

BELGIAN POLITICS.

THE Belgian elections of the 11th of June last were a triumph for vote by ballot in its purity. The outlines of the electoral system of Belgium are as follows. The suffrage belongs of right to all citizens of full age who pay taxes to the amount of twenty florins of the Netherlands, which are equal to forty-two francs, or about thirty-three shillings. The electoral district is the arrondissement formed for administrative purposes, which is itself a subdivision of the province, each arrondissement having a representative for every forty thousand inhabitants, and a senator for every eighty thousand. But, as the population is unequally distributed, there are some districts which return but a single member, as for instance in Luxembourg; while in others, such as those of Antwerp, Ghent, and Brussels, seven or eight, and in one instance thirteen are returned. The voting takes place by secret ballot in the chief town of each district, but before the last reforms secrecy had no real existence. The voting paper might be written. In the first place, therefore, paper of recognisable kind was employed. Then the agent who wished to check a vote would himself write the paper, adding to the candidate's name certain designations, official or personal, arranged in a particular order. When the voting paper had by these marks been rendered recognisable, the agent who had given it to the voter would himself be present at the opening of the boxes, and if the marked paper was not found he knew that a promise had not been fulfilled. These marked papers caused gross abuses. Landlords would furnish their tenants with voting papers warning them that, if these were not found at the counting, the farm would be given to others. Parish priests would make house to house visits, distributing voting papers for the clerical "ticket," and menacing those who dared to vote for the Liberal candidates with the withholding of the sacraments, and especially of the first communion from their children. In the rural communes the number of convents is very large. Ten years ago there was one convent to every two communes, and the number has since increased considerably. Now each convent has a very large custom to offer to brewers, bakers, butchers, fishmongers, grocers, and clothiers. The tradesmen, indeed, are in a great degree dependent on the custom of the convents, and whatever might be their private opinions, they were forced to vote as the clergy wished under penalty of seeing their business seriously diminished and perhaps ruined. On the polling day the priest would summon together the electors of his village, and very few dared to refuse their company. He went

with them by rail or road to the poll ; he gave them their voting papers at the last moment, and kept his eye upon them at the box so as to prevent their receiving another paper or writing one for themselves. The Liberal party were not indeed behindhand in using the marked or recognisable papers, but it is clear that they had not the same means of influence.

The revision of the register gave occasion to another class of abuse. The taxes which go to make up the twenty florins necessary for qualification, include the hearth-tax, the tax on movables, and that on horses kept wholly or partly for pleasure, that is to say in the latter case used both for field work and for riding or driving. The clerical associations obliged the taxpayers over whom they had influence, to increase their returns so as to make up the necessary qualification, and undertook the reimbursement of the surplus, thus in reality manufacturing voters at pleasure. The second class of horses—*chevaux mixtes* is the technical term—were made the occasion of the most absurd devices. In such and such a village all the farm-horses would suffer a sudden metamorphosis into mixed steeds. The priest bought a saddle, and this saddle was lent to one peasant after another, each of whom would mount his beast and parade in front of the taxgatherer's house. This clerical cavalry was levied to assure the triumph of religion. But the revision of the registers gave rise to endless litigation. The Liberal associations opposed the claims of those electors who were suspected of belonging to the opposite side, and the Catholic associations did the same to the Liberal voters. The consequence was an immense accumulation of disputed claims which blocked up the courts of justice.

In order better to secure the secrecy of the vote, a first effort was made at reform. A stamped paper was supplied to the electors, and they were bound to write the name of the candidate on the paper, without adding any designation which might serve to distinguish the vote. This plan was quite insufficient. The elections of 1876 witnessed such an abuse of undue influence, that the success of the scheme was discredited. An inquiry instituted under the care of the central society, called the Liberal Federation, furnished proofs that the independence of the electors was an idle word, in consequence of systematic intimidation and organized persecution on the part of the clergy. The premier, M. Malou, could not resist the evidence, and he promised to bring in a bill for securing the secrecy of the vote by the application of the system of voting employed in England. This was called the *Couloir Electoral*. After lively debates the new system was adopted. At present the candidates have to inform the local authority of their candidature five days in advance. Voting papers are then printed containing the lists of the candidates side by side, distinguished by differently coloured ink.

