

The Political Outlook in England

THE political position in England becomes no simpler as the year draws to a close.

The results of a series of by-elections have just been announced but they do no more than confirm certain general tendencies of popular opinion. They show a steady drift of opinion against the Coalition which is somewhat stronger on the whole than might have been expected as the inevitable reaction after the abnormal election of last year. At Croydon and in the Isle of Thanet there was a straight fight between Unionist and Liberal, and considering that these constituencies have always been strongholds of Toryism, the Unionist majority was so heavily reduced that at a general election the majority of Unionist members would clearly be in danger of defeat.

But to whom they would lose their seats is a very different matter. Dissatisfaction with the Coalition there is, but there is no corresponding enthusiasm for the Liberal party. In a three-cornered fight the electorate is showing a decided tendency to put the Liberal at the bottom of the poll. This was the case at Plymouth. Lady Astor derived some extraordinary support from being a woman, a lively and attractive candidate, and an Astor. But the bulk of her army was drawn from the Unionist rank and file and she had, as they say, an easy journey, for the Liberal and Labor candidates, fighting roughly on the same platform, fought each other with great vigor and cut each other's throats to some effect. Only, the Liberal's throat was cut to much more effect than Labor's.

Party Liberalism is, in truth, in a bad way. Liberalism as a creed is not in so hopeless a plight, for much of Labor derives its inspiration from Liberal sources, and there are not a few independent Conservatives who have more Liberalism in them than some of its acknowledged priests. But the Liberal party is weakened by its internal dissensions, its lack of leadership, its inferiority to its Labor rival in faith and energy. Mr. Asquith, at last and in response to many appeals, has "taken the gloves off." At a caucus meeting in Birmingham he has come out with a resounding attack on the Coalition and its "so-called Liberal" members. It was a "rousing" and a "fighting" speech and the National Liberal Federation cheered enthusiastically. Outside the Federation no one cared a rap. On Ireland Mr. Asquith was admirably "strong," denouncing coercion in his best manner and pouring scorn on the idea of a Cabinet Committee which includes

Ulstermen attempting to find an Irish settlement.

Unhappily, Mr. Asquith has a past. It was he who, on forming the first Coalition Government, gave high office to Sir Edward Carson; who did nothing after the rebellion of 1916 to abolish the Dublin Castle administration which is acknowledged to be the antiquated survival of an age outworn; who in the same year failed to turn to advantage Mr. George's success in bringing together the Irish leaders. No critical observer can really suppose that Mr. Asquith would do better as a peacemaker than Mr. George. What Liberals are entitled to ask, and do ask, is that the present intolerable regime of military repression in Ireland should be continued no longer, that a Home Rule Bill should be brought in promptly and that it should be conceived on bold and generous lines, since no other sort of bill has any prospect of acceptance in Ireland or is worth bringing in at all.

There is this to be said for a Coalition dealing with Ireland, that it is at least more likely to produce an Irish settlement than the old party system, with a Liberal government in power. It is idle to argue that facts and persons should be thus and thus, and not otherwise. We have to deal with facts as they are, and the Irish controversy is so deeply ingrained in the body of British party politics that neither Liberals nor Tories are ever likely to settle it by themselves. Possibly a Liberal-Labor coalition might have the power, that is to say, a Labor government backed up by Liberal support. But whether any such government will come in the near future is mere speculation and Ireland will not wait; even if it did come, the Unionists—we deal with facts—would fight with all the old bitter animosity against a Liberal-Labor scheme.

But, it will be said, the Coalition is predominantly Unionist. It is—except for Mr. George. No problem of English politics can be understood which does not allow for his unchallenged ascendancy. It is paradoxical but true, that the blunders and misfortunes of his government seem only to tend to the glory and honor of Mr. George. About once a month his enemies, and he has many, are convinced they have him down, yet he emerges from the scrimmage as unruffled as one of those extraordinary football players who have the knack of going through the rough and tumble of the game with clean face and the parting of their hair unscathed. The prospect of a Home Rule settlement rests on the indispensability of Mr. George to the

Unionist party. The question is how far he can use his power to screw out of them terms so liberal as to have a chance of acceptance in Ireland. (There is, of course, the further question whether any terms that the Coalition may offer will be considered at all in Ireland, but that is outside the scope of this article.) The country at all events will not turn to Mr. Asquith for satisfaction on the Irish question.

