

NEWCASTLE
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION,
1886.



◇ SPEECH ◇

DELIVERED BY

Sir W. G. ARMSTRONG, C.B.,

IN THE CIRCUS,

On Thursday Evening,

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GENTLEMEN,

This is not the first time that I have been asked to allow myself to be put in nomination for this City, and the reasons which withheld me on the last would certainly have restrained me on the present occasion, had it not been that we find ourselves in a crisis which demands the sacrifice of inclination to duty.

You are well aware that I have never busied myself with political action, and I believe you are equally well aware that I have always been in favor of progressive legislation, tempered with caution. In short, I have been, and still am, a moderate Liberal, and I am afraid moderation in politics does not, as a rule, excite enthusiasm. It is not the least amongst the sacrifices I make in coming forward that I shall lose in the minds of many of my fellow citizens, some of the approbation, which I have reason to believe, they now entertain towards me, but I trust that any asperity which this Election may excite will be but temporary, and that in the end I shall occupy as good a position in the estimation of my fellow citizens as I am led to believe I do at present. At all events, whatever be the result of my candidature, it shall make no difference in the warm feelings I entertain towards this city, which is the place of my birth and the scene of all my labors and successes.



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As to my qualifications for Parliamentary life, I am afraid they are not of the type most generally in favor. I am neither a trained politician nor a practised speaker, but though I am neither of these, I may claim to be both a trained and a practised man of business. I have been accustomed, during a long business career, to view every question brought before me soberly and dispassionately, to hear and weigh every argument for and against it, and to decide in a judicial spirit. I do not think you will say that there are already too many men in Parliament who follow this practice, or that there are too few who have the taste and aptitude for much speaking.

I now come to the cause which has induced me to yield to the earnest solicitations of a large body of the electors to become a candidate at the approaching Election. It is the alarm which I share with so many others at the measure for the government of Ireland, brought forward by our Prime Minister in direct contravention of his previous professions.

As this Irish measure has been so thoroughly debated by men of the very highest competency, I feel diffident in putting forward any views of my own; but it is absolutely necessary that I should declare to the electors my opinions upon this most important question, and this I shall proceed to do briefly, and with as little repetition as possible of what others have already said. In the first place, let me call your attention to the significant fact that nearly all the distinguished men who have taken part in the recent debate in opposition to the scheme of the Premier have acted not only without any personal interests to serve, but contrary to their own feelings, and

against the interests of the party to which they were previously attached. Who can doubt the sincerity of Lord Hartington's distress at being compelled to separate himself from the chief under whom he had served, and whose private friendship he so greatly valued? Or, who can fail to admire Sir Henry James' noble sacrifice when, by refusing to follow in the new path of his political leader, he excluded himself from the great prize of the legal profession which was obviously within his grasp, had his conscience permitted him to adhere to his leader? Much the same thing may be said of many others, but I refrain from mentioning more names lest omissions should be deemed invidious. These men have appealed to the understanding of the nation without enforcing their arguments by impassioned eloquence. They have been perfectly consistent, manly, and straightforward, and, in my opinion, they have shewn to demonstration that Mr. Gladstone's measure, if carried, will almost infallibly result in dismemberment of the empire and in detriment to Ireland herself.

Pray remember that this question is not a new one. It has been before the country on a former occasion, and received the most careful attention of the most eminent Liberal statesman living in an earlier part of this century. About fifty years ago Mr. O'Connell, in a speech of wonderful eloquence, pressed on the House of Commons the repeal of the Union, but like Mr. Gladstone at the present day, he was careful to make the reservation that the demand for repeal was not to involve a severance of Ireland from Great Britain. Lord Macaulay's unanswerable reply showed that the repeal of the Union would not remove the political and social difficulties which afflicted Ireland, but that it would aggravate almost every one of them.



The proposal pressed for by Mr. O'Connell was so nearly identical with that now before the country that Lord Macaulay's great speech may be read at this day as if it were a reply to the Prime Minister. Mr. O'Connell, like Mr. Gladstone, contended for a separate parliament in Ireland. Mr. O'Connell, like Mr. Gladstone, proposed that the two countries should nevertheless continue in union by some scheme remaining to be invented. Mr. O'Connell was, in short, a repealer, and Mr. Gladstone is, upon the very same grounds, also a repealer, differing only from his predecessor in being an Englishman instead of an Irishman. Macaulay's speech may, therefore, be taken as showing that now, as formerly, the plan proposed involves absurdity and contradiction. He put a string of cases in which the two parliaments would probably differ, as all bodies independent of each other are liable to differ, and then he asks who is to interfere to settle such differences. He proceeds to say that if we are to have repeal, let us have it in the unambiguous form of total separation; adding the following remarkable words: "I wish to see
 " Great Britain and Ireland joined as the limbs of a well-
 " formed body are joined, but I do not wish to see the two
 " countries united like those wretched twins from Siam
 " who were united by an unnatural ligament which made
 " each the constant plague of the other, always in each
 " other's way, more helpless and less active than others,
 " because they had twice as many limbs, not feeling each
 " other's pleasure, but tormented by each other's in-
 " firmities, and certain to perish miserably by each other's
 " dissolution."

