

THE BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION.

A PRIMARY difference between the presidential election in the United States and a general election in Great Britain is that while one contest is avowedly a matter of personal preference, the other is ostensibly, often actually, a conflict around certain broadly defined principles. It is true that whilst Disraeli and Gladstone were yet alive and confronted each other in the political arena, the fight raged as closely and distinctly around a name and a personality as is the custom at presidential elections. In 1874 and in 1880 the electors throughout the Kingdom did not profess to vote either as Liberals or Tories. They voted for Gladstone or Disraeli.

With the passing away of those colossal figures the British general election has reverted to its former manner. Lord Salisbury is a statesman who, even beyond the limits of the party pale, is held in the highest esteem. But his is not a name to conjure with at the polls. On the other side Mr. Gladstone has left no successor. Accordingly, the forthcoming general election will be fought, as far as ministerialists can control it, on the question of the war in South Africa, whilst opposition candidates will endeavor to concentrate the attention and judgment of the electors on the shortcomings of the administration in respect to the conduct of the war, and on the sins of omission and commission committed by the Government during their more than five years' term of office.

Another fundamental difference between the two electoral campaigns appears in their inception and direction. A presidential election is a more or less well-ordered battle, every movement being directed by the commander-in-chief on either side. A British general election is a series of independent skirmishes, taking place all over the country, each under local command, owning no supreme general, observing no common plan of battle. The British voter knows nothing of delegates, conventions, or party managers. He walks into the polling booth and votes directly for the man of his choice. It is true that both the Conservative (now the Unionist) and the Liberal

parties have a paid official who is supposed to undertake general supervision of party interests in the electorate throughout the kingdom. He is generally consulted by constituencies in the selection of a candidate. What he tenders in response is advice, not instruction. Nothing is calculated more quickly to put up the back of a constituency than any movement having the appearance of dictation from London.

A great gulf, wide as the Atlantic, separates the party manager of the presidential election campaign from the chief agent of the Liberal or the Unionist party in England. Whilst one has almost an unlimited supply of money at his command, and is not too grievously hampered in disposing of it for campaign purposes, the other has but a meagre subscription list, and is bound hand and foot by the Corrupt Practices Act. It is that legislation which has crippled the political party agent in Great Britain. As will presently be shown, the election agent is bound by law, under heavy penalties, to keep strict account and make full disclosure of every penny spent.

In the good old times, the costs of a parliamentary election were sufficient permanently to embarrass the estates of the combatants. In two contests that took place in the county of Hampshire — one in 1790, and the other in 1806 — the ministerial candidates disbursed between them £50,000. In respect of cost, the most famous English election took place at Northampton, a borough now modestly represented by Mr. Labouchere, who for some time had as colleague a man so far from rich as Mr. Bradlaugh. What is known in history as the Spendthrift Election was fought in 1768. It was a three-cornered duel, the combatants being the Earl of Halifax, the Earl of Northampton, and Earl Spencer. Each threw open his ancestral home — Horton, Castle Ashby, and Althorpe. All were welcome, whether they had votes or not. Hither thronged the wool-combers, the weavers, the shoemakers of Northampton. Over fourteen days the polling was spread, and for a full fortnight the free and independent electors and their friends feasted and drank. At Horton, the mob made short work of Lord Halifax's prized port. That gone, he served up his choicest claret. But, as a well-known story testifies, with claret you "get no forrader." The disgusted electors deserted Horton and went over to Castle Ashby, where port was still on tap.

It is small wonder that, in these circumstances, out of a legally testified total of 930 electors, 1,218 recorded their votes. In the

end, it was found that the votes had been equally divided. The three earls thereupon agreed to toss for Northampton, and Lord Spencer won. He had further the satisfaction of knowing that he had spent less than the others. His bill footed up a mere £100,000, whereas Lords Halifax and Northampton had between them spent £300,000. Lord Halifax was ruined, and to this day his family estate bears the scars of the Spendthrift Election. Lord Northampton cut down the trees in his park, and sold his furniture at Compton Winyates. With the proceeds he went abroad, and died in Switzerland in poverty.

The House of Commons is elected for a period of seven years, but it has never availed itself of its full opportunity of life. It begins to fade at the end of its fifth year, and, as a rule, gratefully accepts dissolution in its sixth session. The present Parliament, which assembled for a short session on the 12th of August, 1895, was a few days short of attaining its fifth year when it was prorogued. There is, therefore, no statutory reason why it should not sit through another session, the dissolution being postponed till January—perhaps, on the whole, the most widely convenient month of the year for a general election.