As there are only two parties concerned, only two lists and two colours are necessary. The elector who wishes to vote for a whole list must make a cross in pencil in a space reserved at the head of each. The elector who wishes to vote for certain candidates out of either list must make his cross in a space reserved opposite each name. At the moment of voting the presiding officer delivers a paper to the elector, who retires into a compartment which hides him from all eyes, makes his pencil cross, folds his paper, and gives it back to the presiding officer, who places it in the box. In this manner the vote is really secret, and the elector is made independent, nor is it any longer possible to force on him a marked ticket under penalty of persecution and ruin. Undue influence is almost entirely neutralized. The clergy can indeed persuade a certain number of unenlightened country electors that their votes will still be recognisable, and thus it is still possible for the priests to enforce their will. But very soon the most benighted peasant will learn that this is not so; and as for the towns, it may safely be said that the votes of the electors on the 11th of June were free. It is a great honour for the Liberal party to be able to say, that as soon as ever freedom and purity of voting were established, the country has given them a majority which would be much greater if a general election were held.

The recent elections have entirely altered the relative strength of parties. The Liberal party possesses to-day a majority in the Chamber and the Senate sufficient for the carrying on of the government. Belgium presents the curious political peculiarity, that in elections candidates can, so far, be divided with exactness into two lists, and be designated by two colours without further differences or even shades of difference presenting themselves. In the Houses, too, divisions take place straightforwardly, without the presence of doubters, of trimmers, or of independents. One single question dominates all others, "Are you for or against the clergy?" That is to say, "Are you Catholic or Liberal?" Differences of opinion on questions of taxation, of economical or administrative reform, are merely accessory. It is understood beforehand that if it be necessary you must sacrifice your private predilection in such matters, in order not to overthrow or weaken the ministry which represents your opinions. This inflexible party discipline has its advantages and its drawbacks. The advantage is that it gives authority, strength, and duration to governments, because they can demand from their adherents the sacrifice of their private ideas, which if they were to refuse they would be accused of treason. It is a question of life or death; the danger is pressing; the situation is that of a besieged town, and deserters and faint hearts must expect no mercy. In Italy, where there is not this strict party division, governments are very

short-lived, and can effect hardly anything. Malcontent groups are constantly formed, party intrigues are incessantly woven and unwoven, and the Chamber is full of ex-ministers who hope to return to power. The soil of politics is a shifting sand on which no stable and solid administration can be built. While in Belgium the same personages return to office when their party triumphs, there is, in Italy, a continual succession of new men, even though there may be no new manifestation of the sentiments of the electoral body. Thus the parliamentary machine works with greater precision when parties are so sharply divided as they are in Belgium. But there is on the other hand an attendant inconvenience. It is very difficult for new ideas to make way. Originality is bound to conform itself to the common level of discipline; men march round in the same circle; instead of advancing, they mark time.

From another point of view, it may be said that in Belgium is pursued most logically, most vigorously, and with most personal feeling, the struggle against Ultramontanism, which is beginning to take a place in the political foreground in France, in Germany, and in Italy. This struggle began about 1840, and is now at the critical point. All intermediate shades of opinions are disappearing—shades which were formerly composed of Liberals who preserved an attachment to the faith of their fathers, and of Catholics who were friends of liberty, the one set being Gallicans, after the fashion of the old French Parliamentary party, the others Liberal Catholics like Montalembert. At the present moment the Church condemns and pursues these as her worst enemies, and the saying of M. Louis Veuillot will soon come true: "There is not," said he, "and there cannot be, such a thing as Liberal Catholicism. A Liberal is not a Catholic, and a Catholic is not a Liberal."

M. Laurent, the great historian and jurist, who is an ornament of the University of Ghent, published recently an article which attracted much attention. The title was, "What shall we do if we win?" and the answer was, "Make war against the illegitimate influence of the clergy." To judge from a letter recently addressed to the Prince of Caraman-Chimay by the new Minister of the Interior, M. Rolin-Jacque-Myns (well known as the secretary of the Institut de Droit International), this seems to be in reality the programme of the new ministry. We come into power, says M. Rolin, at a critical moment, to defend our constitutional liberties against their implacable enemy, Ultramontanism. The head of the new cabinet, M. Frère-Orban, used similar language. It is in truth a strange situation which presents itself in most Catholic countries. It dates only from the last century, and it seems to have no historical precedent. A large part of the nation, sometimes a powerful minority, sometimes a considerable majority, is at open war with

the established Church and its ministers. The form of worship is not deserted, but it is violently opposed, it is even—as happened at the time of the French Revolution—proscribed: the churches are confiscated, the priests who refuse the oath of obedience to the constitution are hunted down, endeavours are made to replace the ceremonies and the holidays of Catholicism by new feasts and by rites borrowed from Greece and Rome. At present, however, there is no inclination to carry the question into the domains of religion proper, and all that is wished for is the independence of the State and the civil power. But as the Catholic Church does not admit this independence, and as its dogmas condemn modern liberties, the friends of these liberties are drawn against their own wish to attack the dogma and the ministers who are its organs. It becomes necessary to deprive the priest of the influence which has been yielded to him over education, and even of that which he exercises over conscience, for he employs this influence to make war upon the rights of the civil power, for the purpose of subjecting it to the omnipotent authority of the Pope. We must not deceive ourselves on this point; what Liberalism has to fight everywhere is the Church.