On the repeal side of the recent debate, we see no self-sacrifice, and no manly frankness as to future intentions, but a line of conduct has been followed in which

diplomacy rather than candour has been conspicuous. It is impossible to doubt that Mr. Bright was substantially correct when he said that if Mr. Gladstone's great personal authority were withdrawn from this most objectionable proposal, it would not meet with twenty supporters outside of Mr. Parnell's party. On the side of Mr. Gladstone and his party, the most flagrant violation of consistency has taken place, and the most unwarrantable surrender of pledges has been made. Instead of calm reasoning, we have had passionate orations, and instead of candour, we have had party manœuvring, to which the great liberal party should never have descended. Nearly all the men who constituted the strength of the liberal party, have examined Mr. Gladstone's proposals with the care and attention that proposals coming from so distinguished a source were entitled to, and have been obliged to express their dissent. Mr. Gladstone, only a few months ago, denounced the Parnellite party, and scouted their demand for Home Rule. He claimed the support of the nation to enable him to improve the government of Ireland independently of the Parnellite party; and now we find him in alliance with that party, and denouncing those liberals who decline to do likewise. It is not surprising that a large section of the liberal party have refused to follow their brilliant leader in a complete reversal of the policy so lately enunciated. It is not the least remarkable of Mr. Gladstone's wonderful powers that he can change sides and argue in contrary directions without any apparent sense of inconsistency; and still more surprising is it that he can make so many of his followers do the same thing. When Mr. Gladstone introduced his measure, he made a speech, which, as a display of eloquence, won the admiration of every one; but the measure was so

ill-matured, that he found it necessary to cast aside all the collateral issues it involved, just as the mariner, whose ship is in danger, throws over his cargo until he thinks the vessel is sufficiently lightened to float. Thus you see that in reviewing this great debate, we have on the one side every quality displayed that is calculated to inspire confidence ; while on the other we have so much of party motives and wavering policy, as to shake our confidence in the convictions expressed. And here I must do justice to one at least of Mr. Gladstone's adherents, that is to say, to my eminent opponent, Mr. Morley, he at least, is acting in accordance with his previous professions, and is not open to the charge of inconsistency. The same may be said of Mr. Cowen, the late distinguished senior member for this city, who has been equally consistent, and whose honesty of purpose in every act of his political life is above suspicion.

Then, again, there is the question—Will Ireland, even if it were a homogeneous country, be likely to govern itself more wisely and justly than the Imperial Parliament? Nobody disputes the existence of much poverty and misery in Ireland, but what is it that the Imperial Parliament has done of late years that those sufferings should be laid at its door? Great measures of reform have been granted. The Catholics have been emancipated—the Irish Church has been abolished—Land Bills have been enacted, and every disposition has been evinced to ameliorate still further the condition of the people. An Irish Parliament is no new thing ; it has already been tried and proved a failure, and considering the greater complexity of the commercial ties which now exist between the two countries, and the greater need of Ireland for British capital to encourage her industries,

the severance of the union would now be more disastrous to Ireland than at any former period.

The Prime Minister now professes to put his case in the form of the simplest possible question:—"Are we to give a separate Parliament to Ireland, or pursue a policy of coercion?" But it is plain that this apparent simplicity is only attained by lopping off from his proposal all the collateral issues which are inseparable from it, and which involve quite as much difficulty as the proposal itself. There is the Land Purchase measure with its awful increase to the national burdens and the extremely doubtful security it offers for the repayment of the immense sum to be advanced. There is also the equally serious question of protecting Ulster and the loyal party, both Protestant and Catholic, scattered through other parts of Ireland, and who would, doubtless, appear in greater numbers if they were freed from intimidation, and allowed to give free expression to their opinions. We know nothing of what Mr. Gladstone's intentions are upon these and other topics. He merely invites us to sanction the ruling principle of his measure, without taking into consideration what is to follow.

The Premier's present object seems to be simply to win over the national party, for he almost ignores the existence of a unionist party in Ireland. It sounds very plausible to say that Ireland should be allowed to manage its own affairs, but we might just as well say that the Irish people ought to be left to settle their own differences. Now, whatever virtue we ascribe to the Irish character, and I admit there is much to admire, it must be admitted that they are not prone to settle their differences in a peaceable manner, and judging from

the national character, as well as from existing indications of strife, the almost inevitable result of handing over the country to its own devices will be that civil war will break out between the loyal and disloyal sections of the inhabitants of that country. Surely, therefore, it is necessary for us, before committing ourselves to Mr. Gladstone's naked proposal, to consider what action we shall have to pursue in such an eventuality. We may take it for granted that both parties will appeal to us for support, and if we abstain from interfering on either side, both parties will hate us for refusing their appeal. Thus, instead of having one division of the country against us, we shall have both. If, on the other hand, we do interpose, how can we avoid the logical necessity of taking the side of the party we establish in power, in other words the loyal minority will have to be treated as rebels, and British troops will have to be employed to crush the friends and maintain the enemies of England. Such a proceeding would create an outburst of opposition on this side of the channel which would almost amount to a rebellion, and thus new and deplorable complications would be introduced to aggravate our present difficulties.