Experience testifies to the sufficiency of a five-year term. Since Queen Victoria came to the throne she has summoned fourteen Parliaments. Of these, only six have exceeded the term of five years. One, memorable for its accomplished work, exceeded the date by the narrow margin of one month and sixteen days. This was the great Parliament of 1868, in which Mr. Gladstone commenced his colossal labor of legislative reform. Meeting on the 10th of December, 1868, it was dissolved on the 26th of January, 1874. The second Parliament of the Queen's reign, summoned in 1841, lasted five years, eleven months, and six days. In the century only three Parliaments have timidly entered upon their septennial year. The first Parliament of George IV. trenched by one month and nine days upon its seventh year. The Parliament of 1859 lived for six years and two months. The Parliament of 1874, which first saw Disraeli in power, as well as in office, enjoyed for twenty days its septennial privilege.

The duty of advising the sovereign as to the proper date for dismissing the sitting Parliament is not, as is commonly assumed, a Cabinet matter. It is a fact that when, early in 1874, Mr. Gladstone decided to dissolve Parliament, some of his colleagues in the Cabinet were first made acquainted with his decision on opening their morning papers. The sole arbiter in the case is the Prime

Minister. In the time of the Georges the sovereign had a good deal to say in the business. In some royal moods the fact that the Premier desired to bring about an immediate dissolution led the King to conclude that he would keep Parliament sitting a little longer. In these times the will of the first minister of the crown is not disputed. But it is the sovereign who summons "my faithful commons" to repair to Westminster. Parliament dissolved, there is promulgated an order from the Queen in council, addressed to the Lords High Chancellors of Great Britain and Ireland, commanding them to cause writs to be issued for the election of knights, citizens, and burgesses to serve in Parliament. At least thirty-five days must elapse between the date of this mandate and the meeting of Parliament.

Up to a recent date a property qualification was essential to a Parliamentary candidate. If he stood for a county he must have either real or personal property amounting to £600 per annum. In boroughs £300 a year served. The march of democracy swept aside this obstacle and created the possibility, now enjoyed, of admission to membership of Irish Nationalist members and of the British workman. The basis of the electorate has been extended in the same spirit. In 1884 Mr. Gladstone introduced and carried a reform bill which extended household and lodger suffrage to counties uniform with boroughs. This added two millions to the electoral register.

Even with this uplifting of the gates the number of electors in Great Britain is but a small fraction of the population. According to the last census the population of Great Britain and Ireland was 37,732,922. It has considerably increased during the ten years that have sped since the counting was accomplished. Yet, according to a return presented to the Parliament in the present session, the numbers of electors who will have the privilege of voting at the forthcoming general election, assuming it is taken on the present register, is not more than 6,732,613. Nor do all who are on the register care to avail themselves of their privilege. At the general election of 1892, which scotched Home Rule and drove the Liberal party into the wilderness, not more than 4,605,442 electors went to the poll. In 1895, with a natural increment of electors on the register, the proportion was still less. It was a trifling aggregate majority on a poll of 3,867,060 that returned Lord Salisbury to power by an overwhelming majority of the House of Commons, and made possible the momentous events that followed in his administration.

England's claim to the position of the predominant partner, con-

ferred upon her by Lord Rosebery in a memorable speech, is justified by the fact that of the something like six and three-quarter millions of electors privileged to vote, not less than 5,287,285 are resident in England and Wales. Scotland has an electoral roll of 681,132. Ireland may poll 764,196. Yet whilst England and Wales have 495 members, and Scotland 72, Ireland sends to Westminster 103. These figures, whilst demonstrating that, proportionately, Ireland is over-represented, do not state the full case. During the last twenty years, it has frequently happened that when British political parties in the House are more evenly balanced than in the present Parliament, a section of the Irish members, representing the Nationalist party, untrammelled by allegiance to either of the British political banners, are arbiters and masters of the situation. A minor exceptional privilege enjoyed by Ireland is that whereas English and Scotch peers are ineligible for seats in the House of Commons, Irish peers, if they can secure a majority, may sit for British constituencies. This stipulation endowed the House of Commons with the presence of Lord Palmerston.

The procedure of polling at a general election is conducted in counties by the sheriff; in boroughs by a returning officer appointed by the sheriff of the county within which the borough is situate. Immediately on the writs being prepared the messenger or pursuivant of the Great Seal conveys them to the general post-office in London and delivers them to the postmaster. They are despatched by first post, postage free, to the returning officer. In country and district boroughs, the day fixed for the election must be not later than the ninth day from the receipt of the writ; and there must be an interval of three clear days between the notice and the election. In boroughs the returning officer must proceed to the election within four days after the receipt of the writ, giving two days' clear notice.

