

A UNIONIST POLI FOR IRELAND.

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WITH A PREFACE BY

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PREFACE.

THE sketch of a Unionist Policy for Ireland presented in the following pages is not, and does not pretend to be, a final and authoritative statement of the views of any section of the Unionist party.

It is an earnest attempt to exhibit for further discussion and consideration a practical solution of the great problems raised by Mr. Gladstone's Bills, the proposals in which were condemned by the House of Commons and the country as unsafe, unworkable, and incapable of affording a final or satisfactory settlement.

Before entering on the discussion of any alternative plans, the question naturally arises, what necessity is there for any alternative at all—why cannot you let it alone? The answer, however, is two-fold; in the first place the existence of the Liberal Unionists, at all events as a separate party, is based on their belief that the principles of Liberalism may be conciliated with a safe policy for Ireland, which shall preserve unquestioned the essential unity of the three Kingdoms, while conceding everything in the shape of practical reforms and of an extension of local government that can be shown to be necessary in the interests of Ireland; and in the second place he must be a blind student of history, and especially of Irish history, who believes that a merely negative policy can do more than produce a temporary result, or that coercion in any form is a specific against widespread discontent or a remedy for grievances that have a real foundation. It is right that law should be respected and that order should be maintained. To do this is the

duty of all Governments; and it is above all the interest of a democratic Government to secure the observance of the law, which is the expression of the people's will, which is made, revoked or amended at their discretion, and which is their only sure guarantee against anarchy on the one hand and despotism on the other. But it is clearly the duty of the majority who make the law to see that it is just, and as far as possible in harmony with the sentiments of all sections of the people. It may be, of course, that the demands of a minority at a particular time are incompatible with the safety or well-being of the whole nation, and in that case they must be sternly refused; but the existence of a demand, supported by a large minority, is in itself a reason for careful and impartial investigation of the claim, and for the concession of so much of it, at least, as can be granted without risk of injury to the majority.

At the present moment rather more than three millions of Irishmen demand self government and a separate Parliament, and they are supported by a large minority of the people of Great Britain. To grant this demand would, in the opinion of nearly two millions of Irishmen, and a majority of Englishmen and Scotchmen, lead immediately to strife and civil war in Ireland, and in the end to the disruption of the United Kingdom. What that means few have probably thought out, and none can predict with certainty; but those who think, as the Liberal Unionists do, that it would paralyse an influence that has been potent in the civilisation of the world, and that it would weaken and divide a beneficent Empire that has been slowly built up by the courage, the tenacity, and the wisdom of many generations, may be forgiven if, even at

the risk of being called traitors and impostors, they hold steadily to the ancient ways of Liberalism, and refuse absolutely to share the responsibility for projects which would put in jeopardy their great inheritance. In taking this stand they are consistent, though at the sacrifice of much that public men hold dear; but they would cease to deserve this title if, at the same time that they resist to the uttermost changes that would be destructive of the best interests of their country, they did not also search out and examine into the causes underlying this dangerous agitation, and seek to remove the grievances which give to it its strength and importance. This has been the constant aspiration of all Liberals during the present century, and we should be false to our professions and to our creed if we abandoned it now, because a great leader at the end of his career has thrown up the task in despair, and having failed in successive attempts either to cajole or to compel the discontented party to submit, has suddenly gone over to them, with those of his followers whom he could induce to keep him company, and is now fighting on their side against all his former declarations. It is our duty, and, it may be added, it is our only hope of safety, to meet this unparalleled desertion by a strenuous adherence to the old lines; and we shall fail if we do not show, not only that the policy, hitherto identified with the enemies of our country, and now suddenly adopted by so many of our old companions in arms, ought still to be resisted and rejected, but also that the objects which its authors profess to seek can be better and more surely attained by methods in strict accordance with the old Liberal faith.

