat he had given weight and attention to the arguments of the millers while the representations of the farmers had been ignored. In dealing with agricultural implements fifty per cent. of the case he presented to the house was made up of information relating purely to the people engaged in the agricultural implement industry. "He has examined the books of these people; he has found out that they are the bankers of the farmers. I wonder it did not strike the minister that he ought to have examined into the financial condition of the farmers who are in such a condition that the implement makers have to be their bankers. In regard to the iron duties he also examined the iron industry but he does not seem to have seen the need of looking at the effect of this change in duty upon anyone except those engaged in the industry of steel and iron. Yet he pretends that this is a national policy. It is sectional, nothing but sectional, and always sectional."

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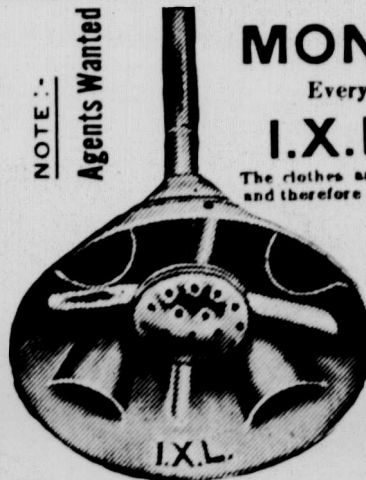


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