

AN ALTERNATIVE POLICY.

By William Rooney.

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The British House of Commons will dissolve in a few days and before we can realise it we shall be in the whirl and excitement of a general election. It will be lacking in those huge demonstrations and spontaneous enthusiasm which characterised the *ante bellum* days – for fortunately we have been cured to a great extent of the idea that the salvation of the country depends on our returning to Westminster the middle-aged monied individual who having made his pile in the “Italian” warehouse of some country-town ambitions for that wide field for his genius provided by the British House of Commons. Excitement of a kind we shall most certainly have – but it must needs be calm – for, notwithstanding the speeches of such prominent public men as the United League has called to its support, the Tories are going back to power in England by a largely increased majority. The future of the Nation, if one is to believe Mr O’Brien’s organ, depends on the despatch to London of a solid party of dunderheads who will do as they are directed without bothering why. The possibility of a party of John O’Donnells and Haviland Burkes shaking the British Empire to its centre is sufficiently remote to allow of the ordinary Irish Nationalist being somewhat dubious of its consummation. Parnell with eighty-five supporters and the balance of power was one thing. Mr. Redmond under any circumstances, but more especially as at present, is quite a different matter. If there is any man in Ireland fool enough to believe that the intelligence of the average League organiser is a valuable asset as against the trained skill of the British Parliamentary politician, his eyes will be opened before another harvest comes to bless the island.

That the Irish Party, ambitioned by Mr. O’Brien and his fellow-workers, can or will achieve anything, as things at present stand, is utterly unlikely. English parties are impervious to argument, even if the projected phalanx were capable of arguing, which the bulk of them certainly are not. The country is, therefore, face to face with the

question whether it shall or shall not send to the British Commons eighty odd men who can do no good, who cost a considerable sum to maintain, and who are either unwilling or unable to do the only thing that an “Irish” Party could do at present – delay, obstruct, and, if necessary, bring into contempt every rule, regulation, and usage of the assembly, and keep on repeating such a line of action until the attention of the world is fastened on it, and the reasons for it at least given to the Press of the world. This would not be exactly an ideal programme, nor one likely to bring much actual good to Ireland, but it could be utilised to the disadvantage of England, to thwart her officials, and render the lives of her Ministers scarcely worth living. It would mean a series of suspensions, probably imprisonment, and would decidedly make every man, woman, and child in England detest the name of Ireland. There is, however, very little chance of Mr. Redmond or his followers (?) following such a line; for two reasons – one, it is uncomfortable to be always fighting, and your Parliamentarian likes quiet above all things; two, it would speedily do away with the profession, and the “patriot” who slaves at Westminster is no iconoclast.

Let it be thoroughly understood that while one may have no confidence whatever in the pioneers of the United Irish League, there are few who regard the disappearance of the landlord and the wreck of his one-time almost autocratic power with any feelings but those of deep satisfaction. Even Mr. Standish O’Grady, who is certainly not a Jacobin or a disrespector of established things, has not a word to say in their defence nor a sigh of lament for their downfall. England has used them for her purposes, they allowed themselves to be used, and, like all her worn-out tools, she has flung them aside to perish or protect themselves by any means they can. They might have led the people and abolished English influence a century ago, but they chose to stand by the “Constitution,” they robbed, ravished, ravaged, and depopulated in its name. It was an effectual shield, for it has covered ruffianism and rapine in every quarter of the globe. It is getting threadbare and can be seen through, and pious and virtuous England cannot permit that the world should see her perfidy, so she casts from her her tools and willing agents, and a few short years will write

“Finis” to the career of Irish landlordism as we have understood it. But the landlords are not the only agencies of England that need abolishing. Everyone knows them for what they are, and they can do harm, but the influences that work under the guise of Nationality are at least as baneful, and yet the League and its pillars are either blind to them or wilfully pass them over. It may be accepted that the bulk of the present or possible members of the Parliamentary Party will swallow any programme that makes them entitled to share in the “fund,” but the least those who pay them should demand is, that they endeavour to carry out their contract – that is to say, see that the objects and resolutions adopted at the Rotunda Convention are not allowed to become dead letters.

