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S P E E C H

OF

GEORGE ERRINGTON, ESQ., M.P.,

ON THE

SECOND READING OF THE

UNIVERSITY EDUCATION
(IRELAND) BILL.

DELIVERED

IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS,

THURSDAY, JULY 26, 1877.

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1877.

UNIVERSITY EDUCATION (IRELAND) BILL.

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Order for Second Reading read.

Motion made, and Question proposed, "That the Bill be now read a second time."—(*Mr. Butt.*)

Amendment proposed, to leave out the word "now," and at the end of the Question to add the words "upon this day three months."—(*Mr. David Plunket.*)

Question proposed, "That the word 'now' stand part of the Question."

MR. SPEAKER: It is very often said that Irish questions, and consequently Irish Members, occupy a somewhat undue share of the time and attention of the House. I think it is important to consider for a moment the exact meaning of this; for it must mean one of two things. Either it must mean that, in the opinion of this House, and of the public out-of-doors, there really is not at present in connection with Ireland any question of such vital and immediate importance as to justify us in pressing ourselves as we do on the attention of the House; or else it must mean that, no matter how urgent or important Irish questions may be, the House has neither the time nor the inclination to devote itself to them.

Now let me at once, for my own part at least, entirely repudiate the latter interpretation.

I have not long had the honour of a seat in this House; but even a shorter time than I have been here would have been enough to convince me that the House is always ready and willing to consider Irish questions in the fairest and most friendly manner.

It must then be the case, that after all that has occurred, after all that has been said and done for years, in Ireland and

in England, in this House and out of it, in the public Press, and through all the various channels by which the feeling of a nation is expressed, this country has not yet realized the fact, that the question of Education, and especially University Education, is, as regards Ireland, one which admits of no further delay; that it cannot continue for ever to be bandied about from Party to Party, to be treated year after year like some second or third-rate administrative measure, a Bankruptcy, or a Valuation Bill.

But if this is so, if the importance of this question is so little understood, can we who come here under the heavy responsibility of knowing what it really is—that it affects not only the present and future of our own country, but also and most materially the interests of England as affected by its relations with Ireland—do otherwise than, fulfilling the pledges given to our constituents, press this question by every means in our power (every fair means of course) on the attention of the House? and the more so when, as I have observed, so many of us believe, that it only requires to be fully known and understood here, in order to obtain immediate redress.

Surely no stronger justification than this is needed for the way in which we have urged—and in which, I say it plainly, we must continue to urge—this matter until the necessary redress is obtained.

Sir, within the last two months the right hon. Gentleman the Member for Greenwich, in one of those addresses to which his great eloquence and great position give a national importance, spoke at some length on the condition of Ireland; and in a tone rather of sorrow than anger alluded to the want of appreciation and gratitude we in Ireland had shown for the various measures he and his friends had in late years passed for our benefit.

I merely mention this as one of the few points on which it is a pleasure to me to differ from, and even to contradict, the right hon. Gentleman. I can assure him he is quite

mistaken in thinking that his measures of redress have not been most gratefully appreciated in Ireland; and let me say they are none the less so, because he did not succeed in doing all we hoped he would do and all he tried most fairly and loyally to do. Our gratitude, let me add, is entirely disinterested, it refers to what has been done, and it is not, as gratitude is sometimes defined, a lively expectation of future favours.

Why, daily we feel more and more how much we owe to these measures and to the right hon. Gentleman who carried them. Within the last fortnight we have had a striking illustration of their effect.

