

REASONS

WHY

NONCONFORMISTS SHOULD OPPOSE

HOME RULE.

BY A NONCONFORMIST MINISTER IN IRELAND,

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REASONS WHY NONCONFORMISTS SHOULD OPPOSE HOME RULE.

WE are face to face with a General Election. The veteran statesman who has so often led the hosts of Liberalism to glorious victory, has again sounded the war-trump. Soon the echoes of Midlothian will proclaim the beginning of the conflict, and ere many days have passed, the battle will rage along the line. It is matter for extreme regret that so many Liberals, who have so long followed their venerated chief, should at such a time not only fail to follow, but feel constrained to take the opposite side. Every Liberal must deplore the division in the camp; but beyond question, Mr. Gladstone himself is responsible for that division. His Irish proposals came as a great surprise to friends and foes alike, and it would have been strange if they had evoked a different response. Beaten in the lobby, he now looks for victory at the polls, and the question of the hour is—Will he succeed? What will be the verdict of the people? No graver issue has been presented to the country within the century. The question must not be decided on mere party lines. Nonconformists, who of all people ought to be able to rise superior to party feeling, should see clearly what is involved, and cast the weight of their influence on the right side.

In one sense the Government Bill may be considered dead; but evidently Mr. Gladstone has buried it in sure and certain

hope of a resurrection, and if he is again entrusted with power, the resurrection will assuredly take place. The question, then, before the country is not quite so simple as Mr. Gladstone in his manifesto declares. We have not only to consider whether "Irishmen are to be allowed to manage their own affairs," but whether they are to be allowed to do so on the lines of the late Bill.

We are prepared to welcome any proposal that would be for the good of Ireland; but we protest against Mr. Gladstone's measure, or anything like it, because we believe it would be an injury to Ireland, an injury to Great Britain, and especially an injury to the large loyal minority in Ireland. Mr. Gladstone blames his opponents for not trusting the Irish people; but in the first place it is not sufficiently clear that the Irish people are desirous of being trusted with Home Rule. When we consider that about one-third of the Irish are avowedly opposed to it—that very many of the electors abstained from voting, presumably because, though not favourable to Parnell, they dared not openly oppose him, or at least were not sufficiently interested to take either side—when further it is known that the ballot afforded no protection to large numbers of illiterate voters, who, under the eye of their priest, could do no other than vote for his nominee—we have some ground for saying that Home Rule is not desired by the Irish people as a whole.

The question of trusting the Irish people resolves itself into one of trusting Parnell and his pledged professionals, the representatives of the National League. Does the past record of these men warrant us in reposing implicit confidence in them? Did Mr. Gladstone trust them when he described them as "wishing to march through rapine to disintegration and dismemberment of the Empire"? Did he trust them when he threw them into Kilmainham? Have they given any evidence of a change of character and aim since then, that we should trust them now? It is a notorious fact that they have continually avowed their disloyalty to the Crown, their intense hatred of English rule, their desire for separation. During the

late debate some of the Parnellites tried to explain away the force of their inconvenient disloyal statements ; but they have expressed no regret for uttering them—they have never retracted them. On the contrary, they have sought to justify them, and have as good as said, that, given the same conditions, they would be quite ready to use similar language. Law-abiding people may well hesitate to intrust their best interests to the hands of such men. It is a suggestive fact that when Mr. Parnell and his lieutenants at last condescended to condemn the outrages brought about under the rule of the National League, they did not condemn them as crimes against the laws of God and man, but simply as “inexpedient,” as “giving their enemies arguments against their cause,” &c. Is there not reason for fearing that Home Rule would mean the establishing of National League Rule ?

Amid all the noise and confusion of the Home Rule debates has anyone advanced any substantial reason why Ireland should have Home Rule ? The assumption is evidently that Ireland is on the verge of social and political ruin, and that nothing can save her but Home Rule. But what evidence is given apart from the agitation maintained by the very men who make the demand for Home Rule ? Have the Nationalists pointed out any particular grievance which can only be remedied by Home Rule ? What exceptionally bad laws now exist in Ireland ? Under what disadvantages as compared with England and Scotland does she labour ? Let the matters that want remedying be fairly pointed out, and England is wise enough and strong enough to be just. I have asked many in Ireland what special grievance exists ; but I can learn of none such. I find, indeed, that Mr. Gladstone a few years ago said, “There is no such grievance. There is nothing that Ireland has asked which this country and this Parliament have refused. This Parliament has done for Ireland what it would have scrupled to do for Scotland and England.” This is strangely corroborated by the *Irish World*, which says, “*We have no grievance—we advance no reasons. We simply say we want a certain thing, and we shall*

have it because we think fit. *Else indiscriminate slaughter.*" The whole thing is largely a matter of sentiment. It is chiefly on sentimental grounds that Mr. Gladstone has defended his measures; and alas! that he who so truthfully described the character and motives of the Parnellites, should now seem to excuse all their past conduct, and supply them with weapons for the future, by speaking of British law as having a "foreign aspect," and wearing a "foreign garb." The sentiment—which makes heroes of assassins, whose chief distinction is to have suffered under British rule the penalty of their crimes—is not likely to be satisfied with a subordinate Parliament—it wants national independence.

