

THE
PRESENT POLITICAL SITUATION.

THE
FORMATION OF A NEW POLITICAL PARTY.

(A LETTER ADDRESSED BY MR. J. B. PETIT TO THE PRESS).

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1. I shall be obliged if you will be so good as to extend to me the hospitality of your columns for discussing certain aspects of the present situation, in order, if possible to evolve out of it a constructive and practical programme of work for the future, that may ultimately take the place of the former forms of political activity, which have now unfortunately become so utterly inconsistent with the grim realities of the moment as to be of any real value to the country and all that thoughtful and progressive India stands for.

THE NEW ERA.

2. India is now undoubtedly passing through one of the most critical periods of her life. She is in the process of a huge transformation. Her history is being remade on lines hitherto unknown. Her future is being entirely recast. Tremendous forces are operating upon her from different directions. They have all combined to create the present situation, which is perhaps the most complicated and is probably destined to be the most powerful that this country has ever been called upon to face.

CENTURY-OLD WRONGS.

3. In order properly to deal with the situation, it is necessary to understand it; and in order to understand it, it is necessary to examine it very closely by tracing its origin through the various stages over which it has travelled, before reaching its present acute state. When this is done, even the most casual student will admit that the present discontent is not a thing of yesterday, nor even a passing phase; but is the accumulated result of the "inelastic, wooden and antidiluvian" system of government that has prevailed in this country now for over 150 years and under which the people have grievously suffered in more directions than one, with a patience and fortitude worthy of a better cause. To trace and examine the history of the various causes that have culminated in the present situation is practically to narrate the entire history of the British occupation of the country.

PAX BRITANNICA.

4. In brief, the British people by their peculiarly isolated, top-heavy, centralized, bureaucratic, and in some cases unsympathetic and

even unrighteous system of government, have cruelly stunted the growth and dwarfed the manhood of a great and historic people. It is true that they have given this country "Pax-Britannica" and protection both against internal dissensions and external aggression; a system of education, which though halting, deficient, half-hearted and incomplete has done much good to the people; a common language, one of the finest and most prolific in the world, with its magnificent literature, which has not only served as a medium of interprovincial expression and consequently facilitated the union of the different peoples inhabiting this big Continent, but has also inculcated in the Indian mind, the principles of freedom and independence; and finally, an orderly and well-regulated system of administration which in spite of its numerous failings, has undoubtedly made for efficiency in several important directions.

THE EMASCULATION OF THE RACE.

5. But all these have been dearly bought. India had had to pay for the same with her life-blood; and to-day after 150 years of British connection, in the enlightened 20th century, when the world is said to have been made safe for democracy, she is still for all practical purposes, economically, industrially, politically and in every other important respect in a more helpless condition than some of the most backward countries in the world. Her children are treated as pariahs in the outposts of the Empire. They are literally hounded out of every British Colony. They are by no means masters in their own homes in the sense in which the Canadians, Australians and South Africans are in theirs. The prejudice of colour and the arrogance of so-called race superiority constantly stigmatise them as inferiors, not seldom vitiating the impartiality even of justice as between Europeans and Indians. Their natural and other resources continue to be exploited in the interest of others. Their commercial, industrial and economic policy is being regulated for the benefit of outsiders and often to their own detriment. They have hardly any effective voice in the administration of their own country. They occupy a place in her services which cannot possibly be called satisfactory. The Navy is almost entirely barred against them. The higher grades of the Army and the Police as also of the Judicial, Medical, Civil, Forest and other important services, charged with the administration of the country, are very largely closed to them. The consequent and continued drain of money in the shape of high salaries, fat pensions, exchange compensations, and the like, out of the poverty of the country, one of the poorest in the world, is too terrible for words. A policy of suspicion and distrust has invariably guided those in authority in all their relations and actions towards the children of the soil. The statute-books abound with the most absolute and antiquated laws, deliberately designed and persistently fostered to terrorise a helpless population into silent submission to the fiat of an irresponsible bureaucracy. The arbitrary power vested in the executive of taking by means of notifications and ordinances, the most drastic action even relating to the liberties and lives of the people, facilitated by the feebleness of public opinion, and aided and abetted by a notoriously corrupt police, has impeded the growth and checked the progress of a free and independent public life. The annual Military expenditure of the country is out of all proportion to its revenues and continually necessitates the appalling sacrifice even of its barest and most pressing

