

# Topics of the Day.

By Our London Correspondent.

## THE BRITISH CRISIS.

### PREMIER AND PARLIAMENT.

#### "WE STAND OR FALL BY BUDGET."

LONDON, February 25.

ON Monday evening Mr. Asquith was called upon to "face the music." With a few hours of the delivery of the King's speech, by which the Government called upon the Commons to deal with the financial situation before tackling the constitutional question which Nationalists, Labour members, and a good many Radicals were anxious to put in the first place, the Premier was defending the plan under which the "Veto Bill" demand was set aside.

Mr. Balfour opened the debate on the Address. He welcomed the statement of

### KING'S SPEECH GRAMMAR.

Mr. Balfour's general conclusion as to the results of the election was that no one knew what the settled opinion of the country was on the Budget, on Home Rule, or the House of Lords. Another conclusion he drew was that the House would probably pass a Budget of which the constituencies as a whole did not approve, and that it would do so because some of the constituencies want another great and revolutionary change, of which the majority of them have no knowledge whatever.

Some scornful allusions were made at the end of the Opposition Leader's remarks to the reference in the King's speech to the House of Lords. Two different policies, he observed, had been embodied in one ungrammatical sentence. He was careful to point out that it was Ministers, and not His Majesty, who were responsible. The grammar of a King's speech, he said, was not always good. "Sometimes it is worse than the

that a Liberal Ministry ought not to meet a new House of Commons unless it secured in advance some kind of guarantee as to the contingent exercise of the royal prerogative. "I tell the House quite frankly I have received no such guarantees, and I have asked for no such guarantees."

The Prime Minister laid it down as the duty of a Minister to keep the Sovereign and the prerogative of the Crown outside the domain of party politics. He declared that, if necessity arose, he should not hesitate to tender to the Crown such advice as the exigencies of the situation demanded. "But," he said, "to ask in advance for an indefinite exercise of the royal prerogative in regard to a measure never even submitted to or approved by the House of Commons is a request which no constitutional Minister could properly make, and which the Sovereign could not properly grant."

Mr. Asquith then laid down before the House the course of procedure proposed by the Government. Apart from the time to be given to finance, the session is, if the Ministerial programme be carried, to be devoted to the topic of the Lords. In the first instance there is to be a resolution. This resolution is afterwards to be embodied in a bill, to be carried through the Commons

and if they were refused you should at once free yourselves from any responsibility for the government of the country."

The Nationalist Leader held that it would be a disastrous policy to pass the Budget before the Government had received any assurance that the Veto Bill would reach the Statute Book in this Parliament. "We cannot in this matter," he affirmed, "walk blindfold. We cannot be a party to a policy of plunging the sands once more," and he ended by stating that the Nationalists could not accept a policy which contemplated the continuance of the Government in office without any guarantee that the Veto Bill would be passed this year.

### RIGHT-ABOUT-FACE.

On Tuesday the debate was continued by Mr. Barnes, the Chairman of the Labour party. Only five days before he had declared that the "Budget first, veto second" policy would not be acceptable to the Labour party. He now found himself under the painful necessity of having to execute a right-about-face, and to tell the House that he and his colleagues were prepared to accept that policy. He pressed for two conditions. They were that the committee stage of the old Budget should be taken as a whole without unnecessary delay, and "without giving any power of discussing it to the new members;" and that the coming year's Budget should follow the Veto Bill.

So far from having authority to insist, as he did in last week's manifesto, that the veto should be taken before the old Budget, he had to say on behalf of his colleagues that they wanted the old Budget to go through. Nor was he able to respect his declaration that the continuance of the Government in office without assurances from the King regarding the Lords' veto would not be acceptable to the Labour party.

### MR. WM. O'BRIEN DECLARES WAR.

The Independent Nationalists' declaration of war against the Budget came soon afterwards. It was delivered by Mr. Wm. O'Brien. He described the mission of the Independent Nationalists as being to deliver Ireland from a Budget which would "make Home Rule a curse instead of a blessing." The net practical result of the situation, in Mr. O'Brien's opinion, is that Ireland by its own act was saddled with a scheme of Imperial taxation that would spell ruin to any Irish Government, and that was a "flagitious breach of the Act of Union." He declined to believe that Home Rule was an impossibility till the veto of the House of Lords had been abolished, and he expressed the opinion that the Budget was a more serious obstacle than the House of Lords to successful Home Rule.

The latter part of the debate was noteworthy for the development of what looked like a rather serious Liberal revolt. The Ministry was severely criticised by half a dozen Liberal members. Mr. Wedgwood roundly declared that the Government did not mean business, and called upon the Premier to resign, whilst another member bluntly stated that if the Albert Hall policy of "safeguards" was not the Ministerial policy, the Government would "have to get support for the policy from the people."

