

IRELAND'S FITNESS FOR HOME RULE

THE CHIEF SECRETARY ON HELPS AND OBSTACLES

The following is a report of Mr. Birrell's address in Manchester on March 24:—

I would be untrue (said Mr. Birrell) to the office which I hold if I did not say a word about Ireland. You all know it is the fixed intention of his Majesty's Government, if all goes well—as we think it will—with our Parliament Bill, to proceed next session with a measure of self-government for Ireland. That is our fixed determination. It will be the third time of asking, but many things have happened since 1893. Many things have happened in Ireland since then, and the only difficulty that I foresee is that so many of our young men and eager politicians have come upon the scene since that day that they perhaps hardly realise the present position, though I am glad to think that already many of them have cast upon one side the doubts and difficulties which pressed upon their predecessors in 1836 and 1893. Let me just enumerate

A Few of the Great Changes

that have since taken place in Ireland. In 1898 Lord Salisbury, who had not long before declared that Local Government for Ireland, the County Councils, and the like, would be a greater act of insanity even than Home Rule, proceeded in the ordinary course of a politician to give the country the very thing which he said would be an act of lunacy. For my own part, I always thought even then that Local Government for Ireland should have followed, and not preceded, Home Rule; and I still think so. But that was not the course of events, and the Tory Party conferred upon the tenant farmers of the South and West of Ireland the sole and exclusive right of governing their local affairs. Upon the shoulders of these men, who had been hopelessly excluded from every form of government, they placed the great burden of county administration and local rates. These Catholics had none of them ever had a job before, for if ever a bone was thrown to a Catholic you may be sure it was one that had been well gnawed by dozens of Protestant dogs. The Local Government Board was almost in despair at the thought of how to teach these men how to discharge their duties. They sent down gentlemen to instruct them how to hold meetings, how to have agendas, how to strike a rate, and how to do all the things that

For Centuries had been Done by Grand Juries;

and had never entered into the considerations of those Irish people, who were the most tractable people in the whole world. They set to work to learn; they managed their agendas, and though they occasionally had lively meetings they weren't a bit more lively—though the language may be a little different—than those you may have witnessed in the West Riding of Yorkshire. We have had an experience since 1898—an experience that I still think was a dangerous one—and it has worked uncommonly well. I will not say that it is not open to criticism. What local government is not open to criticism? Even in this sublime country of ours, it is open to criticism. They have had their changes in Ireland, but there is not one who would now go back to the old form of government. That is something to have happened since the Parliament of 1893; and that happened in 1898 by a Tory measure. Then there was another measure—the great Land Purchase Act—Mr. Wyndham's measure of 1903. That was a very great Act of Parliament, but it had one fault—it was on a rotten financial basis. But, rotten or not rotten, I am glad it was carried out. Under a half of the agricultural land of Ireland has changed hands, and a great agrarian revolution has been carried out. During the next ten years it will be carried out on the entire remainder, and Ireland will be an agricultural country, with a race of peasant proprietors. There was but

One Great Obstacle.

Mr. Birrell proceeded. The land purchase was making no progress in the West of Ireland, so that the men who really won the victory were deprived of its fruits. He went on to describe the efforts being made in the West at present and then turned to the University settlement. He was glad to be able to say that the University settlement had been a great success, not only in the University of Dublin, but also where it was most criticised—in the new University of Belfast. There, he was glad to think, Catholics were flocking in large numbers to the truly undenominational University, there to study side by side with the Protestants of Belfast. That would do more than all the Acts and all the Bills and speeches to reconcile the two branches of the population. The Catholics of Belfast were just as proud of Belfast as were the Protestants, as eager to see the great city prosperous, healthy, and wealthy. The University question had stood long in the way of an Irish settlement. Now it had been settled, and he thought they might contemplate, and he looked forward to the time, not at once but in time, when they would see the Protestants and Catholics of Ulster living together as happily and peacefully as the corresponding population in the great province of Quebec. With regard to the fears of Ireland making overtures for foreign friendship, he asked: Who would the Catholics of Ireland ally themselves to? Was it