This arbitrary power carries with it some political influence. A sheriff or returning officer of Liberal principles is pretty sure to fix the polling day for a Saturday, when the working man is at liberty to spend part of his half holiday in recording his vote. Where the authority is a Unionist, Saturday is carefully avoided. Counties and boroughs are divided into polling districts, the former under the direction of the county council, the latter by the town council.

The Reform Bill of 1867 abolished one of the liveliest and most picturesque features of a parliamentary election. It did away with the hustings and the ceremony of public nomination. My earliest

recollection of political life was attendance at the hustings in the 1865 election in South Shropshire. A vigorous attack was made by a young Radical, to-day a prop of the Unionist government, upon the family seat of a Conservative landlord. A short time before the date of the general election Sir Baldwin Leighton incurred much unpopularity by prosecuting one of his tenants for snaring rabbits. This was not overlooked in the election contest. As soon as Sir Baldwin presented himself on the hustings, smiling benignantly upon the intelligent electors, the summer sky was darkened by a cloud of rabbit skins, which fell upon the just and the unjust. The performance on the hustings was frequently gone through in dumb show, amid howls, cat-calls, and the flight of missiles even more odorous and harmful than rabbit skins.

The proceedings to-day are, by comparison, lamentably prosaic. Nominations are made in writing, the documents being subscribed by two registered electors of the county or borough, and by eight other registered electors, as assenting to the nominations. Going to the extreme contrary of the old order of things, where the multitude gathered round the hustings to witness the nomination, it is now enacted that no one save the candidate, his proposer and seconder, and one other person selected by him is entitled to attend the proceedings. It is not necessary that even these should be present. The nomination paper being duly signed, it suffices that the candidate delivers it in person to the returning officer.

Beside peers of England and Scotland, there are many persons expressly disqualified by statute from being nominated as candidates for seats in Parliament. They include all judges, from the High Court of Justice to the County Court, and the magistrates at the Westminster Police Court. Large classes of civil servants are also excluded. To this day there exists in Scotland a little known, but absolute, disqualification of a person who, twice in a year, shall have attended a Scotch Episcopal Church, where the royal family is not prayed for. This quaint enactment, too obscure to challenge repeal, will be found in "32 Geo. 3, C. 63, S. 13." In that standard book, "Rogers on Elections,"¹ indispensable to all concerned in Parliamentary elections, it is, with quite exceptional vagueness, stated that deaf and dumb persons are "said to be" ineligible to Parliament. On another point the great authority is uncompromising. "Mental imbecility," it is written, "is a disqualification for Par-

¹"Rogers on Elections." Seventeenth edition. Stevens: London.

liament.” This dictum is supported by citation of two judgments based upon the statutes. But we all know that there are ways of evading acts of Parliament, even to the extent of driving through them coaches and four.

On receipt of the nomination papers the returning officer publishes the names of the candidates, with the names of their respective proposers and seconders, placarding them in a conspicuous position outside the building in which the election is held. If at the expiration of an hour after the handing in of the nomination papers no more candidates are nominated than there are vacancies to be filled up, he declares the persons nominated to be duly elected. If the number of candidates be in excess of the number of vacancies he adjourns the election, giving notice of a day fixed for taking the poll.

This takes place by ballot, and is girt about with innumerable precautions in order to make secrecy a real thing. The returning officer is directed to erect a reasonable number of polling booths, which he generally does, at the expense of the candidates. In not very distant times the contract for setting up polling booths was a valuable gift at the disposal of the election agent, not to be dispensed without *quid pro quo* in the form of promise to vote. As much as £40 was permitted by a statute of William IV to be expended on a county polling booth, £25 being credited for booths in boroughs. The charge is now cut down to seven guineas, whether in counties or boroughs, with an allowance of one guinea for each compartment over two. It is understood that this leaves a fair trading profit. But the contractor thinks with regret of the spacious times of William IV.

According to the act governing these disbursements, the presiding officer in a borough constituency has an allowance of three guineas a day. In the counties he draws four. He is permitted to employ polling clerks in the proportion of one to each 500 voters. These are paid in boroughs one guinea for their services on polling day; in counties they draw 30 shillings.

Whilst the presidential election is determined on a single day, the British general election straddles over nine, the maximum term within which the returning officer may fix the date of polling in counties and district boroughs. Midway in the reign of George III there was no limit to the duration of the poll. In the twenty-fifth year of his reign an act was passed fixing the maximum duration at fifteen days. Now, in boroughs and counties, the poll opens at 8 o'clock in the morning and closes at 8 o'clock in the evening of the same day. Ex-

ception is made in the cases of the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge, and London, where the poll may remain open for five days. Here votes may be received orally or by means of open voting papers; the universities, for some occult reason, being specially excluded from the benefits of the Ballot Act.