The Land Question is an important factor in the case. There is no doubt that the motive which leads many in Ireland to support Parnell is the desire to get the land for nothing or next to nothing. The National League's crusade against rent-paying has fostered this idea. There are thousands who only think of Home Rule as a means to such an end. Many even of the Nationalist farmers say, "We don't want Home Rule; we want a good Land Bill." I fancy English and Scotch farmers would be glad to have the advantages that the Irish have now.

But the Irish farmers have been led to think that all things are possible to the National League; that, given sufficient time, it will make them owners of their farms at little or no cost to themselves. Thus, for instance, some little time ago, a priest told his parishioners that as their landlord had refused to give them a reduction of 5s. in the pound, they must be resolute, and next time demand more, and eventually they might hope to get 19s. 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ d. in the pound.

Mr. Gladstone has declared his Land Bill inseparable from the Home Rule measure; and though he has said very little about it of late, Lord Spencer is still emphatic enough. Is the British nation prepared to trust the Irish farmers to the extent of 50 or 150 millions? Let Mr. Parnell be ever so willing to collect the British rent (and certainly as a landlord he has shown scant indulgence to some of his tenants), is it likely that where

the doctrines of the League have borne fruit, the farmers will be willing to pay? And are the leaders of the League the ones likely to enforce payment? I know a prominent Leaguer who, when the Bills were under discussion, said he sincerely hoped that the Irish would never pay a penny of the land tribute to England.

There is a third force in Ireland that makes for Home Rule, and that is priestly influence. Whatever may have been the attitude of the priests to the Nationalist movement in its early days, they now find it to their advantage to support it.

It is sad to think of the black catalogue of crimes committed under the inspiration of the National League; but it is sadder still to think that, in many cases, the President of the League is the parish priest. Its meetings are invariably held on Sunday, and so resistance to law receives its consecration.

Mr. Gladstone deprecates the introduction of the "venomous element of religious bigotry into this question." We trust that all venom and bigotry will be excluded; but the *religious element* cannot be left out. The character of Roman Catholicism is too well known to allow us to look with equanimity upon the supreme power passing into the hands of its adherents. At present there is complete religious equality, and Protestants have no desire for any ascendancy over their Catholic brethren; they are entitled to object to a Catholic domination.

Mr. Parnell has plainly avowed his determination to deal with the Education Question; and who can doubt but that it will be moulded to suit the views of the Roman Catholic Church? As to the religious liberty of Protestants being preserved intact, there is room for grave doubt. Mr. Gladstone's Bill did not make sufficient provision for that. It is questionable whether any Bill on similar lines could do so. Messrs. Parnell, Sexton, and others assure us that they are determined to maintain religious equality. We may give them credit for honesty in this matter; but will it rest with them to decide the point? Just as behind them the discontented farmers would prove a strong force against the payment of the tribute money, so might we expect that the priests would have sufficient power to sway

the Irish councils in reference to religious questions. It may seem ungracious, it may savour of bigotry, to speak thus of any body of men ; but the Romanist system must be judged according to its known character, and its avowed beliefs, and its usual fruits. I have made careful enquiries of Protestants, who could not possibly be reckoned as bigoted Orangemen, who have lived all their lifetime surrounded by Catholics, and have no feeling towards them but that of the truest Christian charity ; but they are unanimous in the belief that if the Romanists had the power, Protestantism would not be safe. That belief is not gathered from books, but from what they have seen and known of Roman Catholicism from their infancy.

It is vain to say that the question of Ireland managing her own affairs is not a religious one. Religion is one of the greatest of Irish affairs. The Roman Catholics are intensely religious. The Protestants are not indifferent to religion. Indeed, we cannot help seeing that the religious element enters into almost every question that concerns Irishmen. In Poor Law Boards it is found to give colour to many a resolution, and it would be easy to mention cases in proof. No doubt, much capital will be made by the Nationalists out of the deplorable riots in Belfast. We are already told that they prove that the trouble in Ireland will not spring from the Catholics, but from Protestants. We unsparingly condemn such rioting as disgraceful and criminal ; but it is startling to find that the evidence given at the inquests, and the verdicts pronounced, point to the policemen as the greatest offenders. The whole matter requires to be most carefully investigated.

