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NEW EDITION.

A MANUAL
OF
POLITICAL QUESTIONS
OF THE DAY:

AND THE ARGUMENTS ON EITHER SIDE.

With an Introduction.

BY

SYDNEY BUXTON, M.P.,

AUTHOR OF "FINANCES AND POLITICS," "HANDBOOK TO POLITICAL
QUESTIONS," ETC.; EDITOR OF "IMPERIAL PARLIAMENT SERIES."

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PREFACE TO FOURTH EDITION

THE former editions of this little book, as well as those of the parent "Handbook," have been so well received, that the author feels justified in offering to the public a new and enlarged edition.

The sections omitted from the previous editions are those on *London Municipal Reform*, *Local Self-Government*, *Local Taxation*, and *Tenant Right*, as being no longer required; while those on *Leasehold Enfranchisement*, *the Gottenburg System*, *Registration of Titles to Land*, and "*Distress*," have been replaced by subjects of greater or more pressing importance. All the above-named subjects will, however, be found discussed in the seventh edition of the "HANDBOOK TO POLITICAL QUESTIONS."

The new subjects included in this edition are *Free Schools*, *Shorter Parliaments*, *Compensation in the Liquor Trade*, and the question of an *Eight Hours Law*. The whole book has been carefully revised.

It was in no way the object of this book, as some seem to have supposed, to point out which arguments are weighty, which worthless, which are sound, and which rotten; nor to arrange the arguments in the order of their

importance. Its existence will, I hope, have been justified, if it has been of any practical use to the public ; and if, by showing how much sound argument can usually be urged on the "other side of the question," it has, in any degree, inculcated toleration.

S. B.

February, 1891.

INTRODUCTION.

We are in this country fortunate enough to possess a system of party government, which, while it divides the political life of Great Britain into two or more parties, and gives rise to angry argument and heated discussion, does not degenerate into animosity. There is, consequently, nothing to prevent men of opposite modes of thought from remaining on amicable and intimate terms, or from discussing temperately the questions on which they differ.

The reasons for the general absence of personal animosity between the rival political parties are not far to seek. In the first place, there is no diversity of opinion on the general question of the form of government best adapted for the country; and, though the various Estates of the Realm, which together make up the body politic, may struggle for power and influence, and from time to time may vary in constitution, it is taken for granted that a Sovereign who reigns but does not govern, is for us the best Head of the State. The country is, consequently, saved from any agitation and intrigue, having for its object a change of Dynasty, or the institution of a Republic; and there is no Pretender caballing against the occupant of the throne. The Sovereign, and the supporters of the existing form of government, need not, therefore, be constantly engaged in attempting to crush or paralyse the Opposition, in order to preserve their own power, or office; to save themselves from exile, imprisonment, perhaps even death. The Opposition, on their part, are not tempted to engage in secret plotting, to which they would be certain to descend if the despairing conviction were forced upon them that their only hope of participating in the government of the country was by a complete upheaval and reversal of the existing state of things.

Then, again, there is no hopelessness in English politics. Though, from time to time, one of the two great parties in

the State has been forced to linger for many a weary year in the cold shade of opposition, while the other has been enjoying the sweets of office and the fruits of victory, a turn of Fortune's wheel has always come, sooner or later; the minority has converted itself into a majority, ousted the Government, and taken its seat on the Treasury bench. The party in opposition has the ever-present consciousness that within three or four, or at most six years, it will of necessity have an opportunity of appealing to the intellect, to the interests, or to the passions of the nation. The sanguine expectation of future success which animates politicians, whilst it keeps alive a knowledge of, and an interest in politics, and prevents the defeated party from descending to violence and intrigue, has also, in Parliament and out, a powerful moderating influence on the Opposition; inasmuch as they are aware that at any moment they may be called upon to undertake the responsibilities and the cares of office.

Thus party contest, while occasionally effervescing and bubbling over unpleasantly, is honest, sober, and sedate at bottom, and mostly kept within reasonable bounds.

On the other hand, the historic past of the two great Parties, the genuine divergence of opinion and principle, the real interest which is taken in matters of policy and politics, are sufficient to keep alive the rivalry between them in its best and most ennobling form, and to prevent it from degenerating into a mere conflict between the "ins" and the "outs." Other countries—more especially, perhaps, some of our own colonies—point the moral for us, that where no traditional or fundamental difference of opinion or principle exists, party politics cannot flourish in a satisfactory form, but reduce themselves to the low level of personal strife, desire for place, the pitting of class against class—ignoble aims and sordid aspirations.