The bishops express astonishment and complaint at the hostility which pursues them. Consider, say they, the countries where schism, heresy, or Mahommedanism prevail. Do we see the Russians, the English, or the Turks attack the ministers of their faith? Whence then comes all this hatred and injustice to us? Are we who are Catholic priests less accomplished or less devoted to our fellow-creatures? The fact is certainly strange; but the peculiarities of Roman Catholicism supply the explanation. While other Churches and other bodies of clergy are national, and as such subject to the authority of the State, Catholicism is universal, and claims not merely independence, but supremacy over populations and sovereigns alike. The moment that this supremacy is no longer accorded, a struggle becomes inevitable. The logical consequence of such a fundamental opposition of interests and doctrines should evidently be the abandonment of a faith which is no longer in accordance with the groundwork of modern civilisation. Some nations took this way of enfranchising themselves in the Reformation of the sixteenth century, and in their case the struggle has not broken out. With those who, on the contrary, remained subject to Rome, it is bursting forth with ever-increasing violence. On the one side these nations are actually engaged in the life of to-day, and on the other they wear the yoke of a mediæval religion, which asserts itself to be unchangeable, and which not only does not renounce any of its claims, but even adds thereto new dogmas, and revives the most eccentric superstitions. Between tendencies so opposed, how can there be aught but struggle and combat?

Belgium is likely to become a field of curious experience and to supply other Catholic countries with useful information. The struggle with the clergy has assumed such an acute and decided character, that it becomes necessary to deal seriously with it. It will be the first time since 1792 that efforts have been made to throw off the domination of the Church without revolutionary violence, and without any attempt at religious reform. How is this to be managed? Evidently the Liberal effort must concentrate itself on the education question. Here action is most urgently needed, and here it will be most fertile of result. The share of the clergy in the work of education is enormous in Belgium. For the higher teaching they have the University of Louvain, which has nearly as many students as the two State universities put together. For intermediate education they have twice as many establishments as the State and the municipalities. As for primary instruction, they have the numerous boys' and girls' schools kept up by the religious orders; and besides this—in virtue of the law of 1842—they have the right of inspection and supervision in the communal schools. Hence the parish priest really directs the schoolmaster, who trembles before him. Of the normal schools, which send out the communal teachers, the bishops have five and the State two, both of which have clergymen at their head. As soon, then, as electoral reform shall have been completed, by checking as far as possible the manufacture of faggot votes, the new cabinet will give its whole attention to education.

The law of 1842 will be amended. Religion will no longer be taught by the schoolmaster, who is not fitted for the task, but by the clergyman, who is there in his right place. Thenceforward the necessity of granting to the priest the right of inspection and supervision disappears. The instruction given by the public authority will thus acquire the secular character which it ought necessarily to have. It must also be made obligatory. Belgium lies, with France and England, in the intermediate space between the Protestant countries where illiterate persons do not now exist, and the countries of the south where the numbers of the illiterate exceed one-half or three-quarters of the population. For a country so rich, so covered with industrious inhabitants, so furrowed with railroads, this condition of ignorance is one which should put us to the blush, and to which we must put a stop at any cost. Under the head of intermediate education, it would be necessary to increase the number of the schools, especially in the smaller towns, which have only the diocesan schools. Finally, the higher teaching in the universities must be completed and strengthened. It will be of special importance to correct the effects of the right of granting degrees enjoyed by the private universities, by the institution of examinations for professions, and of a special degree necessary for entrance into the public

service, and particularly into the administration of justice. The Liberal party will also probably demand certain measures for arresting the rapid numerical increase of the convents, which are being established in evasion of mortmain laws that were passed even under the old *régime*.

