

THE SOCIAL FIELD [ToC](#)

BIRMINGHAM, *January 13, 1909* [\[13\]](#)

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I am very glad to come here to-night to wish good luck in the New Year to the Liberals of Birmingham. Good luck is founded on good pluck, and that is what I think you will not fail in. Birmingham Liberals have for twenty years been over-weighted by the influence of remarkable men and by the peculiar turn of events. This great city, which used to be the home of militant Radicalism, which in former days supplied with driving power the cause of natural representation against hereditary privilege, has been captured by the foe. The banner of the House of Lords has been flung out over the sons and grandsons of the men who shook all England in the struggle for the great Reform Bill; and while old injustice has but been replaced by new, while the miseries and the privations of the poor ^[212]continue in your streets, while the differences between class and class have been even aggravated in the passage of years, Birmingham is held by the enemy and bound to retrogression in its crudest form.

But this is no time for despondency. The Liberal Party must not allow itself to be overawed by the hostile Press which is ranged against it. Boldly and earnestly occupied, the platform will always beat the Press. Still less should we allow ourselves to be perturbed by the fortuitous and sporadic results of by-electoral warfare. I suppose I have fought as many by-elections as most people, and I know that all the advantages lie with the attacking force. The contests are complicated by personal and local influences. The discussions turn upon the incidents of current legislation. There are always grievances to be urged against the Government of the day. After a great victory, all parties, and particularly the Liberals, are prone to a slackening of effort and organisation; after a great defeat all parties, and especially the Tories, are spurred to supreme exertions.

These factors are common to all by-elections, under all Governments; but never, I venture to say, has it been more important to ^[213]an Opposition to gain by-electoral successes than during the present Parliament. It is their only possible line of activity. In the House of Commons they scarcely show their noses. In divisions they are absent; in debate—well, I do not think we need say much about that; and it is only by a combination of by-electoral incidents properly advertised by the Party Press on the one hand, and the House of Lords' manipulation upon the other, that the Conservative Party are able to keep their heads above water. And when I speak of the importance to the Opposition of by-elections, let me also remind you that never before have by-electoral victories been so important, not only to a great Party, but to a great trade.

Therefore, while I am far from saying that we should be content with recent manifestations of the opinion of the electorate, while I do not at all deny that they involve a sensible reaction of feeling of an unfavourable character, and while I urge the most strenuous exertions upon all concerned in party organisation, I assert that there is no reason, as the history of this country abundantly shows, why a general election, at a well-chosen moment, [214]and upon some clear, broad, simple issue, should not retrieve and restore the whole situation.

There could be no question of a Government, hitherto undisturbed by internal disagreement and consistently supported in the House of Commons by a large, united, and intact majority, being deflected one hair's breadth from its course by the results of by-elections. We have our work to do, and while we have the power to carry it forward, we have no right, even if we had the inclination, to leave it uncompleted. Certainly we shall not be so foolish, or play so false to those who have supported us, as to fight on any ground but that of our own choosing, or at any time but that most advantageous to the general interest of the Progressive cause.

The circumstances of the period are peculiar. The powers of the House of Lords to impede, and by impeding to discredit, the House of Commons are strangely bestowed, strangely limited, and still more strangely exercised. There are little things which they can maul; there are big things they cannot touch; there are Bills which they pass, although they believe them to be wrong; there are Bills which they [215]reject, although they know them to be right. The House of Lords can prevent the trams running over Westminster Bridge; but it cannot prevent a declaration of war. It can reject a Bill prohibiting foreign workmen being brought in to break a British strike; it cannot amend a Bill to give old-age pensions to 600,000 people. It can thwart a Government in the minute details of its legislation; it cannot touch the whole vast business of finance. It can prevent the abolition of the plural voter; but it could not prevent the abolition of the police. It can refuse a Constitution to Ireland, but not, luckily, to Africa.