needs in almost every important direction. But, worst of all, the utter feeling of helplessness that the people experience at every step in their own country, the pitiful condition of abject intellectual subservience that it generates, the continued sense of mortification under which they live year in and year out, the slow but complete effacement of all powers of initiative and action that it brings in its train and last though not least, the deadly blow that such conditions deal at the self-respect and patriotism of the people, constitute a cruel wrong, the grievousness and terrible intensity of which none but an Indian can realise. And finally, in consequence of the lamentable failure of the Government, both Imperial and Indian, to do justice to the people of this country in the matter of the Punjab atrocities and the Khilafat wrong, what little confidence the people had in the administrative capacity and sense of justice and fairness of the British people and the Houses of Parliament is now gone. Disgraceful and shocking as both the events are, they have necessarily taken the place of the proverbial "last straw." They have helped to fan the flame that had been smouldering in the Indian mind for years and was bound some day to burst out into a dangerous blaze.

BROKEN PLEDGES.

6. All these have brought about the present situation, which is not merely a protest against the immediate wrongs and a demand for their redress, but is a revolt against the entire system of government which has steadily denationalized the country for a period long enough to wipe any people out of existence. Tried though her feelings were, India stood loyal to England and the Empire in their hour of trial and sorrow. The people of India poured out their blood and treasures for England's sake and in England's cause; and England has rewarded those services by the Rowlatt Act, the Jalianwalla massacre and the Khilafat wrong. The people now have a feeling that they are not only being continuously held in subjugation for the benefit of others, but that their blood is being often unfairly spilt for advancing selfish Imperialistic purposes, for propagating the dangerous doctrine of the whiteman's burden and for enslaving other nationalities. It is one long sorrowful story of broken pledges, unredemed promises and grievous wrongs, deliberately heaped upon a poor and helpless dependency by a mighty Empire. It is this unfortunate condition of affairs and the pernicious system that has brought it about, which the people now wish to end for once and for all.

7. This Mr. Editor, briefly and barely put, is the crux of the whole situation.

THE GOVERNMENT HAS LEARNT NOTHING AND FORGOTTEN NOTHING.

8. If therefore the situation is to be successfully tackled, it is the root of the evil that must be carefully probed and removed. Unless that is done, there cannot be a lasting peace and all hopes of a permanent reconciliation between the Government and the people are bound to be disappointed. If the Government had adopted a statesmanlike and honest attitude towards India, immediately upon the publication of the Hunter and Congress Committee Reports, they would have saved the position at least so far as the Punjab outrages are con-

cerned. But the psychological moment has been lost and now the situation seems to be well-nigh out of hand. For this condition of affairs, the British Government and their agents in this country are to thank themselves. They have done and are doing nothing to strengthen the hands of those who stand for co-operation with them, for law and order, for constitutional and constructive work. They are doing everything in their power to defeat them and weaken their hold on the people.

THE PUNISHMENT OF THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE OUTRAGES IN THE PUNJAB.

9. The situation is by no means past repair. It is not yet too late. A wise and courageous stroke of statesmanship and touch of imagination can still save it. Even now a sincere and frank statement expressing regret both on behalf of the Imperial and the Indian Governments for what has happened in the Punjab and impartially and openly dealing with all those, from the highest to the lowest, who were directly and indirectly responsible for the carnage, from the Viceroy and Sir Michael O'Dwyer down to the meanest figure that participated in it, would immediately ease the tension and considerably improve the situation, so far as the Punjab question is concerned. There is also reason to believe that the return of Thrace and Smyrna to Turkey, guaranteeing of course the rights of the minorities, would satisfy Moslem feeling on the Khilafat question. The partial acceptance by the Government in the Indian Legislative Assembly of an already feeble and ill-drafted resolution with regard to the Punjab outrages, coupled with an indirect attempt to uphold and applaud O'Dwyer and his regime, without any action on the Khilafat matter, will not and cannot possibly satisfy the country on either question.

