

ESSAYS IN LIBERALISM

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ESSAYS IN LIBERALISM

BY
SIX OXFORD MEN

This is true Liberty, when freeborn men,
Having to advise the public, may speak free :
Which he who can not will deserves high praise :
Who neither can nor will may hold his peace.
What can be juster in a state than this ?

Milton, after Euripides

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TO
JOHN MORLEY

PREFACE.

IN these days, when books multiply and men decay, it becomes more than ever the duty of editors to provide some apology for the appearance of a new volume. Since, however, the vogue of the historical school and of popular science makes explanation consist in a *résumé* of the origin rather than a defence of the end, our task is considerably lightened. The writers of these Essays were drawn together in the political debates and the contested elections of the Oxford Union Society. To that society, and to the stimulating discussions of the Palmerston and Russell Clubs, we owe a common debt of gratitude. Six years ago Undergraduate Oxford tended to be Tory or Socialist: since that time we have seen an extraordinarily strong Liberal movement absorb, with one or two remarkable exceptions, most of those who care for political discussions or debates.

So far as the causes are personal, Mr. Belloc has been the leading spirit, and we cannot refrain from gratefully expressing our admiration for his kindling

eloquence, his Liberal enthusiasm, and his practical idealism. Much that he has not written is indirectly derived from him, inspired by a companionship which we have all found a liberal education.

The general purpose of a book of youthful essays must be rather a confession of faith than a discussion of opinions; and the virtue expected will be rather freshness of conviction than ripeness of thought. The special aim of this book was the statement of a few definite principles applied to various departments of politics. Finality, exhaustiveness, the detailed knowledge of the expert: these are merits we have hardly attempted to realise. But if we have not succeeded in conveying that these two covers contain the work of six men who know their own minds, and have, not perhaps a formed opinion on every topic of public affairs, but at least some principle to determine the lines of an opinion, then we have failed of our object. It would be presumptuous to lay claim to the prime virtue of lucidity, but we may boldly affirm that these papers are precise and outspoken. Views definitely presented may be wrong and foolish; but views tentatively hinted under temporising reservations and concessions are, even if free from positive error, too unreal and unsubstantial to be called effectively right. We prefer to fail or to succeed in frank black

and white rather than to shilly-shally in colourless neutrality. Further, it was difficult to write of the moment and not to find that we had written for the moment. Details falsify themselves between the pen and the press; but principles cannot be declared in skeleton abstraction. We have endeavoured to give some warmth and colour of actuality without condemning the work to become petty and ephemeral. In the Essay on Outward Relations the difficulty was especially pressing: but why correct January up to date to fit March, when April will probably leave both untrue or obsolete?

If this little book be found to deserve any praise its value will consist in the attempt not only to realise present forces and conditions in politics, but to get back to principles which stand to prove themselves the master forces in the future as they have done in the past. These Essays are dictated by the conviction that there has been of late too much neglect of principle, that the party is lost in detail, and that it is useless to put before the country long programmes and minute schemes of particular legislation.

But unless the country knows what general line measures will take, it will never give a mandate to the party of reform.

What, then, are the common principles which

ramify into these six widely divergent branches? They can be briefly summarised: Democracy actualised up to the full meaning of Bentham's formula; a degree of political idealism; and a third article intimately bound up with this last, a resolute opposition to the form under which the materialist attacks the State—Socialism. And here we may quote some words of encouragement written by Mr. Gladstone, on January 2nd of this year, to one of the essayists:—“I venture on assuring you that I regard the design formed by you and your friends with sincere interest, and in particular wish well to all the efforts you may make on behalf of individual freedom and independence as opposed to what is termed Collectivism.”

The first Essay, the most general in scope, lays special stress on the great truth that the desire for property is natural and ineradicable; and that the artificial causes which prevent the greater distribution of landed property—that ideal accompaniment of citizenship—should be swept away by a great measure of reform.

The second Essay attempts to justify the past impositions of Liberal principles on economic conditions, and outlines the commercial policy of the future. The application of a somewhat new distinction in monopolies to the problem of municipal enterprise

brings the Liberal position with regard to the extension of State industry into clear relief.

In "Liberals and Labour" we pass from mainly economic to mainly moral considerations. Free play is the one thing needful for labour. But free play implies fair play, and can only be under law. The main point of the *Essay* is therefore to define the "compromise" between licence and limitation, under which the desired goal will best be attained.

"Liberalism in Outward Relations" develops the veneration for national sentiments and national self-government which has always inspired the party, and appeals above all for a democratising of foreign policy as a substitute for traditional obscurantism.

Foreign policy is followed by Education. In that subject the history of a sectarian monopoly exposes the hollowness of the present Conservative attitude. Present events emphasise the need for a constructive Liberal policy, and lend an interest to the indications here given.

In the last *Essay* the threads are drawn together, and the Liberal doctrines, which are ideally correlated at the outset by Mr. Belloc, are reviewed in the tangible but tangled frame of history by Mr. Macdonell.

Principles would not be worthily large which did not allow an honest freedom to differ in detail. Not

one of these Essays, probably, but contains opinions, phrases, *vbiter dicta*, interpretations of examples, which the other contributors reject entirely, or accept only with modifications. We have made no attempt to reduce the parts of the work to a mechanical unison, confident that general conformity of attitude and harmony of inspiration will be sufficiently apparent. Indeed, our essential agreement is proved by the willingness of each to stand in juxtaposition with subordinate beliefs which he considers doubtful, mistaken, or even absurd : it is the humble microcosm of party loyalty.

One point more : only a great literary artist can be sure that he can so present the past that the whole is scientifically indicated ; only a triumph of style can effect that from what you say of A your judgment on hypothetical B and C can strictly be foretold. Such success could not be hoped for in a work of independent contributions. We could not cover the whole field of politics to treat every article in the party creed and pronounce upon every question in the party problem. We hope the general position is fairly defined ; hints scattered up and down may help to complete some subsidiary lines. The points in the figure which are, perhaps, least precisely indicated are the burning questions of the House of

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Lords, the Liquor Traffic, and Disestablishment. In so far as definition of an attitude on these matters is wanting, we are not without hope that possibly in the future Essays on these subjects might be added to the present collection.

J. S. P.
F.W.H.

Oxford, March 1st, 1897.

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