The 12th of July, the great Orange Anniversary, so long the occasion of shameful scenes of riot and bloodshed, has this year passed off with entire tranquillity. It was, as usual, celebrated with the flying of flags and the beating of drums; in fact, as usual, with all the pomp and circumstance of glorious war; but fortunately, and most unusually, without any of the other accompaniments of war. The reason of this is so fairly and so admirably put in a few lines in *The Times* of the 14th, that I venture to quote them, and the more so as they are from the pen of one whose judgment and knowledge of Irish matters are well known. The writer, after stating that the celebrations passed off quietly, says—

“This result was not due to any disposition on the part of the Roman Catholic population to regard the demonstrations in some places as too insignificant to be worthy of notice, and in others as too formidable to be attacked with impunity, but rather to the influence of their Clergy, and the abatement of sectarian rancour, which is more bitter in a subject race. With the consciousness of power derived from the possession of equal rights and privileges, with a preponderance of numbers even in ‘the Protestant North,’ they can afford to look with equanimity, if not a generous indulgence, on displays which were exasperating so long as they were regarded as the triumphs of an insolent ascendancy. They are now divested of this character, and are looked on as having little more significance than mere holiday pastimes. Orange flags floated from the steeples of many churches, and even private houses were festooned with lilies.”

Sir, I would ask—Could the right hon. Gentleman have hoped for happier or speedier results of his legislation? And if these are the results of a partial redress of our grievances, what may we not fairly and reasonably hope from that more complete redress for which we have so long prayed, and for which we are now once more Petitioners to Parliament?

In the Birmingham speech to which I have alluded, the right hon. Gentleman, after glancing at certain Parliamentary incidents doubtless in the recollection of most hon. Members, and which he termed, I think, “little inconveniences and secondary evils,” went on to speak in these remarkable terms of the condition of Ireland. He said he had an—

“Undoubting and cheerful confidence that the Union of these two countries may be said now to rest on something like a firm foundation; and the aspect which they will present to the world will be no longer one open to ungenial criticism, but one which, on the contrary, will draw from every enlightened foreigner the admission that we endeavour in our legislation, and in our institutions, to secure justice to all, and to give to every man, so far as depends on us, the means of the healthful, beneficial, successful employment of the faculties with which God has endowed him.”

These, Sir, are noble words; they seem to me singularly applicable to the present question, and they are so eloquent as almost to delude us into the belief that they are actually being realized. I only wish they were. I fully admit the force of the appeal the right hon. Gentleman makes to foreign criticism; no one values more than I do what a Scotch poet calls the fairy gift—“To see ourselves as others see us;” but I take liberty to question whether the enlightened foreigner appealed to would take this very *couleur-de-rose* view of the situation.

Why, I will suppose him here present this evening, seated in that Gallery opposite you, Sir. I would suppose him to be fairly conversant with the general state of the question; I would suppose him to know that all parties are unanimous as to the necessity of some sort of University education for Ireland; I would suppose him to know how earnestly and how anxiously the people of Ireland have long

been praying for this education, but praying to have it under the only conditions under which they can or ought conscientiously to avail themselves of it; I would suppose him, last but not least, to know that to grant what they ask would not cost the British taxpayer one sixpence. Well, I venture to think that after listening to this debate, the enlightened foreigner would be somewhat puzzled; he would be inclined to ask some such question as this—"How is it that the English House of Commons, which not only has the reputation of being one of the most enlightened and liberal-minded Assemblies in the world, but has given proofs of this in its recent legislation for Ireland, hesitates so long to complete the redress it has begun, by concessions apparently so just, so all important to Ireland, so easy to England to grant? What is the mysterious cause, the secret difficulty, which hinders the accomplishment of this redress?"

Probing the question to the bottom, and passing over side and irrelevant issues, this is the answer he would at length reach, and it is, I am convinced, the real root of the question. He would be told—"We have laid down for ourselves a rule that in future no public money shall be granted for any purpose which can by any means be construed as favouring or supporting religion or any form of religion; this rule suits the present tone of our public opinion, and we are determined to force it on the people of Ireland, although we know it entails consequences abhorrent to the whole spirit and conscience of that nation, and that it offends and insults their most cherished and most respectable convictions."

I think, Sir, that enlightened foreigner would return to his country a sadder, if a wiser, man; sadder to think that no amount of fairness or generosity shown in the ordinary affairs of life, will guarantee that even common justice or common prudence will prevail when these questions come to be complicated with religious considerations. For we have it here—a rule purely speculative, which from the nature of things never can be demonstrated to be right or wrong, is to

be forced on us in matters of the most practical and gravest importance and obligation ; and this although we have just as much right, and are just as likely to be right, in considering that rule injurious and wrong, as you can possibly be in thinking it beneficial and right.