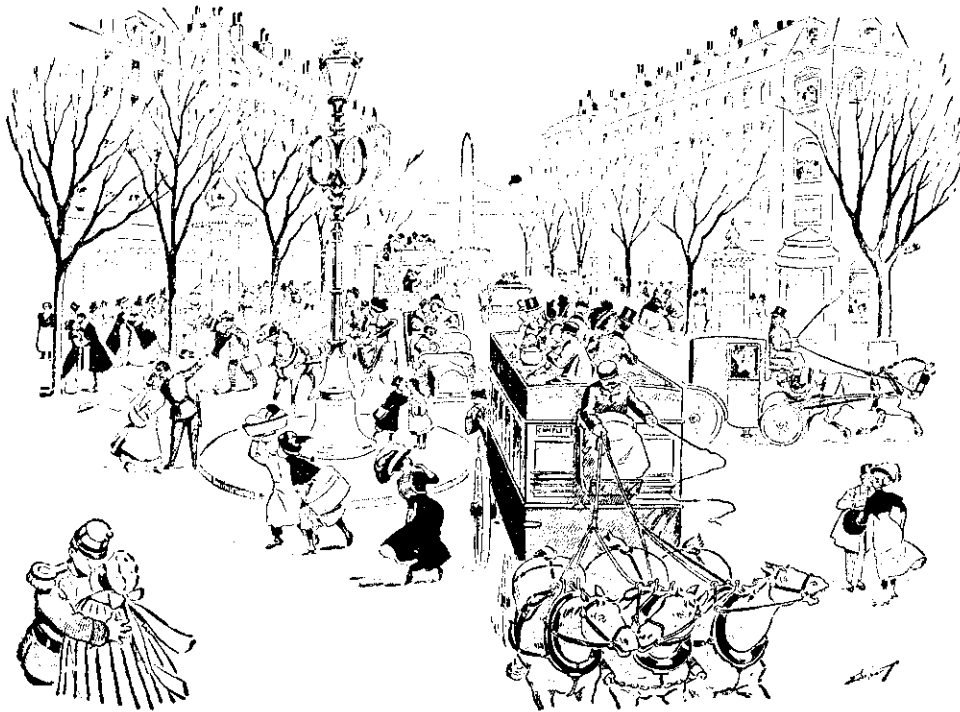
So ended the general debate on the Address, and it must have been with feelings of relief that Ministers on the morrow found themselves able to turn their backs on such topics as the Albert Hall pledge, even if it was only to find themselves face to face with the question of

### TARIFF REFORM.

This subject was introduced by Mr. Austen Chamberlain, who had tabled an amendment expressing regret that the King's speech contained no mention of any proposals for "enlarging the market for British and Irish produce and increasing the demands for labour by a reform of our fiscal system which would promote the growth and stability of our home trade, provide means for negotiating for the mitigation of foreign tariffs, and develop our overseas trade, through the establishment of a system of mutual preference between the different portions of the Empire."

In the course of a vigorous speech, Mr. Chamberlain showed that the demand for productive labour in Great Britain had not kept pace with the growth of the population, and amid cheers and countercheers, urged that the real test of any economic system was that it should provide comfortable subsistence for the

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PARIS.

As the imaginative tourist expects to find it.

Ministerial good intentions made in the King's speech with regard to the Navy. Then, turning to the recent election and its results, he remarked that the issue had primarily been the Budget. "On the Budget," he affirmed, "the country had pronounced." At this there was a Liberal cheer. Turning to the quarter from which it proceeded, Mr. Balfour drily continued: "I am not quite sure what it has pronounced, but at all events it has pronounced"—an observation which sent a ripple of laughter over the House. Mr. Balfour had something to say about the position in which the election had placed Mr. John Redmond and his friends. He pointed out that the Nationalists had refused in the last Parliament to vote against the third reading of the Finance Bill, because they regarded the Home Rule issue as more important than the financial issue. Assuming that they would adopt a similar attitude in this Parliament, he pointed out that Home Rule had not been one of the dominant issues of the election. "I have had 149 speeches of Cabinet Ministers examined," he observed, amid laughter, "and in one speech only was there a voluntary reference to Home Rule. Ministers," he said, "have persuaded every Irishman that Home Rule is a thing they are struggling for, and they have left every Englishman and Scotsman indifferent on the subject."

grammar of even the most illiterate man in the Cabinet. It certainly appears to be so on the present occasion." Mr. Balfour hailed the ambiguity of the language thus criticised as showing that the Government had not itself made up its mind as to the precise character of the changes it intended to introduce into the House of Lords. He expressed the hope that whatever change was introduced into our Constitution, care would be taken that it was not made the sport of a chance majority.

### THE PREMIER'S PLEDGE.

Mr. Asquith's turn came next. He showed a bold front, and there was nothing in his manner to show that he regarded the occasion as at all exceptional, though a few words at the end of his speech showed him to be fully conscious of the fact that the fate of his Ministry was trembling in the balance.

He soon came to grips with the difficulty raised by the Nationalist demand. "If," he said, "you are to get Home Rule or any one of those changes on which the hearts of the Progressive party—the three parties on which the Government rely for its majority—are set, they must be preceded by the abolition of the Lords' veto." Mr. Asquith then came to his Albert Hall "pledge."

He denied that he intended to convey

in the course of the present session. The resolution is to be presented at such a time that the governing principles of the Ministerial policy can be debated and determined before the House rises for its spring recess. The Budget is to be reintroduced, unchanged except in some immaterial matters, and also passed before the spring recess. The Government will stand or fall by the Budget, and will stake its credit on carrying it through the Commons.

### HOSTILE NATIONALISTS.

Mr. Keir Hardie intervened with the question "whether it is intended to send the resolution to the House of Lords before the Budget passes from the control of this House." Mr. Asquith replied: "I don't propose to send the resolution to the Lords at all." The importance of this question and the reply became apparent in the course of Mr. Redmond's speech. For the Nationalist leader, while showing himself unsatisfied with the Ministerial policy outlined by the Premier, supported the compromise thus suggested by the Labour representative. "Instead of sitting on for months," said Mr. Redmond, "plunging the sands with a futile discussion on the clauses of a bill which you have received notice would never pass, you ought then"—after the submission of the resolution to the Lords—"to ask guarantees from the Sovereign,