Nor can it be any the more impressed by Mr. Asquith's utterances on Russia. Mr. Asquith uses strong words now against the policy of intervention. It is a pity that he did not use them six or nine months ago, when it was not so clear that anti-intervention was the winning horse. Besides, though Mr. George's conduct in regard to Russia has been characteristically tortuous, it is well known that throughout the whole year he has been in favor of getting peace in Russia by negotiation and that at last he has put his foot down heavily against the Churchills and the Pichons. It is doubtful whether Mr. Asquith would have done one whit the better. To go further, there is no reason to suppose that in regard to the whole of the peace settlement and the foreign policy of this year an Asquith government would have pursued a more liberal and enlightened policy than Mr. George. In foreign policy there neither is nor ever has been much to choose between a Conservative government and the Liberal Imperialists of whom, from the days of the Boer War, Mr. Asquith has been the chief. There is no reason why the country should be moved towards the Liberal party by anything that Mr. Asquith may have to say on foreign policy. Nor is it. If the country wants a Liberal outlook on the outside world it must go to the Labor party for it, not the Liberals. At home the Labor party suffers from the narrowness of its vision; it thinks too much of class, too little of the general brotherhood without the state. Abroad it is alone among the parties in the breadth of its vision, in its aversion from a selfish and imperialistic nationalism.

Liberals at the moment descry a fresh hope in the Government's anti-dumping bill. Like Cortez's men they look at each other, startled, wondering whether this bill, rightly described as a measure for the maintenance of high prices, may not open to them the possibility of that unity without which they are electorally lost. The prospect is attractive: both principle and expediency invite them. The bill is so much an offense to free trade that both independent and Coalition Liberals are against it. Free trade is one of the few things about which almost all English Liberals are deeply concerned and even warm supporters of Mr. George say that he has gone too far in the mutual surrender of principles which marks the Coalition. In November 1918,

when the Coalition was formed, Mr. George and Mr. Bonar Law agreed that foreign goods should be kept out of this country if it were shown that they were being sold here below the cost of production in the country of origin. But the bill says that the criterion shall be not the cost of production but the sale price in the country of origin, which is a very different matter. Besides, the bill offends against constitutional propriety, it places the imposition and the rise and fall of import duties at the mercy of an external committee which is to advise and supervise the actions of the Board of Trade—a method in every way more objectionable than a scientific tariff framed and approved by Parliament. The same procedure denies to the commercial man precisely that certain knowledge of his future that he most demands. And, since the bill will unquestionably help to keep prices at a high level, party Liberals would be superhuman if they did not see in it a good popular "cry." It is a cry, however, which will equally advantage their rivals, the Labor party.

The Coalition Liberals in Parliament are openly opposed to this bill, which their leader, the Liberal Premier, has produced, and many shrewd observers think that the Premier will find some way of shelving it. But how did Mr. George come to father such a measure? If that question could be answered fully we should not only explain much of the past and present but peep into the future too. Mr. George, dare he speak frankly, would explain that in a Coalition neither side must be too punctilious about its principles. Rigidity, he would say, is all right for party warfare but the mark of Coalition statesmanship is flexibility. "The Coalition Government," he would add, "has given the country the Education and the Franchise Acts. Are not these measures good and would you ever have had them without the Coalition? And if, as I hope, our coming Irish bill produces peace in Ireland, would you ever have had that from the Unionists or the Liberals alone? Well, the Liberals must pay something for the good things they have had or hope to have. I have not given the Tories a full-blown tariff, which is what they want—and remember that they have a majority over all parties in the Commons and control the House of Lords—but I have given them a little bit of preference in the budget and now a bit of protection against dumping. True, it is a violation of Free Trade principles, but times are changed, things are not what they were, put country before party and keep an open mind."

Our Mr. George, to speak frankly, has no deep root in Liberal (or any other) philosophy. Mr. Asquith may be described (charitably) as principles without action; Mr. George is action without

principles. He is not only the man of the moment, he is the man for the moment—that is his guiding principle. It is doubtful whether he feels passionately about liberty of trade or liberty of conscience or any other liberty; liberty in Ireland, in Russia, or any other where. His motive power is opportunism. He has sound instincts but he is careful not to be seduced by them into the strait path which leads, in politics, into the wilderness.