As a set-off against the Belfast riots we have those in Sligo, deliberately planned by Roman Catholics, in the course of which the Congregational and Methodist Manses and Chapels received special attention from the mob. It now turns out that the outrage offered to the Catholic Cathedral, which was attributed to Protestants, and made the excuse for attacking them, was really perpetrated by three Romanists, who have confessed the deed and the motive.

Whatever other lessons these sad occurrences may teach, this one is written in large characters—that the fear of religious strife following the passing of a Home Rule Bill is not without foundation.

Mr. Gladstone places a false issue before the people when he says that the choice is between Home Rule and coercion. By the way, coercion need not be such a bugbear. The firm administration of the law is always felt to be coercion by law-breakers; but laws are not usually relaxed because the thief or the murderer has conscientious scruples against coercion.

Surely one of the first duties of a government is to see that the majesty of the law is upheld.

Mr. Trevelyan has clearly shown that the main provisions of the Crimes Act, which the Liberal Government wished to retain, are identical with the ordinary laws under which Scotland has been governed for ages. I had the privilege of living in Ireland while the Crimes Act was in force; but it was no more inconvenience to me than if it had not existed; nor has any law-abiding citizen had cause to complain of it. I believe that the theory held by Peter and Paul, as to administration of law, remains the true one—"the punishment of evil-doers, and for the praise of them that do well." Despite the taunts uttered in the course of the debate, I think a "judicious mixture" of firmness and kindness is what Ireland needs. Let it be known that the Government mean to enforce the law; that honest men will be protected in the discharge of their duties; that no measure will be extorted from the British Parliament by fear, but that every just demand will receive unprejudiced attention; and a great step in the right direction will be taken.

It is a prevailing belief among the people in Ireland that all past concessions are the fruit of intimidation. Kindness is reckoned weakness. That is no reason why a Government should refuse concessions that are seen to be just; it is a reason why the authority of the Crown should not bow to the authority of the National League.

But there is something else before the country than so-

called coercion. Mr. Chamberlain's scheme of Local Government seems in harmony with Liberal traditions and Nonconformist principles. Mr. Gladstone's action makes it necessary that something in that direction should be done. But it ought to be something that can be extended to England, Scotland, and Wales as well as Ireland. There has been enough of exceptional legislation for Ireland. There is no reason, save that supplied by agitation, why Ireland should have the preference in this matter. If Local Government be a desirable good, what have England and Scotland done that they should not enjoy it as well as Ireland? What superior fitness has Ireland shown for it that England does not possess? Some such carefully prepared scheme, maintaining unquestioned the supremacy of the Imperial Parliament, preserving inviolate the rights and privileges of minorities, and adapted to the whole United Kingdom, would be safer, wiser, and better than Mr. Gladstone's unfortunate scheme.

Meanwhile let all lovers of God and fatherland lift up their hearts in earnest prayer to the Great Counsellor that the decision given by the country may be in harmony with truth, righteousness, and justice.

POSTSCRIPT.



SINCE writing the foregoing, I have read Mr. Gladstone's Scottish speeches. There are many statements in them upon which one would wish to animadvert; but I must content myself with a reference to one point. At Glasgow he asked the question—"Is there any reason to suppose that the Roman Catholic majority would be disposed to persecute the Protestant minority?" He went on to say, in support of the negative answer, that the only possible grounds for suspecting the "Irish Roman Catholics of gross intolerance" were, that they were favourable to denominational education, and that they opposed the admission of Mr. Bradlaugh to Parliament.

How is it that Mr. Gladstone overlooks the one great reason—the reason given by himself in the "Vatican Decrees"—viz., "the essentially intolerant nature of the Roman Catholic Church"?

Mr. Gladstone's text for his Glasgow oration was taken from a sermon by the renowned Dr. Chalmers, and was therefore likely to interest a Scotch audience. Has Mr. Gladstone read the life of Dr. Chalmers? If so, has he observed the note by his able biographer in reference to these very sentiments expressed by Dr. Chalmers? I quote a portion of it. "Dr. Chalmers, in his later years, readily but sadly acknowledged that he had been disappointed; that it had been a historical blunder to expect that gentle treatment would either strip Popery of its natural intolerance, or deaden its desire to rule."

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