I have no faith in Mr. Gladstone's utopian views as to tranquilizing Ireland by the isolated concession he proposes, nor have I the slightest belief that it would be accepted as a final arrangement by the so-called National party. That party has over and over again declared their object to be the total severance of Ireland from Great Britain; and even, at this moment, they can hardly restrain their impatience to re-assert that object. Any limited concession we may make will, we may be assured, only be accepted as an instalment, and the

agitation by the disaffected party, if not otherwise restrained, will be continued until their declared object be attained. It is alleged that Mr. Gladstone's opponents are unprepared with any alternative course; I say it is sufficient for the moment to arrest a disastrous course, and as to the future, let us look to such grave and statesmanlike suggestions as are contained in Lord Hartington's address, and to the cautious and enlightened views of such men as Mr. Goschen. Give to Ireland everything that can reasonably be required in the form of local self-government; but resist separation and maintain the law with a firm unwavering hand, and thereby give to Ireland the opportunity of improving her condition after the suppression of her own internal discords.

Mr. Gladstone asserts that the only alternative to his proposal is a policy of coercion—and here I must protest against the misleading use of that word, as if it always meant something odious and tyrannical. It is a word to be used with discrimination, because it may express either oppression, or protection against oppression. When moonlighters coerce innocent men by shooting them in the legs and mutilating their cattle in order to establish a reign of terror, I call that oppression. But when coercion is applied to restrain those evil-doers from such tyrannical acts, I call that protection—protection of law-abiding people, and protection of liberty. If there be any one word that sums up my political creed it is that word Liberty; but liberty can only be accorded to the just by the coercion of the unjust.

The true question which now presses for consideration is, what amount of self-government can be granted to Ireland without injury to herself, to Great Britain, or to

the Empire. What Mr. Gladstone's programme is no one can say. We only know that its essential principle is repeal of the Union, with the reservation of some undefined link which he himself does not profess to be able to explain, any more than O'Connell could, in his time, explain. How can we expect that any link whatever can be met by contentment in Ireland, seeing that we have been told, on the best authority, that agitation will never cease until the last link is broken? What possible good can be anticipated for Ireland if severance were effected? The future welfare of that country essentially depends upon the *inflow* of English capital, but if Ireland were removed from the control of the Imperial Parliament, we should have an *outflow* instead of an inflow of capital. Irish industries would be contracted instead of expanded, and increased misery would be the result. As regards England, the discouragement of industry in Ireland would cause Irish labourers to be driven out of their country and brought into competition still more than at present with English labourers. Again, according to what Mr. Gladstone has affirmed to be an essential part of his scheme, the British Government would have to raise a vast sum of money, at the risk of the British tax-payer, to compensate Irish landowners. Moreover, we should have, in close proximity to us, an island bitterly hostile, which could readily lend itself to become the basis of hostile operations for any State that might be at war with us, and to meet this danger, we should have to increase our naval and military forces at the expense of our already heavily-taxed population. But without going the length of repealing the Union, much may yet be done for improving the condition of Ireland. We can give her

a large measure of self-government, and we can help her as only a rich and powerful neighbour can help her. What the particular form of such ameliorating measures should be, no one ought to be expected to define off-hand, especially considering that Mr. Gladstone himself is so reticent on the subject. Such measures require careful consideration, instead of headstrong action, and nothing but cool-headed treatment can be expected to yield a satisfactory solution. Surely at this late stage of the Nineteenth Century "measures, not men" should be our motto.

I feel very indisposed to speak in a disparaging manner of Mr. Gladstone, of whose mental powers I have a great admiration. I share the tendency of the human mind to applaud excellence in whatever form it may be exhibited; and Mr. Gladstone's astonishing powers of persuasion, by means of his impassioned eloquence, as well as his unrivalled powers of debate, are worthy of laudation. But if Mr. Gladstone succeeds by his personal influence in carrying this measure, there will be nothing beyond his power to do in future. He will become a dictator, with an army of disciplined adherents at his back, determined to support him in every political enterprise, however reckless it may be and however inconsistent with previous professions. The common sense of the nation will be overwhelmed, and idolatry of an individual will take the place of independent thought and patriotic feeling.

Although the Irish question absorbs all interest at the present moment, it is right that I should say that on all other questions I shall be guided by cool and impartial judgment, and shall most conscientiously

act in such manner as I shall deem best for the maintenance of the empire and the good of the people. If at any time I have reason to believe that my action or want of action fails to satisfy the majority of my fellow-citizens, I shall be quite ready to execute the happy despatch which shall restore me to tranquil life and more congenial pursuits.

And now, gentlemen, let me conclude with a few solemn words which, I think, can hardly fail to reach your feelings. Sir Charles Trevelyan, than whom no kinder-hearted man or one more devoted to his country ever lived, called upon me in London only nine days before his death, and urgently pressed me to become a candidate at this election. I pleaded age and other disabilities as reasons for withholding my consent, but he met my objections with these remarkable words: "Sir William, this is a cause for men to die in." And he did die in this cause, for I am assured that his death was due to over-exertion and anxiety in connection with the present appeal to the country.



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