How far they have shown a disposition to do so, up to the present, anyone can see. To take the Irish language portion alone, it is rather singular that we have heard nothing from them on the recent regulations of the National Board, and their intensity of interest in it may be gauged by the fact that Mr. O’Mahey who was charged with the question in the British House of Commons, recently at a meeting in Clonbur, in the County Galway, ceased speaking in Irish because the reporter present was unable to record his speech, and of course his eloquence was too precious to miss the permanency of print.

There was a resolution adopted at the Convention in favour of Irish manufacture – but we shall wait in vain for any denunciations by Mr. O’Brien or his satellites of the shop-keepers who, of course, are staunch Leaguers, and yet more than anyone else are responsible for flooding the country with the vilest products of the foreigner, from a farthing box of matches to the suit of readymades which is wiping out of the land the artificer and the artisan who are at least as necessary as the gombeen-man and the huxter. Can there be any justification for the boycott which in almost every Irish town, meets the Irish article, while every goods train brings the rubbish of Liverpool, Manchester, and Birmingham, into the heart of Munster, Donegal, and Connemara?

Does the League propose to induce the farmers to go back on the old system which filled their chests with their own meal, gave work for the winter evenings to the deft fingers of their women, provided

them with home-made linen and woollens, and left no room for Manchester cottons or London finery?

Will the League endeavour to induce its members to imitate their fathers and not depend on foreign produce for their sustenance, teach them that the home-bred article ought to be at least as good as the foreign one, and try to burn into their minds the fact that Ireland as she exists to-day, the foreign fed nation she is, could not stand a blockade of three weeks without facing a famine as dire as ever blighted the harvest prospects? What a farce it would be if France or some other friendly power having landed a force here sufficient to help us to regain our freedom should be compelled to withdraw it because we were unable to supply them with the mere necessaries of life.

Beef and mutton we have no doubt in abundance, but corn is yearly decreasing in acreage, though any ordinary people with foresight would look to the bread producer as the primal need. We will be told the League actually proposes to do this by breaking up the grazing tracts, but we shall wait in vain for the war upon importations which would rally to its support every honest Nationalist in the country as well as many who have no sympathy with Nationalism, but who from purely personal reasons are grieved to see the country going to the dogs.

Earlier in these columns it was pointed out that the Parliamentarians at any time during their flood of success could have made this ideal of a self-supporting Ireland a reality. They failed even to recognise how dependent Ireland was on the outside world for existence. We are not too sanguine that their successors will do anything either, yet it is not a matter requiring an Act of Parliament. There need be no eloquent speeches or prolonged debates in the British House of Commons on its heads. It is purely a matter for the people themselves, a thing to be settled at home in each parish, a matter of urgent necessity, but one comparatively easy of being cured – and one that calls for the attention of all men who do not pin their faith exclusively to oratory and “manly” resolutions. It is not a programme that is likely to make a hero of anyone, for strange as it may appear, there is no act of the British Parliament compelling a man to wear English shoddy, eat American flour, or wash himself

exclusively with the produce of Lancashire fat. It will not admit of many grandiloquent speeches for there is nothing extraordinarily praiseworthy in those who set themselves up as public instructors, teaching the people that National existence depends on National resources. Yet the fact will sound so foreign to a people who have listened for a quarter of a century to the bellowings of the political quacks who prescribed everything but the right thing for Irish evils, that they may fancy it is really a new remedy. It hampers no other policy; it is merely reverting to the days of the past when Ireland had her millions of men, and every little town was a hive of industry; when there were mills of all sorts on the rivers, ships in the harbours, trade in the cities, and the old Irish civilisation and spirit in the land. We have improved of course since then, our manufactures are gone, our population dwindled to half, our harbours empty, our cities silent, our mills gone to ruin – but have we not the ballot box and the elective franchise? And can we not return any man we wish to British Parliament? What more could anyone desire? And if these have been procured by an Irish Party at Westminster after seventy years of struggling who knows what the next seventy years may not bring forth.