Liberal Unionists, then, because they are Liberals, and

Conservative Unionists, because they are Unionists, must alike recognise the necessity of seeking for some permanent remedy for Irish discontent, and the first step must be to discover its material cause. Does there exist a statesman or a politician who is not in his own mind convinced that the material causes are economic and agrarian? Ireland is, and always has been, wretchedly poor, and the great bulk of the population is chiefly dependent on the land, which under present circumstances provides them with an insufficient subsistence. It is useless to enquire whether a more enterprising race would have overcome natural difficulties, although the comparative prosperity and industrial development of the North [of Ulster] prove that these disadvantages, which it shares with other parts of Ireland, are not insuperable by an energetic people. But it is sufficient to know that we cannot change the race, and the only question that remains is whether we can change the conditions. The Imperial Parliament, if not omnipotent, can at any rate do something; and, in the first place, it may stimulate the energy of the people and assist in the development of its industries. If we are to continue to govern Ireland as a part of the United Kingdom we must do for Ireland at least as much as a patriotic and capable Irish Parliament would accomplish. Because England is the richest country in the world, and because the Anglo-Saxon race is the most energetic and pushing on the face of the globe, we have no right to conclude that public works, which are safely left to individual energy and private speculation here, can be entrusted to similar agencies in Ireland. In no other country, whether in Europe, Asia, Australasia, or America, have public

works been carried out entirely without State assistance. The marvellous development of prosperity in our great Indian dependency is almost wholly due to the magnificent network of communication created under Government guarantees or by its initiative, while it may be added in passing that the peace of that vast dominion has been secured by concessions to native opinion on the subject of land tenure. The writer of the following articles has shown from the report of the recent Commission in what ways the development of the resources of Ireland might be assisted by the action of the State, and unless the people of the United Kingdom are prepared to recognise this obligation they are not justified in standing in the way of a Government which would at least attempt to fulfil it. The risk of such an investment is not a serious one. Railways, tramways, and other means of communication have never yet failed to pay a reasonable interest when they have been economically and honestly constructed. There is in this case no possibility of repudiation. The fares and rates are collected without difficulty as the service is rendered. There can be no strike of passengers or freighters against railways, and the only risk lies in the possibility that the traffic may be too small to pay. But experience has shown in India and elsewhere that the facility of communication creates the traffic, and though it may not return sufficient to tempt speculation, it is almost certain to pay the moderate interest exacted by the State.

But, important as is this branch of the subject it sinks into insignificance beside the question of the Land. Whatever the State may do to promote general industry it is certain that the majority of the people will still look

to the land for their means of support, and if they are unsettled, or dissatisfied with their tenures, there can be no peace in Ireland.

It is because the leaders of recent agitation have appealed to agrarian discontent that they have been more successful than their predecessors. Whatever their ultimate objects may have been, they have consistently promulgated, as Mr. Gladstone said at Leeds, the gospel of sheer plunder. In all their speeches and in all their writings Home Rule has been secondary, and agrarian revolution has been primary. The great recommendation of Home Rule in the eyes of the peasantry has been that it would lead to their possession of the land on their own terms, and nothing is more absolutely certain than that if the tenantry possessed the land in freehold the agitation for Home Rule would altogether change its character. Is it not the duty of statesmen to appreciate these facts, to recognise this sentiment—the earth hunger of all agricultural people—and to endeavour to satisfy it by just and reasonable means. It is now at least a quarter of a century since Mr. Bright began to advocate this solution of the Irish Question, and all experience since obtained shows that it is by such measures and not by tinkering with rents that finality can be obtained and the Irish people contented. The returns of sales effected under various acts of Parliament, and especially under Lord Ashbourne's Act, show that the most striking improvement both in the temper of the people and in the condition of the holdings, has followed the change of ownership, and that the payment of instalments and interest has invariably been accomplished with exemplary regularity. It is natural that in these circumstances some

persons should look to an indefinite extension of Lord Ashbourne's Act as all that is necessary. But there is a fatal objection. If the extent of these transactions were greatly increased, and if the number of debtors to the State became very large, nothing would be easier than for the agitators at some favourable time, or after a bad harvest, to bring about a strike against payment of interest, just as they have in the past induced a strike against payment of rent. As there would be only one landlord, and that landlord would be the unpopular British Government, and as it would be easy to represent the purchase price agreed upon as exorbitant, there would be every temptation to strike a double blow both against the British connection and against what would be described as the British tribute. Where there are a number of landlords to be dealt with, the difference in the conditions makes a general strike difficult or impossible, but the extensive development of purchase under Lord Ashbourne's Act would concentrate the agitation against a single and impersonal authority. In this connection it is well to take warning by the speeches of Mr. Davitt, Mr. Healey, Mr. Dillon, and other prominent Nationalists who have not obscurely threatened a repudiation of obligations under any large scheme of purchase with a British guarantee. To these considerations may be added the fact, which no experienced electioneerer will question, that the constituencies of Great Britain would emphatically condemn and probably destroy any government which largely increased the liability of this country for the purpose of buying out the landlords of Ireland. The scheme proposed in the present volume is not open to this objection. It rests entirely on Irish