POPULAR GOVERNMENT THE ONLY REMEDY.

10. A statement, such as I have ventured to indicate, in order to be effective, should be made at the earliest possible opportunity; and if it is to ensure the permanent return of good feelings, it is essential that it should also be coupled with an assurance that such disgraceful incidents will not happen again. That can only be done by effectively vesting the control of the executive functions of the Government in the representatives of the people or in other words by complete autonomy. I am willing to concede that there are numerous practical difficulties in the way of the immediate grant of such a demand; but I cannot induce myself to believe that a reasonable time-limit cannot be set to the consummation of such a legitimate and just demand. The fact that the New Reform Act provides for the appointment of periodic Commissions to determine the pace at which further instalments towards this goal should be given, is no reason in itself why this somewhat halting method should be substituted by a more direct procedure, particularly when the concession is, to a large extent, likely to restore the good feelings of the people towards the British Government, and revive their former confidence in their good intentions and designs. In view of what such a proposal, if accepted, will mean, I do not think it can be considered too heavy a price to pay.

NON-CO-OPERATION MOVEMENT.

11. And this brings me to the real object of my letter. Having endeavoured to trace the genesis of the present situation and pointed out what is expected of the Government to relieve it, I am at the same time prepared to admit that the people and particularly those who count for anything in the land, also owe a duty to themselves. At a time of unprecedented crisis like the one through which we are now passing, it is absolutely incumbent on all who have the good of their country at heart to devote their energies and exert their influence to the utmost possible extent towards guiding and regulating into channels of constructive, steady and wise work, and otherwise excellent spirit, very largely generated by Mr. Gandhi's movement, which now pulsates throughout the country, and which but for such timely guidance and the caution with which such new forces have to be handled, is apt to degenerate into license, to the detriment of the cause of India's progress and advancement. I am by no means an alarmist. I am not ignorant even of the healthy and hopeful aspect of the impulse, of the appeal it makes to the self-respect of the people and of the spirit of self-reliance that it promotes and encourages. I am also taking the fullest account of the fact that such excesses as we occasionally see around us in various directions, are coeval in all countries and at all times with the dawn of power and are natural in a people that are only just partially beginning to realise their inherent strength. I am even making the utmost possible allowance for the circumstance, that at a time like this when the deepest feelings of the people have been wounded there is bound to be a little inundation over the brim. But in our anger towards those who have wronged us and in our zeal to redress these wrongs, we cannot indefinitely continue to ignore the corrosive effect on society of the dangerous aspects of the movement of "Non-violent Non-Co-Operation," which, unless properly harnessed and carefully guided, must sooner or later, human nature being what it is, react on the proletariat and result in a serious and lamentable disregard of constituted authority, of law and order, of the rights of individuals and all that we have learnt to regard as sacred. It is impossible to deny that the continuous mishandling of this new spirit is likely to destroy the effect of the good and strenuous work of generations of great Indians and Englishmen who have gone before us at the very moment when it is beginning to bear fruit; and must ultimately create a condition of affairs incompatible with the accepted idea of constitutional Government. Under circumstances like these, it is the urgent and bounden duty of every thoughtful Indian to do his utmost to so guide and regulate this new force as to make it a great factor for good in all our future activities, so that it may ultimately prove a blessing instead of a curse to the country we all love so much.

12. So far as the general trend of political work is concerned, although there is a practical unanimity in the country as regards the ultimate ideal, there is no doubt that there still exist very serious differences of opinion as to the methods to be employed and the stages to be traversed in achieving the object in view.

13. ABDICATION OF ITS FUNCTION BY THE CONGRESS.

13. Owing to the recent alterations in its constitution and its acceptance of the gospel of Non-Co-operation, the Congress has abdicat-

ed its old function of focussing public opinion and offering informed criticism on Government measures. It has launched upon a programme of work on what is often loosely termed "National Lines" by methods which in many cases have not yet been quite clearly unfolded to the public view. These changes, though apparently innocent and very probably intended to be so by its authors, clearly seem to be liable to a construction which may commit the country to a line of policy, of the wisdom and sagacity of which in the country's own interest, at any rate in the present condition of India, a very large and important section of our countrymen is not satisfied.