Lord Lansdowne, in his leadership of the House of Lords during the present Parliament, has put forward claims on its behalf far more important and crude than ever were made by the late Lord Salisbury. No Tory leader in modern times has ever taken so high a view of its rights, and at the same time no one has shown a more modest conception of its duties. In destroying the Education Bill of 1906 the House of Lords asserted its right to resist the opinion of a majority of members of the House of Commons, fresh from election, upon a subject which had been one of the most prominent issues of [216]the election. In rejecting the Licensing Bill of 1908 they have paraded their utter unconcern for the moral welfare of the mass of their fellow-countrymen.

There is one feature in the guidance of the House of Lords by Lord Lansdowne which should specially be noticed, and that is the air of solemn humbug with which this ex-Whig is always at pains to invest its proceedings. The Nonconformist child is forced

into the Church school in single-school areas in the name of parents' rights and religious equality. The Licensing Bill is rejected in the highest interests of temperance. Professing to be a bulwark of the commercial classes against Radical and Socialistic legislation, the House of Lords passes an Old-Age Pensions Bill, which it asserts will be fatal alike to public finance and public thrift, a Mines Eight Hours Bill, which it is convinced will cripple British industry, and a Trades Disputes Bill, which it loudly declared tyrannous and immoral. Posing as a Chamber of review remote from popular passion, far from the swaying influences of the electorate, it nevertheless exhibits a taste for cheap electioneering, a subserviency to caucus direction, and a party spirit upon a level with many of the least reputable [217]elective Chambers in the world; and beneath the imposing mask of an assembly of notables backed by the prescription and traditions of centuries we discern the leer of the artful dodger, who has got the straight tip from the party agent.

It is not possible for reasonable men to defend such a system or such an institution. Counter-checks upon a democratic Assembly there may be, perhaps there should be. But those counter-checks should be in the nature of delay, and not in the nature of arrest; they should operate evenly and equally against both political parties, and not against only one of them; and above all they should be counter-checks conceived and employed in the national interest and not in a partisan interest. These abuses and absurdities have now reached a point when it is certain that reform, effective and far-reaching, must be the necessary issue at a general election; and, whatever may be the result of that election, be sure of this, that no Liberal Government will at any future time assume office without securing guarantees that that reform shall be carried out.

There is, however, one reason which would justify a Government, circumstanced and supported as we are, in abandoning [218]prematurely the trust confided to us by the country. When a Government is impotent, when it is destitute of ideas and devoid of the power to give effect to them, when it is brought to a complete arrest upon the vital and essential lines of its policy, then I entirely agree that the sooner it divests itself of responsibilities which it cannot discharge, the better for the country it governs and the Party it represents. No one who looks back over the three busy years of legislation which have just been completed can find any grounds for such a view of our position; and although we have sustained checks and vexations from circumstances beyond our control which have prevented us settling, as we otherwise would have done, the problems of licensing and of education, no lover of progress who compares the Statute-book as it stands to-day with its state in 1905, need feel that he has laboured in vain.

No one can say that we have been powerless in the past. The trade unionist as he surveys the progress of his organisation, the miner as the cage brings him to the surface of the ground, the aged pensioner when he visits the post office with his cheque-book, the Irish Catholic whose son sees the ranges [219]of a University career thrown open, the child who is protected in his home and in the street, the peasant who desires to acquire

a share of the soil he tills, the youthful offender in the prison, the citizen as he takes his seat on the county bench, the servant who is injured in domestic service, all give the lie to that—all can bear witness to the workings of a tireless social and humanitarian activity, which, directed by knowledge and backed by power, tends steadily to make our country a better place for the many, without at the same time making it a bad place for the few.

But, if we have been powerful in the past, shall we then be powerless in the future? Let the year that has now opened make its answer to that. We shall see before many months are passed whether his Majesty's Government, and the House of Commons, by which it is supported, do not still possess effective means to carry out their policy, not only upon those important political issues in which we have been for the time being thwarted, but also in that still wider and, in my opinion, more important field of social organisation into which, under the leadership of the Prime Minister, we shall now proceed to advance.

