

LABOUR IN POLITICS

DISCOURSE BY BISHOP DELANY

In view of the recent lively controversy on the subject in Australia—a controversy which had its echo in New Zealand—the following able discourse on 'Labor in Politics,' by the Right Rev. Dr. Delany, Coadjutor-Bishop of Hobart, will be of interest to our readers. The discourse (which we take from the Tasmanian 'Monitor') was recently delivered, by invitation, to the Zeehan branch of the Workers' Political League. The Right Rev. speaker said:—

Some months ago I was favored with a communication from this branch of the Tasmanian Workers' Political League, conveying the request that I would address you on the subject of 'Labor in Politics.' I at once replied to your secretary that I would do so. I felt that I could not well do less. The subject is well before the public of this and the sister States; it is subjected to wide and earnest discussion; it has become a factor in our public life, and under all these circumstances any citizen has the right, if challenged, to set forth the conclusion at which he has arrived, provided he does so with the modesty which befits a free man.

The inquiry, I take it, resolves itself into two questions: we ask ourselves, in the first place, is it right that the sons of toil should combine for political action, next, we face the query, whether the aims and methods of our actual Labor Party are right and commendable? It is far easier to answer the first of these questions than to give a satisfactory reply to the second. I will do what is more respectful to you and to myself, I will give you, in all frankness, my individual views for what they are worth.

As to the claim of those who live by the sweat of their brow to combine and organise with a view to influence legislation, I confess I do not perceive a shadow of argument to invalidate that claim. Suppose we lived under a different political form, under some ideal autocracy, whose ruler was animated and guided by the principles of even-handed justice to each and all, in such a condition of things I should unhesitatingly condemn labor parties as unnecessary and mischievous. But that is not our case. Our legislation does not emanate from the serene and benevolent heights of unselfish political philosophy. We do not look to any one superior intelligence nor to the combined wisdom of a select few to formulate the measures which shall pass into working enactments. Our law-givers are plain, matter-of-fact men, who do not pretend to draw their inspiration from above, who all but invariably yield to the pressure of their political environment, that is, of course, to the wishes of their parliamentary supporters.

Parliamentary Government

is, etymologically, as well as in the language of caricature, the government of the 'talking shop,' but the talk has become little more than pretence. The actual work is due to dictation from without. I do not deny that upon matters which do not adversely concern any important section of voters decisions are come to in virtue of their inherent reasonableness, and to some extent in consequence of argument in their support, but for the rest—and the rest embraces what is the most important—it is voting power, not rhetoric nor reasoning, that decides the issue. Now, in parliamentary assemblies, as we know them to-day, voting power is inseparable from party strength. It is, indeed, a curious result in political evolution, this system of party rule, for it seems inevitably fated to involve the public weal in broils and in impediments to its orderly progress. Yet, rough and ready as it may be, the results obtained from its use seem to justify it as an acceptable political form; and in spite of complaints which are neither rare nor frivolous, it is likely to remain in force throughout most of the civilised world for a long time.

The chief difficulty in working the party system springs from the constitution of the parties themselves. In most of the countries that have adopted parliamentary government in imitation of England, the parties as yet remain too numerous and variable for strong and orderly parliamentary rule. The reactionaries are many in all those countries, and they are dissatisfied because they inwardly distrust the efficacy and fitness of the parliamentary system. In England, for a very long period, the system worked most effectively as a political engine; so much so, indeed, that nearly all the leading minds of Continental Europe yearned to see it transplanted to their respective countries. Yet it was in those days that the voice of the British people had comparatively little to do with the shaping of legislation.

The Great Landed Interest

took and held the reins of power. A few great families agreed to differ, and divided the voting battalions into two antagonistic bodies of Whigs and Tories, reserving to themselves and their political creatures the final word on the all-important question of what was to become law. The franchise was very restricted. The voting was in the open. The landlord knew for whom the vote was cast. Hence, in the rural constituencies and in the boroughs the owners of the ground were perfectly secure in forecasting the electoral issue. Even brilliant and conscientious men like Edmund Burke, and in much later days Mr. Gladstone, owed their entrance to the House of Commons, not to the intelligent discrimination of a constituency, but to the mastery of a great landowner over his obedient voters. Yet, unless the reflected light of history is deceptive, that bygone system of pretended public opinion brought together parliamentary assemblies whose eloquence, power, and political wisdom we may scarce hope to see revived. We do not really expect to find Chathams or Burkes or Gladstones in houses recruited through manhood suffrage. If in the House of Commons the level of ability and political wisdom was slow in sinking, even after the great measures of electoral reform, that was due in no small degree to the tenacity with which, in England, vested centres of power hold their own after legislation has theoretically stripped them. So late as thirty years ago the House of Commons had to reckon with the Cavendishes and the Cecils as well as with the press and platform, and all the other agencies of popular instruction in public life. Most probably the hold of those great houses upon the opinion of the country would have continued all but unweakened had it not been for the singular evolution of one overmastering mind. Mr. Gladstone's towering personality, his surpassing powers, his unique moral fascination for the masses, and the tireless energy he threw into the task of inspiring them with the hopes and prospects of a people uplifted and enlightened, and made happy in their homes, put it in his power for a few years to measure swords as the people's champion with their hereditary masters. The ground he won for the people remains theirs and affords footing for further advance. Since his disappearance from the political arena, the reactionary forces of landed interest and capital have dictated the law-making of England. The old so-called Liberal Party split up as soon as a great measure of social justice touched the quick. Then all those who had masqueraded as lovers of their fellow-man, but were in truth lovers only of the comforts of their caste, cut away from true-hearted Liberals, from the men who love to regard in man a brother before all things else. In that fateful hour Gladstone would have triumphed once more had the sons of toil throughout Great Britain been schooled and organised, had they possessed the organisation which you are working to extend and perfect. You know how Gladstone was compelled to realise, and how he did not shrink from declaring that it was necessary to look for support in behalf of measures making for social justice, not to the classes but to the masses. That maxim of modern parliamentary government was wrung from a most conscientious political expert. You might emblazon it upon your political banner.

A moment's survey of history will show you its justification. I have mentioned one or two of the great names that adorn the page of English parliamentary history during the fifty or sixty years prior to the age of reform. We still go to Burke and others of his time for political wisdom. Yet, although those great men were Liberals in the true sense of the term, what were they able to do but enunciate sound maxims? What was the condition of the masses in their day? What did it continue to be, in spite of those brilliant pageants in parliamentary debate? Did not reform come from the rude awakening caused by the spectre of insurrection? How tardily and laboriously concession came after concession to mitigate the horrors of the factory and the mine. Are we sure to-day that the noblest eloquence of the senate would have wrung those elementary concessions from the holders of wealth, had it not been reinforced by the barbarous methods of strike and riot? They are barbarous methods, unworthy of civilised communities; but to my mind the effective check to their recurrence is adequate representation of Labor on the floor of the Legislature. Let the clash of interests meet there. Let its shock be dulled by the force of debate. Let the common weal be spared the risks of conflict outside.

When the franchise is high you may draw artificial party lines, and that was what was done in England and elsewhere under restricted representation. But universal suffrage inevitably leads to a demarcation of parties along the line which separates capital from Labor. In a civilised community you must