THE LIBERAL FEDERATION.

14. Again, that section of the public known as the moderate party, now called the Liberal Federation, though important and influential, is unfortunately too small in numbers and altogether too orthodox in its methods of work, to count for much in the affairs of the country. The Liberal Party is unable to command the confidence of the people because it appears to be helplessly out of touch with the currents of thought in the country; and it seems difficult to convince it that the India of to-day is very different from the India of the days of Hume and Bonnerji, or even of the days of Dadabhoi and Wedderburn, or Phirozshaw and Gokhale.

15. Thus, the country stands to-day between these two contending forces, very largely dominating our political life and not seldom pulling in opposite directions,—on the one hand the Congress, which has by its attitude of Non-Co-operation with the Government, practically shut out all avenues of public work of the old accepted type; and the liberals on the other, suffering under the disabilities I have already described and still apparently unwilling to recognize the requirements of the new situation.

THE NEED FOR AN ACTIVE OPPOSITION.

16. There is, however, a very large class of public-spirited men, who, belonging neither to the Congress nor to the Liberal Party, still believe in vigorous and constructive work within the constitution; to whom circumstances such as these I have described above, suggest a call to unite into a party in the interests of the rights and liberties of the people of India and who are prepared to take up the thread of political criticism of the administration and all constitutional work in connection with it from the standpoint of the opposition, abdicated by the Congress in its pursuit of Non Co-operation and not liable to be vigorously pursued by the Liberals, who, having been as a party, assimilated in the government of the country, are likely to develop a tendency always to support their comrades, now forming the Government in almost all the Provinces and forming about 40% of the Government of India. The imperative necessity of creating a powerful and critical opposition to the authorities in a system of government such as is now set up in the country, need only be mentioned to be realised. It is in fact and in theory the corner-stone on which the system of responsible Government is based; and the absence of any effective opposition at this important juncture in the history of political evolution in this country, is a matter which cannot be too deeply deplored.

A NEW PARTY.

17. All these and other important considerations, too numerous to detail in the course of a letter of this kind, that must easily suggest themselves to thinking minds, impel me to appeal to all patriotic Indians to join ~~him~~^{me} in the promotion and maintenance of a new party which ~~he~~^{she} has organised in consultation with prominent leaders of thought throughout the country and whose watch-word will be progress all round—progress political, social and economic. There is no doubt that the new party will be able to help the country very materially in the achievement of its object by doing public work on constitutional lines with greater animation and ampler courage than hitherto, for which with the advance of representative institutions, there is bound to be greater and still greater need.

THE AIMS OF THE NEW PARTY.

18. It is hardly necessary to indicate in detail the methods to be employed to achieve this end. The new party will very largely rely upon the self-respect and self-reliance of the people as its chief plank; and endeavour by sustained and vigorous propagandist work to create and guide the currents of public thought and activities into healthy and fruitful channels. It will keep a watchful and critical eye on all public movements and the questions of the moment, focus the country's needs and opinion thereon, and press for their solution. It will simultaneously labour for the early attainment of complete Self-Government by all legitimate and constitutional means and particularly by a vigorous educative and constructive programme of Nationbuilding, which will make the demand irresistible. It will at the same time interest the British people with the necessity of doing immediate justice to India in the matter of the Punjab and the Khilafat wrongs. It will also be its duty to watch the development and counteract the evil effect of all anti-Indian agitation on the fortunes of this country.

19. The party will have its headquarters in Bombay but its activities will not be confined to this city. It will be an All-India Organization; and its operations will extend to all parts of the country. It will also have an Agency in London and work in co-operation with it for an early achievement of the objects in view. It has been placed in possession of sufficient funds to enable it to make a beginning on a proper and permanent basis. It will also have a party-paper and a separate building of its own at a very early date.

AN APPEAL.

20. All Indian ladies and gentlemen of 21 years of age and over, who are willing to join the party, to be called "The Indian Progressive Party," in the first instance, on the terms and conditions laid down in its constitution, and rules and regulations, are hereby cordially invited to do so.