England is not likely to fall on such evil days. Even when the momentous question which now dominates English politics has been laid to rest, there will yet remain, awaiting solution, many great questions of national importance, involving principles and details on which the two parties conscientiously differ. Moreover, we may well believe that, with an Empire such as ours, when the questions of the immediate present, and those looming large in the

distance, have been settled, others of equal moment will come to the fore.

Party government, as it exists amongst us, possesses this further incidental advantage, that each side is interested in the orderliness and intelligence of the other, whilst the country itself is almost as vitally concerned in the conduct of the Opposition as in that of the Government.

The stronger and more capable the Opposition—with due regard to the existence of a proper working majority on the Ministerial side—the better, more thorough, and lasting will be the work and legislation of the Government. A weak, lazy, or stupid Opposition cannot exercise half the influence for good, either within or without the House, that will be exercised by one vigilant and strong. A Government which has to bear the brunt of intelligent, searching, and able criticism, will have a great additional inducement to propose well-thought-out plans, high-principled schemes, and measures which will commend themselves to the nation as well as to the Ministerialists.

Moreover, a well commanded, well drilled, and united Opposition will be less of a hindrance to the proper legislation of the Government, than one which is broken up into factions, has little respect for itself, and less regard for the dignity of the House. An Opposition such as this not only unreasonably delays the business of the nation, but brings discredit on itself and on the House of Commons.

In order to obtain an intelligent Opposition as well as a strong Government, the electors must be able to discriminate between the different parties, and to weigh the merits of different candidates. They must examine for themselves, as best they can, each political question as it arises, so that—though they may not perhaps be able to make a very profound study of the situation—they may look at it from an intelligent and common-sense point of view, and cast their votes on the side which seems to them to be most in the right, and which, for the time being, appears to be most likely to promote the welfare of the country.

It cannot be to the interest of either party to veil the truth from the elector, or to keep him in darkness and ignorance. On the one hand, the Liberals may, and doubtless do, imagine that it is to their special interest that light should be shed, intelligence awakened, ignorance dispelled,

and knowledge increased. They believe, or ought to believe, so firmly in the truth and vitality of their principles, as to be convinced that, the more these are studied and understood, the wider and more lasting will be their influence. Indeed, if they do not hold this faith, they are either hypocrites, false to their political creed, or meaningless repeaters of parrot cries.

But, on the other hand, the Conservatives must have the same implicit belief in the truth, justice, and eternity of the principles which they profess; and if they are convinced of the righteousness of their cause, they must rejoice to see just intelligence awakened and increased. They also must feel that the more capable a man is of thinking and understanding, the more will the doctrines in which they believe be acceptable and accepted by him.

If, then, it be allowed by the advocates of both parties—as it surely must be—that increased knowledge is an advantage; and if they hold—as they surely must—that the arguments advanced by their own side outweigh those which can be urged by the other, neither can shrink from the test of having these arguments placed fairly side by side, for both must be convinced that the mind of the intelligent and unprejudiced inquirer will incline towards their own creed.

Unfortunately—though the fact may not be without compensatory advantages—men are far too apt to make up their minds that they are in the right in thinking this or that, simply and solely because somebody else thinks it, or has thought it. Such men, no doubt, are not troubled with many qualms of conscience, but wrap themselves up in the impenetrable cloak of unthinking deference to authority of opinion, and, whilst professing to be open to conviction, stubbornly refuse to see that there can possibly be more than one side to a question.

Those, however, who take the trouble to examine both sides carefully, will be ready to admit the force of opposing arguments; and, when they have weighed them well, and after anxious doubt and laborious thought have made up their minds, they will feel that, with themselves at least, the stronger arguments have prevailed, and that their convictions are founded on truth and justice.

In no case can a man of intelligence allow himself to

remain for ever doubting and hesitating ; right or wrong, he finds he must range himself on one side or the other ; and the step once taken, his opinions naturally become stronger and stronger, he becomes more and more convinced that his party is in the right. It is well that this should be so, for without an instinctive inclination to believe in the truth of one's opinions, the mind would be enveloped in a mist of doubt, party government would be impossible, and politics would remain a chaos without form and void. "Very few," as Hartley Coleridge said, "can comprehend the whole truth ; and it much concerns the general interest that every portion of that truth should have interested and passionate advocates."

There exists, however, a class of men—a very large class—who knowing nothing and caring less about politics, are politically everything by turns and nothing long, and who unfortunately make up in many constituencies the margin of voters who turn the scale of the election. These are the men whose wavering conviction opposing candidates must make it their business to arrest, by plying them with every argument that can fairly be urged, with the hope that one at least may strike home.