with France? Was it with the Germans? Nobody need dread a fleet of Irish Dreadnoughts with strange Gaelic names in the Channel. Those notions, he thought, had disappeared. But two bugbears will remain, Mr. Birrell proceeded, and it would be idle to deny their existence. One is religion, or what is called religion. It is not the religion of the River Jordan, but the religion of the River Boyne. The other difficulty is money. I don't say so-called money. Well, these are the undoubted difficulties standing in our path. What does the religious difficulty really mean? Whether you like it or not—and there is no better Protestant in this room than I am—the great bulk of the Irish people belong to what used to be called in this country the old religion. All your ancestors belonged to it; but we have altered and changed our minds, and, I think, for the better. But the Irish people have not changed their minds. The Catholic religion plays an enormous part in their lives. Their little way-worn chapels where they were taken by their mothers to their First Communion, their affection for their priests who have stood by them in many a hard battle, their tempers and disposition and whole course of events up to the present day have made and confirmed them Roman Catholics, and you won't alter it. Nobody now attempts to alter it. There was a time when there was a great deal of proselytism in Ireland, but there is none of it now. They have come to regard the difference between Protestant and Catholic as a generic difficulty, as between a horse and a cow. The time may come when they may think these things have an intellectual and moral basis, but you may take it from me that the Catholic religion will prevail for many a long day to come, and everything we have done hitherto has had the effect of rivetting it upon them even stronger than otherwise it might have been. Was no Catholic country which contained any Protestants in it at all qualified to have a great measure of government such as had been conferred on Canada and South Africa? They might not have it because they were not fit for it, and would use it injuriously against their Protestant fellow-countrymen. That was the argument and course of reasoning which was now advanced against the whole case of Home Rule. When they got, as they soon should, into the thick of it, these were the arguments that would be used. He did not know how far they would be used in the House of Commons, but they would be used on every platform. The Catholics were not fit to be entrusted with property or patronage in any shape or form. I can only give that statement a denial, continued Mr. Birrell. I am not saying for a moment that every Protestant or Catholic is 'absolutely to be trusted.' I don't think they are. There may be cases of injustice, of favoritism shown here and there, but to say the Catholics of Ireland are unfit to exercise local government because a portion of the inhabitants are Protestants, is a libellous statement. We don't find it in the South and West of Ireland. I have visited all the main towns and villages in these places, I have seen Protestant and Catholic churches side by side; I have had meals at the same table with Catholics and Protestants, and if you impose on Ireland a responsibility before the face of Europe, you can dismiss from your minds any notion that their environment will unfit them for local government.

The Other Difficulty is Money.

and all I have got to say upon that is that you must ascertain first of all what justice requires. After having ascertained that, if you are disposed to be generous, why so much the better. Wealthy men—I have often noticed it, not being one myself—to save bother, say, 'Let us get rid of this claim of yours; we won't take any account; here's a five for you.' Well, if the account had been taken, the man would have found he was entitled to £5 1s 6d. Where is the generosity? You haven't even been just. Therefore, I say, first find out how the account stands. Ascertain strictly and literally—having regard to the treaty Act of Union and what has happened since—what justice requires to the last penny, and don't say we will deal in round figures. That means that the man who has got to pay goes off with the out figure. Having found out what justice requires, let generosity tinge the gift if you like. If this country thinks it worth while to pay a little more so much the better for Ireland and for England, too. I do not think the monetary difficulty, though one requiring the most careful consideration, presents anything like a real obstacle in the great task before us. My heart is in this job, and, difficult as it may be, we shall be able to carry it through, and when once we have Ireland pacified we shall occupy for the first time since Henry II. went there a proud position which will enable us, with the United States of America, to take a stronger line, and establish a more real friendship than is at present possible. But we shall have done something better than that. We shall have removed from our minds a memory which cannot be but a shame and disgrace. It is a lamentable and melancholy thing for anyone travelling through Ireland seeing men and women, keen, qualified, and teachable, with all the part they have played in our battles and Empire winning, to think that we have to cut such a poor figure in Ireland. It can be remedied, but only by strength and courage, and also by consenting (which is a difficult thing for us Proud Protestants) that the Catholic people have their own way and by recognising that everybody cannot be cast in the same mould. We can't all of us be Primitive Methodists. It would be a good thing, perhaps, but we can all be common members of a great United Empire.