When the conjurer is about to perform a box trick he makes a point of first showing the audience that the box is empty, so that, as he puts it, there may be no deception. This procedure is, for the same reason, closely followed by the presiding officers in the various polling booths. Before the poll opens they take up the ballot box and show it to the clerks and agent authorized to attend, each of whom has sworn an oath to secrecy. Satisfied that the box is empty, the presiding officer locks it and seals it up, so that it cannot be opened without breaking the seal. Thus safe-guarded it is placed in a prominent position, and the doors of the polling booth are then thrown open to the voters.

The voter having stated his name, the register is consulted, and the number, name, and description of the elector, as therein set forth, are cried aloud. A ballot paper stamped on both sides with the official mark is handed to him. This is kept secret, and an interval of not less than seven years elapses before the same mark is used again at a parliamentary election. Retiring to the secrecy of a compartment in the polling booth, the voter finds printed on his ballot paper the names of the candidates who have been duly nominated and are standing for election. Down the right hand side of the paper runs a blank column. In this he is required to mark a cross against the name of the candidate or candidates whom he desires to see elected. He then folds up the paper with the names inside, the official mark on the back. This latter he shows to the presiding officer, and drops his paper into the ballot box, assured that the secret of his preference is safe with him.

At the close of the poll the ballot boxes are sealed up to prevent the insertion of additional papers. The boxes, after having been conveyed from the various polling places to a convenient centre, are taken charge of by the returning officer, who proceeds to count the votes given for each candidate. During the counting no one may be present save the returning officer, his clerks, the agent of the candidates, and the candidates themselves. On the completion of the counting the returning officer seals up in separate packets the accepted and rejected ballot papers. They are all forwarded to the clerk of the crown, in

whose custody they remain for a year, and are then destroyed. The interval amply suffices for any action in the direction of a recount. This may be undertaken only by order of the House of Commons, of a Superior Court, or of a judge in chambers.

The illiterate voter is carefully looked after. The printed names on the ballot paper conveying no information to his mind, it is obvious he cannot, unassisted, affix his mark against the name of the man of his choice. A form of declaration that he is unable to read is recited to the voter, who makes his mark in token of assent. Thereupon the presiding officer, in presence of the agents, marks the ballot paper in accordance with the voter's wishes, and places it in the box. The same procedure is observed in the case of blind men. If the poll be taken on a Saturday, difficulty arises in the case of Jews, who, on their Sabbath, are forbidden to transact business requiring their signature. Short of that, they may vote, and freely do; the presiding officer writing their names, under their instructions, as if they were physically blind, or unable to read.

Particulars of the illiterate voter, as illustrating the operation of the Education Act, are among the most interesting in the statistics of a general election. In 1892, of the 4,587,036 voters who polled, 135,605 were returned as illiterates. Of the three and three-quarter million electors in England and Wales, 46,109 were illiterate; in Scotland, there were 4,577 out of 466,040; whilst in Ireland, out of a total of 395,024 voting, not less than 84,919 were returned as illiterate. At the general election taken three years later, of 3,858,923 votes polled, 72,940 persons voted as illiterates. This is a drop within three years of nearly one-half. In Ireland, the fall was more than a half, the number of illiterates being 40,357. It is true that the total poll was less in 1895, the Home Rule question not being to the fore, than it was in 1892: only 220,506 Irish voters went to the polls. The political circumstances of the day may also, in part, account for the illiterates in England and Wales falling to 28,521, and in Scotland to 4,062. The illiterate voters in Great Britain are doubtless largely recruited from the Irish laborers in the large towns. But there still remains sufficient margin to make the growing influence of free and compulsory education perceptible.

A matter of the utmost importance to a candidate is the selection of an election agent. The Corrupt Practices Act of 1883 is a hard taskmaster. Only a cool-headed, keen-witted man, intimately acquainted with its provisions, can be relied upon safely to steer through

their labyrinth. In a judgment delivered upon an election petition, Lord Justice Field clearly defined the position of an election agent. The passage will serve to show how distinct he is from the party manager in the United States, or any of his staff. "The object of the Corrupt Practices Act," said the Judge, "is that a person shall be the election agent who shall be effectively responsible for all the acts done in procuring the election. No contract is to be made by anybody but him. He is the person to make the contracts, because he is a known and responsible man, who can be dealt with afterwards, and who can be looked to afterwards for an explanation of his conduct in the management of the election."