[220]I do not, of course, ignore the fact that the House of Lords has the power, though not the constitutional right, to bring the government of the country to a standstill by rejecting the provision which the Commons make for the financial service of the year. That is a matter which does not rest with us, it rests with them. If they want a speedy dissolution, they know where to find one. If they really believe, as they so loudly proclaim, that the country will hail them as its saviours, they can put it to the proof. If they are ambitious to play for stakes as high as any Second Chamber has ever risked, we shall not be wanting. And, for my part, I should be quite content to see the battle joined as speedily as possible upon the plain, simple issue of aristocratic rule against representative government, between the reversion to protection and the maintenance of free trade, between a tax on bread and a tax on—well, never mind. And if they do not choose, or do not dare to use the powers they most injuriously possess, if fear, I say, or tactics, or prudence, or some lingering sense of constitutional decency, restrains them, then for Heaven's sake let us hear no more of these taunts, that we, the Liberal [221]Party, are afraid to go to the country, that we do not possess its confidence, and that we are impotent to give effect to the essential purposes of our policy.

Subject to such a constitutional outrage as I have indicated, his Majesty's Government will claim their right and use their power to present the Liberal case as a whole to the judgment of the whole body of electors. That case is already largely developed. How utterly have all those predictions been falsified that a Liberal Government would be incapable of the successful conduct of Imperial affairs! Whether you look at our position in Europe, or at the difficult conduct of Indian administration, or the relations which have been preserved, and in some cases restored, with our self-governing Colonies, the policy of the Government has been attended with so much success that it has not only commanded the approval of impartial persons, but has silenced political criticism itself.

It was in South Africa that we were most of all opposed and most of all distrusted, and by a singular inversion it is in South Africa that the most brilliant and memorable results have been achieved. Indeed, I think that the gift of the Transvaal and [222]Orange River Constitutions and the great settlement resulting therefrom will be by itself as a single event sufficient to vindicate in the eyes of future generations the administration of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, and to dignify his memory in Parliaments and periods which we shall not see. But our work abroad is not yet completed, has not yet come to its full fruition. If we should continue, as I expect we shall, to direct public affairs for the full five years which are the normal and the healthy period of British Administrations, we may look for a further advance and improvement in all the great external spheres of Imperial policy. We may look in India for a greater sense of confidence and solidarity between the people and the Government. We shall salute the sunrise of South Africa united under the British Crown. And in Europe I trust that Sir Edward Grey will have crowned his work at the Foreign Office by establishing a better and kindlier feeling between the British and the German peoples. That will be the record of policy beyond the seas on which we shall appeal for judgment and for justice.

If it be said that, contrary to general expectation, our policy has prospered better [223]abroad than at home, you have not far to look for the reason. Abroad we have enjoyed full responsibility, a free hand, and fair-play; at home we have had a divided authority, a fettered hand, and the reverse of fair-play. We have been hampered and we have been harassed. We have done much; we could have done much more.

Our policy at home is less complete and less matured than it is abroad. But it so happens that many of the most important steps which we should now take, are of such a character that the House of Lords will either not be able or will not be anxious to obstruct them, and could not do so except by courting altogether novel dangers. The social field lies open. There is no great country where the organisation of industrial conditions more urgently demands attention. Wherever the reformer casts his eyes he is confronted with a mass of largely preventable and even curable suffering. The fortunate people in Britain are more happy than any other equally numerous class have been in the whole history of the world. I believe the left-out millions are more miserable. Our vanguard enjoys all the delights of all the ages. Our rearguard [224]straggles out into conditions which are crueller than barbarism. The unemployed artisan, the casual labourer, and the casual labourer's wife and children, the sweated worker, the infirm worker, the worker's widow, the under-fed child, the untrained, undisciplined, and exploited boy labourer—it is upon these subjects that our minds should dwell in the early days of 1909.

The Liberal Party has always known the joy which comes from serving great causes. It must also cherish the joy which comes from making good arrangements. We shall be all the stronger in the day of battle if we can show that we have neglected no practicable measure by which these evils can be diminished, and can prove by fact and not by words

that, while we strive for civil and religious equality, we also labour to build up—so far as social machinery can avail—tolerable basic conditions for our fellow-countrymen. There lies the march, and those who valiantly pursue it need never fear to lose their hold upon the heart of Britain.



FOOTNOTES:

[13]In the interval between this and the preceding speech the House of Lords had rejected the Licensing Bill.