

**VERBATIM REPORT OF THE FIVE
DAYS' CONGO DEBATE IN THE
BELGIAN HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES (FEBRUARY
20, 27, 28; MARTH 1, 2)**

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Verbatim report of the five days' Congo debate in the Belgian House of Representatives
(February 20, 27, 28; Marth 1, 2) by E. D. Morel

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Belgian House of Representatives

(February 20, 27, 28; March 1, 2).

'The native is entitled to nothing.'

M. DE SMET DE NAEYER, 1903.

*"A man has been found to make of that sentence—
'The native is entitled to nothing'—a system."*

M. GEORGES LORAND, 1906.

Translated from the Official Shorthand Report,
and annotated by

E. D. MOREL.

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FOREWORD.

HAWARDEN, *May, 1906.*

It was necessary that the English-speaking world, from whose past and future actions salvation for the Congo peoples will come, if it comes at all, should become acquainted with this historic debate in the Belgian Parliament.

To this end the debate has been translated word for word, and is published, at considerable expense, by the Congo Reform Association, which, since its foundation in March, 1904, has placed before the world a mass of documentary evidence affecting the unparalleled tragedy of the Congo.

Times have, indeed, changed since the Congo Reform Association, working in friendly co-operation with the Aborigines' Protection Society—between whose Secretary, Mr. H. R. Fox-Bourne, and the Hon. Secretary of the Association a cordial and unbroken community of thought had existed in connection with the Congo, long before the Association was formed—came into existence. Abuses, which Sir Charles Dilke and Mr. Fox-Bourne had denounced for years, basing themselves upon unofficial testimony, were confirmed by the Report of H.M. Consul in the Congo, Mr. Roger Casement, and by Lord Cromer in the White Book issued in February, 1904.

To Mr. Casement's services in the cause of humanity too high a tribute cannot be paid. His Report vindicated, in a manner as complete as it was striking, the grave step taken by H.M. Government before that Report was received, in approaching the signatory Powers of the Berlin and Brussels Acts, consequent upon the vote of the House of Commons in May, 1903. And never—the time has come to say it—was the choice of a British Government so justified by subsequent events as was the selection by Lord Lansdowne of Mr. Roger Casement to perform the delicate, difficult

and ungrateful task entrusted to him. The later Report of King Leopold's Commission of Inquiry was confirmatory in so notable a degree of Mr. Casement's Report that a prominent Belgian Statesman, with whom the present writer was conversing some weeks ago, remarked that passages in the Commission's document might have been translated from the Report of the British Consul. Mr. Casement's contribution to a great humanitarian cause has passed into history, and is on record, and it would be strange, indeed, if the country he has served with such distinction, proved ungrateful of his services.

The Congo Reform Association came into being shortly after the issue of Mr. Casement's Report, simultaneously with the birth of the malignant and unscrupulous campaign of mendacity started in Brussels, under King Leopold's auspices, and possessing ramifications all over the world. To meet that campaign, to confound and sterilise it, to spread in ever-widening circles the torch-light of truth, to compel further action and exposure, to embrace all sympathies in all lands in one common protest against an infamous wrong—that was the object of the Association. Its chief weapon was publicity, and to some purpose has it wielded it.

In the first issue of the Association's organ was published the celebrated judgment of the Appeal Court in the Caudron case, which threw so lurid a light upon the administrative system prevailing on the Congo that its publication provoked King Leopold to the promulgation of a special manifesto. The successive revelations of Messrs. Weeks, Scrivener, Harris, Frame, Stannard, Frost, and others, begun in the columns of the *West African Mail*, and continued in the official organ of the Association, together with other documents issued by the Association, were largely instrumental in forcing a Commission of Inquiry out of King Leopold, whose members took out, as part of their impedimenta, the issues in which these revelations appeared. Meanwhile, the Association has taken every possible opportunity to familiarise the public with the fundamental causes of the Congo evil.

Later on, when the Report of the Commission was published, shorn of the evidence placed before it, the Association issued a considerable portion of that evidence in England, in the United States, in Belgium; and in France, through the instrumentality of that large-hearted "Colonial" of repute, Monsieur Pierre Mille.

The Association has made up for limited means by energy, and its propaganda has gone far and wide. To-day it numbers correspondents and sympathisers in every land. Despite abominable imputations brought against it, and its officers, by the paid hirelings of the "Royal Rubber Syndicate," it has had the satisfaction of seeing seeds sown by it ripen into harvests fertilising Public Opinion. Especially has this been the case in America, where the creation of an Association, similarly named, and acting in close co-operation, followed—thanks to the indefatigable efforts of Dr. Thomas Barbour—the visit of the Hon. Secretary to Washington and Boston eighteen months ago, and has received fresh propelling power through the recent tour of the Rev. J. H. Harris and his wife.