As the future presents itself to Mr. George he foresees the continuance of some sort of Coalition government. The next election will give a largely increased Labor party, but probably not one that will be strong enough to form a government and stand alone. If it accepts office it would have to rely for support on the Liberal group. That is no bait for Mr. George. There are those who think that if he broke finally with the Tories and went to the country with a bold radical program, his personal prestige—which is enormous and is not in the least shaken by episodes like the Bullitt disclosures—would carry him back to power. But it is a marked failure of Mr. George that he has never understood how much the country responds to a brave and gallant call to arms. Yet at the present time it is comical to see how much the country is disposed to put the blame for all the misdemeanors of the Lloyd George Government on any shoulders except Mr. George's own. The odds are that Mr. George thinks the time has not yet come to break the Tory-Liberal compact. Informally it represents already a Centre party of the middle-class and moderate working-class elements who see no other leader in the field, who fear the uncertain future, desire order and stability and will put up with much to get it. They are a large proportion of the people; there are Conservatives, Liberals and a good many Labor men among them and Mr. George still prefers their backing to that of the pure Liberals, who do not make a strong appeal to the popular mind.

The above was written before Mr. George's speech to the Manchester Liberals, December 6. He took the lines forecast, except that he denied that the Anti-Dumping Bill was a violation of freetrade. But he destroyed the effect of his argument by admitting frankly that this bill is the consideration paid to the Unionists for their support of Liberal measures and by hinting broadly that he did not like it himself but had to carry out his bargain. He has already postponed the bill till next session so that, as he says, there may be further consideration of it in the "cool winter evenings," and the general impression is that the obnoxious measure is laid on a bed of sickness from which it will never rise again.

AN ENGLISH LIBERAL.

The Carpentier Fight

Bennett vs. Shaw

ARNOLD BENNETT confides to us that he was at a very High Life dinner before the fight. He went to the fight in one of his host's fifteen taxis. When the great event was over he took another taxi to the Eccentric Club and there Denry—we mean Arnold—"solaced himself with an aged Courvoisier brandy."

Bernard Shaw apparently arrived on foot, not on the wings of the dove. "My seat has cost me more than ten times what I have paid to hear Parsifal at Bayreuth or Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at a very special performance at the Grand Opera in Paris." When Shaw left he left on foot. "As I pushed my way through the crowd in Holborn, I could see by the way my news was received that every poor dupe of the sporting papers had put his shillings or pence or even his quid or two on Beckett."

To Arnold Bennett the fight was principally a glittering human spectacle, with high lights on the ten guinea tickets, the civilized Carpentier, the millionaires' smoking-jackets and swallow-tails, "Mr. Cochran, the mysterious organizer," "the celebrated Mr. B. J. Angle, whose word was to be law to the champions"—these things, and the treble-X radiance of the battle-ground and the presence of the Prince of Wales. To Bernard Shaw, a born republican, it was also a glittering human spectacle—only for Shaw all is not gold that glitters. Shaw notes the Prince of Wales not to remark that he holds a cigar "just in the manner of his grandfather" (how like his grand-pa!), but to indicate that the Prince's little speech was lost on the great barbarian smoke-hazed mob. For Shaw Mr. Cochran is simply one of the entrepreneurs of the ring "who must bear in mind that they can secure toleration only by being on their very best behavior." Mr. B. J. Angle to Shaw was Jack Angle. "Suddenly a figure from the past—from my past—was announced and appeared. It was Jack Angle, no longer a trim, clean-shaven, young amateur athlete, but a père noble in white moustaches, exactly like Colonel Damas in *The Lady of Lyons*." Shaw writes as if he were good old Colonel Newcome once more in the Cave of Harmony. But the audience as he sees it is not all "honourables and right honourables, explorers, sporting stock-brokers, eminent professional men, plutocrats of all sorts, men with an artistic interest in the display like Robert Loraine, Granville Barker, Maurice Baring, Arnold Bennett and myself . . . The prevalent impression is the usual one of a majority of