credit and Irish resources, and attempts to secure, by self interest, a public feeling in favour of the discharge of just obligations and against the defaulter. If this object can be obtained there is no doubt that in every case the land will fall into the hands of solvent tenants, and those who will not pay or cannot pay will have to emigrate or find other occupations.

It behoves the landowners in Ireland most seriously to consider these proposals. They may rest assured that no further large assistance from British credit will be forthcoming, and if they cannot accept the present or some similar alternative they will be doomed to see their property slowly disappearing with successive reductions of rent, or wholly confiscated by the more drastic proceedings of an Irish Parliament; and in this case, though the evil done may be repaired so far as the Government of the country is concerned, their loss will never be recovered. After the defeat of Napoleon the Monarchy was restored in France, and the work of the Revolution in large part undone, but even the Monarchy and the Reactionaries were powerless to restore the land to its former owners.

There is one point in the scheme here submitted which is worthy of careful consideration. It may be doubtful if it would be wise, in the first instance at any rate, to proceed by way of compulsion or in a wholesale manner. There is much to be said for a more gradual change, and probably it would be found better not only to limit the sums devoted annually to the purpose, but also to restrict the application in the first instance to cases where the landlord and tenants agree, or where either the landlord or the whole of the tenants on an estate are willing to avail themselves of the plan.

There remains only to consider the alternative scheme of Home Rule or extension of Local Government propounded in these pages. It is clear that the suggested land reform must precede the political change, and until the long-standing quarrel between the owners and the occupiers has been compounded, it will not be safe to trust the latter with full control over the property of the former. This was the avowed opinion of Mr. Gladstone in introducing his two Bills, and it must be considered an essential condition of every proposal.

But assuming that the social war which now exists in Ireland were terminated by a reasonable settlement, there are strong reasons for desiring on the one hand to relieve the Imperial Parliament of some of the constantly increasing burden of its local work, and on the other hand to open to Irishmen in their own country a larger field of local ambition, together with greater liberty of action, and greater personal responsibility. Such a result is surely not beyond the reach of statesmanship, and might be effected without in the least impairing the authority of Parliament, and without creating legislatures which from their nature would infallibly tend to become co-ordinate powers. The scheme elaborated in these pages is a tentative proposal, but at least it is not open to the objections which were fatal to Mr. Gladstone's ill considered Bill. The intention of the Unionist Party to consider at the proper time some such development of local government would prove the sincerity of their determination to pursue a policy of justice and conciliation, and it would justify their continued resistance to the schemes of anarchy and separation to which their opponents seem to be committed.

It is said that a moderate scheme would not satisfy the

extreme party, nor put an end to agitation. That is true; and so long as agitation continues to be profitable to every patriot who engages in it, it is certain that there will be many found to risk a few weeks or months of mild imprisonment for the chance of securing such a prize as Mr. Parnell's when, without a word of thanks to his paymasters and dupes, he pocketed a testimonial of £40,000 as a reward for his disinterested services.

But the question is, would a policy of the kind here indicated satisfy the vast majority of the people of Ireland? Would it turn the attention of the tenants to making the best of the land which would be their own? Would it convince them that nothing more was to be gained by violence and disorder? Would they recognise in it a friendly and practical interest on the part of the Government, and people of Great Britain in their material welfare? Would they find in it opportunities for improving their condition, serving their country and for securing the changes in their immediate surroundings which are most necessary to their happiness? If the answers to these questions be in the affirmative it matters little what may be said or thought by the well-paid representatives of Irish-American hostility and the leaders of what Mr. Gladstone formerly called the anti-British and anti-loyal party.

I hope that the proposals here set forth may receive impartial consideration and the fullest discussion. For myself I believe that it is in this direction that the ultimate solution of the Irish question is to be found.

J. CHAMBERLAIN.

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