There is something grim in the Judge's satisfied contemplation of a man "who can be dealt with afterwards." A candidate may act as his own election agent. He will find he has a very miserable client. A person found guilty of illegal practice, under the act, is, on summary conviction, liable to a fine not exceeding £100. He is further declared incapable during five years from the date of his conviction of being registered as an elector, or of voting at any election held within the county or borough where the illegal practice was committed. There is no appeal against a summary conviction by an Election Court.

The maximum expenditure permitted at a Parliamentary election is absolutely defined. In a borough where the number of electors on the register does not exceed 2,000, the maximum amount of expenditure, other than personal expenses and sums paid to the returning officer for his charges, is £350. Where the number of electors exceeds 2,000, an additional £30 for every complete 1,000 electors above 2,000 may be disbursed. In a county or division of a county legal expenditure is more lavish. If the number of electors on the register does not exceed 2,000, £650 may be spent, with an additional £60 for every complete 1,000 electors above 2,000. A candidate's personal expenses are limited to £100.

Within twenty-one days after the return to the writ has been made, the returning officer transmits to the election agent of every candidate a detailed account of all the charges claimed by him in respect of the election. This enables the agent to complete his statement of accounts, which is exceedingly minute. It gives particulars of every payment made, accompanied by vouchers in the form of bills and receipts. On the other side is a statement of all money securities and equivalent of money received by the agent from the can-

didate, or any other person, for expenses incurred in the conduct and management of the election. Ten days after receiving these accounts the returning officer publishes a summary in two newspapers circulating in the county or borough where the election was held. The account and vouchers are kept for two years open to inspection by any who desire to examine them. Thus does the law jealously guard purity of Parliamentary elections.

Looking up the detailed return of costs of the last two general elections, I find that the election of 1892 cost on the average per vote polled 4s. 1d. The election of 1895 was got through at the average cost per vote of 3s. 8½d. In 1892 there were 1,307 candidates for the 670 seats composing the House of Commons. The maximum expenditure allowed by the Corrupt Practices Act was £1,129,430. The actual expenditure was £958,532 0s. 1½d. Mr. Mantalini would have been scornful of "the demnition coppers" in a bill of a trifle under a million sterling. They undesignedly testify to the minuteness of the account rendered. In 1895 there were 1,181 candidates. The maximum scale allowed by the statute was £1,025,207. The actual disbursement was £773,333 0s. 3d.

The cheapest part of the United Kingdom for a Parliamentary candidate to present himself is Ireland. The dearest is Scotland. In 1892 Irish votes cost on the average 2s. 8½d. In 1895 they were not to be had under 3s. 1½d. The movement was slightly in the opposite direction in Scotland, where, in 1895, votes were obtained at an expenditure of 4s. 7¼d., having cost 4s. 8d. at the previous general election. In England and Wales, votes which in 1895 had averaged 3s. 10d. apiece in 1892 cost up to 4s. 2d. It will be understood that the whole of these charges fall upon the candidates. At a general election, the only cost borne by the State is the conveyance, postage free, of the writs issued by the clerks of the Crown, directing elections to the new Parliament.

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A PLEA FOR THE ANNEXATION OF CUBA.

“If they wish the Spanish flag to cease to wave over Cuba, they will have to realize it through a glorious Trafalgar at the gates of Havana.”

So spoke Señor Don Antonio Canovas del Castillo, Prime Minister of the Spanish monarchy, in the beginning of the year 1896. These words have been since contradicted in the waters of Santiago de Cuba. The Trafalgar, indeed, has been realized, but with no more glory for Spain than to suffer, without retaliating, the strokes of an adversary superior in force and dexterity.

Cuba has broken the bonds which bound her to Spain; and as the social functions cannot be suspended it is urgently necessary to organize them. Those who united love of country with hate of the tyranny of Spain are about to take definite roads; some esteeming, with honest conscience, that American intervention has irremediably determined new paths for Cuba, and others, equally honest, believing that it is imperative to take up categorically the consequences of the revolutionary programme.

The Cuban revolution began with a negation which embraced many opinions; hence its strength. “Nothing with Spain; nothing with the degenerate nation which knowingly and systematically deploiled and tyrannized us.” Such was the cry which was heard from Maisi to San Antonio, culminating in the rebellion in which a few colonists, impelled to desperation by tyranny, were able to resist a display of force never before equalled in any colonial war. This vigorous negation was accompanied by an expressed determination to create in Cuba a republic, “founded on the free exercise of the natural capacities of man.”

The country acclaimed and proclaimed the negation; and with it affirmed the declaration of “Cuba Libre” — which was the symbol under which all the elements of Cuban society were united, and which gave to the revolution its moral and material support. If the revolution, fighting single-handed against Spain, could have reached the