The accomplishment of the programme which we have just sketched will meet with desperate resistance on the part of the clergy and their adherents. As the Clerical party makes for itself a weapon of the religious sentiment, the effort of the Liberal party will necessarily result in this sentiment becoming weaker. This raises an important question. Is the influence of religion likely to suffer continual diminution? Macaulay believed in the perpetual duration of the Papacy because, said he, in matters of religion the law of progress does not hold good. Inasmuch as the ideas and the hopes which are concerned are beyond the reach of experience and observation, we must not here expect the progressive advance which results from the accumulation and the survey of observed facts. This remark, however, profound as it is, is only half true. Little by little there is being formed an intellectual atmosphere, fatal to certain doctrines which are irreconcilable with reason. These doctrines die, just as certain species of animals have died, when circumstances have become unfavourable to their conservation and propagation. Catholicism has gained much ground in a material point of view, because it has known, with great ability, how to make capital out of the ideas and the desires of conservatism and tradition. It has more convents, more schools, and more wealth than it once had; but Catholic belief has grown strangely weaker. Among enlightened folk, among the town workmen, and even among the more cultivated countrymen, it is rare to find any who believe with conviction in the Immaculate Conception, in the Infallibility of the Pope, and even in the Real Presence. We should find, it is asserted, very few even among the Catholic members of the Chambers who have such beliefs. The bishops see and groan over the fact that Catholic belief grows weak and faint. If now the public schools of all grades are wrested from the control of the clergy, and if war is carried on against them by what is called the diffusion of enlightenment, there will follow, should the Liberal crusade succeed, a profound disturbance, if not the ruin, of religious sentiment. Unfortunately the independence of the State is at stake, since the Church, if it preserves its empire over souls, has but one end, namely, the subordination of every power to its supremacy. I shall not at present endeavour to examine what may be the consequences of this novel situation.

The disaster which the Catholic party has suffered at the hands of the constituencies, has sharpened the disagreement which held its two

subdivisions apart. The first of these subdivisions is that of the Conservatives, who dub themselves Catholic because they think the Church the best safeguard, and the best rallying point of Conservative and reactionary interests. They declare that they accept the Belgian constitution as admirable and final, and when they are told of the anathemas with which Gregory XVI. and Pius IX. loaded it, they equivocate or are silent. Their dream is to unite with themselves the more moderate Liberals, and thus to make up a party of the Centre. M. Malou, his ministerial colleagues, and the great majority of the Catholic members of the Chamber belong to this group. The other is that of the Clericals pure and simple. They take boldly for their watchwords the Syllabus and the restoration of papal supremacy. They put up with the constitution as a necessary evil, but they avow that the ideal to be aimed at is "the natural order of Christian societies;" that is to say, the order in which the civil body is subject to the priests, as the natural body is to the soul. This is the dream of unity under the ægis of the Holy See, a gorgeous dream, and one conceived by the greatest mediæval doctors. The Clericals are not ignorant that, in affecting these lofty views, they will scare the timid; but they believe that the troubles and the catastrophes which menace modern society, will finally drive it to seek shelter under the wing of the institution which is, in the West, the best representative of the principles of permanence and authority. The power and fascination of this ideal had need be great, since, even in Protestant countries, it has attracted more than one troubled soul.

The two subdivisions of the Catholic party are at this moment waging a bitter war with pen and ink; but their mutual dependence is too great to allow of a final divorce between them. The political Catholics of the Chambers cannot do without the support of the bishops and their journals. On the other hand the bishops have need of the political Catholics to defend their cause in Parliament. The party of the Centre could only be formed by the excesses of the deeper shades of the two parties actually existing; and in all probability this would only happen in the case of the complete triumph of one or the other. So long as Catholics and Liberals continue in their present state of equilibrium, the present understanding will continue of necessity, because the least dissension, if carried as far as the ballot-boxes, would bring about the victory of the opposite party.

From an international point of view, the incoming of a Liberal cabinet is a piece of great good fortune for Belgium. All over the Continent, in Italy, in Austria, in Germany, in Holland, and in France, since the downfall of the Government of the 16th May, power is in the hands of the adversaries of clerical supremacy.

Belgium had become the refuge of monks driven from other countries—the fortress and rallying point of Ultramontanism. Once and again already the provocations of the fanatical partisans of the temporal power had put the Belgian Government in an awkward position with regard to the Governments of Germany and Italy. Catholic as it was, M. Malou's cabinet found it necessary to interfere, and to request moderation from the bishops, the parish priests, and the clerical journals, which were not more polite towards King Victor Emmanuel than towards Prince Bismark. The sympathy of all Europe for Belgium is obviously the best pledge that her neutrality and her independent existence will be respected. This sympathy would little by little have cooled if the country had become a centre of opposition to the prevailing policy of Germany, Italy, and France. It is a clear advantage for a small State to pursue a course parallel to that of its powerful neighbours, as Belgium will now do. In every Catholic country a struggle of gigantic proportions, and as yet far from its conclusion, has begun between the modern spirit and the older spirit represented by the Papacy. Belgium is in the forefront of this battle, inasmuch as in no country has the question at issue been more clearly defined or the conflict waged longer. A powerful effort is on the point of being made to arrest and vanquish Ultramontanism; and it will be not a little instructive for other nations to watch closely the conduct and the result of the attempt.

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