The spread of education, of newspapers and literature, the increased means of communication and locomotion, are gradually decreasing the numbers of this neutral host, and no efforts should be spared on our part in enticing as many as we can of the soldiers composing this body to come over to us, and in ourselves enlisting recruits who would otherwise join its ranks. This army consists of men of all conditions in life, men of all degrees of knowledge, intelligence, and capacity ; a large part of it is distinctly mercenary. The more it can be reduced in numbers the less will be experienced the tremendous reverses of electoral fortune which have been seen of late years—reverses which have been caused chiefly by a sudden whim, pique, fear, or hope, seizing this usually impassive body of men, and causing them to desert the side which they formerly supported, and to support the side which they formerly opposed.

The sin which most besets party politics consists in this, that prejudice and passion too frequently warp the feeling and conduct of politicians.

the further purchase of land by the rich, and the increase in the size of estates.

13.—That legislation cannot do everything, and may not be successful in this instance, but it can assist to form, to clarify, to carry out public opinion. The voluntary system has failed; it is time to see whether State interference would not attain the desired ends.

14.—That the proposal is undoubtedly a socialistic one. But Socialism is already incorporated in our laws, and there are precedents in the Poor Laws, Municipal Administration, Education Laws, Sanitary Laws, Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Laws, and more especially in the Irish Labourers' Dwellings Act;* while compulsory powers of purchase are already possessed by railways, School Boards, etc., for the public benefit.

15.—(a) That it is no new thing to give considerable discretionary powers to representative Local Authorities, and the tendency of the times is still further to enlarge their powers.

(b) That there would be no compulsion on the Local Authority to exercise their compulsory powers; thus, unless the majority of the local community so desired, nothing would be done; while, in every case, great caution would be exercised in the purchase of land and the provision of allotments; and public opinion would always prevent excess in supply, or any unfair treatment of a particular landlord.

16.—(a) That there would be no fear of immovably fixing a particular labourer to a particular spot; the tenant-right would always be saleable, and the holder would thus always be able to remove from one place to another without loss.

(b) That the Local Authority would not provide allotments and cottages for all; thus there would never be any excess of labourers attracted by this means to any particular locality.

17.—(a) That the labourers and artisans would be glad and willing to rent cottages and allotments at a fair rent,

* This Act, passed in 1882, with the amending Acts of 1883 and 1885, practically gives to Boards of Guardians in Ireland, under the authority of the Local Government Board, nearly all the powers in the matter of purchase of land, erection of cottages, and letting of allotments, which are now demanded for England and Scotland; loans for the purpose being made to the Boards of Guardians by the Treasury on very easy terms. The Boards are enabled not only to purchase land, to build cottages, and to attach to each half an acre of land, but can attach such plots to any existing cottages.

In order to convince themselves that they are in the right, men are often led to speak ill of opponents in their public capacity, in a way which they would never think of doing, or dare to do, in the private relations of life. It is foolishness itself to impute to the other side motives which one must know would never actuate them as individuals; and while arrogating to one's own party all virtue, infallibility, and prophetic foresight, to ascribe to one's opponents political vice, stupid fallibility, and insane shortsightedness.

The difference between the principles held by Liberals and those held by Conservatives is not, except under the influence of excitement, asserted by either side to be the difference between right and wrong. It is frankly acknowledged to be but a conflicting idea, or a dissimilar point of view; a belief on the one side in the beneficial results of action, on the other a dread of the evil results of great changes—the whole tempered by the personal equation of the observer, the constitutional difference of feeling and thought. The principles advanced by the two parties cannot be reconciled, and may differ almost fundamentally, but they are after all founded on the same basis of supposed right, and the conception and realisation of them is but a matter of degree. Every Englishman, whether he be Whig or Tory, Unionist or Home Ruler, Conservative, Liberal, or Radical, is actuated more or less by the same motives; though the conduct of one man may be governed by feelings and passions which another does not hold and cannot understand.

Even where it is evident that a man is personally interested in opposing a reform, we ought, before levelling insinuations against his good faith, to look around, and to see whether those who are supporting the measure are wholly free from personal bias, and are not themselves actuated by sinister interests of their own.

Toleration, indeed, in its largest sense, ought always to actuate public leaders as well as the rank and file, in word, action, and legislation. And the more it is recognised that on the merits of every question a great deal can be honestly urged from the opposite point of view, and that in many cases both opposer and supporter have right on their side, the more widely, one may hope, will political forbearance and consideration prevail.

But, though toleration should always be practised, and mutual recrimination, misrepresentation and abuse, always avoided, we ought at the same time never to forget that there are cases in which, as Burke once said, "Temper is the state of mind suited to the occasion." Wrong is wrong, and right is right. There are evils that may not be patiently endured; and, in spite of all we nowadays hear of the heat to which political passion has risen, I am myself inclined to believe that we have among us too much of that lukewarm indifferentism which believes that there is nothing new, and nothing true, and that nothing matters very much.

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