I never like to use strong words, for they do not advance an argument ; but I cannot help feeling very strongly on this point. It does seem to me so intolerant to force a mere opinion on those who differ from it when the question is one of the most practical and conscientious obligation perhaps in this world. I believe the intolerance of this will one day be recognized, and that then, as we, when we read history, look back with wonder at what we call the intolerance of our ancestors, so will those who come after us wonder, and, perhaps, with more reason, considering our greater enlightenment and civilization, that even in this 19th century, and in this country of so much real freedom, that in religious questions we could not rise above the pettiest and most miserable jealousies.

People often talk of governing Ireland according to Irish ideas. I never liked the expression, because it suggests the absurdity that Irish ideas of justice and right are different from those of the rest of the world. What, of course, it really means is, that Ireland ought to be governed by laws suited to the circumstances of Ireland. We ask you, in fact, to govern Ireland as you would have governed England, had the conditions of England been similar to those of Ireland.

This has been done, to a certain extent, in secular matters.

The land laws of England, if any laws, were deeply rooted in the Institutions of this country, so much so as almost to have the sacred character of the proverbially unchanging laws of the Medes and Persians ; yet when a liberal minded Assembly came to realize that those laws, however suited to this country, were entirely unsuited to the

conditions of Ireland, they were modified to suit Ireland, with the happiest and most promising results.

When the same principles of justice are allowed to prevail in questions affecting religion, then the redress for which we ask will be complete. When England not only admits grudgingly the fact that Ireland is Catholic, but is prepared frankly to recognize that she must remain so, and that she should be allowed to develop herself fairly according to her Catholicism, as England is allowed to develop itself according to its Protestantism; then, in the words I have quoted, the Union of these two countries will rest on something like a firm foundation, and will need no Coercion Acts to defend it against disaffection and disloyalty, which will then no longer exist.

Sir, I wish I could hope that this would be the last debate on Irish University Education we may ever have to listen to. I know, of course, that under no circumstances can the Bill before us become law this year; it will, however, have done good service if it has helped to bring home to English and Scotch Members, and to the Leaders of Party, that justice and expediency both demand this question should be settled once for all, and disposed of.

Let me say also that while recognizing the great ability with which this Bill has been drawn, and while perfectly willing to accept it as a solution of the question, I am not prepared to maintain that it is the only possible solution, or even the best that could be devised. On the contrary, I see many difficulties in its way: I see it array against itself the opposition of one most formidable body. If, then, other plans are proposed by which these difficulties and oppositions can be diminished or obviated, we ought to consider them, and I should do so in the fullest and fairest way.

I know it is often said that this question is of so ticklish and so dangerous a kind that no prudent Minister would venture to touch it. Sir, the danger—if danger there is—is not

in touching the question, but in leaving it so long and so hopelessly unsettled.

It is now ripe for solution, and I am convinced that in the present state of feeling, a Minister needs only the courage to approach it, in order "from the nettle danger to pluck the flower of safety," and this not only for his country's benefit, but especially and pre-eminently for the benefit of his Party. No one who knows the right hon. Gentleman the Chancellor of the Exchequer will suggest for a moment that, in considering his course on such a question, he would be governed entirely by Party interests; at the same time, we all know that, in addition to higher motives, he would have to give due weight to Party considerations.

Under these circumstances, then, if we have convinced the right hon. Gentleman—or if, as I cannot help thinking, he has long been convinced—that to settle this question would be a great act of justice, as it certainly would be one of the most Statesmanlike expediency, I feel that I can appeal to him in the interests of his Party, although I do not belong to it, as well as in the interests of his country and of mine, to give us this evening some assurance that this question shall have his early attention, and that he will, by dealing with it, help to bring about the reality of those eloquent words I have already quoted—

"That we endeavour in our legislation and in our institutions to secure justice to all, and to give to every man, so far as depends on us, the means of the healthful, beneficial, successful employment of the faculties with which God has endowed him."