The change of Government in this country robbed the Association of the active services of several of its most efficient helpers. Its President, Earl Beauchamp, whose sympathy had been a permanent source of inspiration, received an appointment in His Majesty's Household. Mr. Alfred Emmott, one of the Association's founders, and a tower of strength to the cause, became Chairman of Committees and Deputy-Speaker of the House of Commons. Mr. Herbert Samuel, to whose continuous interest the Association stands greatly indebted, became Parliamentary Secretary for the Home Office.

Severely as these losses have been felt, the Association's work has, nevertheless, gone steadily forward, and extended. To-day that work is half—but only half—accomplished. To-day the consequences of King Leopold's rule upon the natives of the Congo are everywhere admitted, even in the Belgian Parliament, to be atrocious. Ten years' denials have been swept away like chaff. Truth has prevailed. But reform has not come. Until reform comes, complete, thorough, fundamental, the Association cannot sheath the sword, and must rely, as it has done in the past, upon the financial assistance of the Public to enable it to emerge finally triumphant from the greatest humanitarian struggle waged since the days of the over-sea slave trade.

* * * * *

And now a word or two as to this five days' debate in the Belgian House. It is not the least notable because it marks the commencement of the awakening of the Belgian people to a sense of the moral liabilities they are assuming in serving as a cloak to

shelter the infamies of the Congo despotism, over which they have no control, and of which they are, in a measure, the present, as they will be, probably, the future victims. I say the commencement. It is hardly possible to call it more than this, so long as the Belgian House can listen with patience to the orations of the King's official apologists, and so long as denunciation is not followed by action.

Despite the impressive eloquence of Vandervelde and Lorand; despite the revolt against the long "conspiracy of silence" on the part of certain members of the Clerical majority; despite the exclamation wrung from the venerable ex-Minister of State, M. Beernaert, "It is abominable"; despite many encouraging symptoms in the House and outside of it—such, for instance, as the splendid courage of Professor Cattier—readers of the debate cannot fail to be impressed with the wall of apathy, of ignorance, of cynicism which has to be surmounted in Belgium before reform, if left wholly to Belgium to inaugurate, can be said to be within even measurable distance of realisation.

This, indeed, is the predominant impression which a perusal of the debate cannot but have upon the reader, and when to it is added the personality of the Sovereign of the Congo State, drunk with absolutism, cynically defiant alike of Public Opinion and constitutional limitations, impervious to all humanitarian feeling, exposed yet shameless—the outlook is not bright.

As to this, however, the reader who approaches the subject with a mind less concentrated upon it than the translator's must be the judge.

There is another feature of the debate which thrusts itself upon the attention. One rises from a perusal of this discussion impressed with an acute realisation of the extraordinary and basic error which seems to underlie so much of the debate.

It is one of the most curious things in the world that a policy of mere pillage should appeal, thanks to the enunciation of sonorous platitudes, thanks to the abysmal ignorance prevailing in Belgium on the problems of tropical Africa, in the light of a magnificent attempt at State construction, so grandiose in its conception that the now-admitted evils accompanying its evolution seem paltry and trivial.

It is not possible, I think, to read this debate without becoming convinced that, beyond hypocrisy and time-serving, beyond

servility to a Royal will, beyond considerations of party politics on the part of the apologists of the Congo State, there exists among some such, at any rate, a belief that they are defending an idea, ruthless, perhaps, but great; an idea which time will fertilise into a colossal achievement, whose realisation is not in doubt, and whose far-reaching results will shine with added lustre from the criticisms of the hour.

The task undertaken on the Congo is compared with the transformation of ancient into modern Gaul! "Remember, gentlemen," exclaims one speaker, "the origin of all European States." "Consider," exclaims another, in effect, "the centuries which have elapsed in building up civilisation in Europe, and the evils through which progress had to wade in its onward march. Yet you expect civilisation to become established in barbarous Africa in twenty years."

What magic in that word "State"! What a hypnotic influence it would seem to wield! The "Congo Free State." What does it mean? An internationally independent "State" in course of construction in the Congo Basin by the genius of one man! What visions does it not conjure up for the exercise of inflammable rhetoric! Feed the supply with stories of fine buildings out there on the Congo, "coquettish" towns on the great river, steamers plying the brown waters, railways piercing the forests—with a background of military uniforms, the fanfare of trumpets, the strains of the national anthem, the vigorous beating of the *tom-tom* of patriotism. The mental picture is complete, the imagination runs riot. Mesmerised by a mirage, speaker after speaker indulges in high-sounding, empty phrases, having little or no relation to facts; the outcome, partly of invincible ignorance, partly of misguided ideas, mixing sincerity with insincerity in a confused jumble.

Beside all this fanciful fooling, the grim reality stands out in striking contrast. And therein lies the tragedy; the incomprehensible tragedy of it all.

Twenty centuries it took, we are told, to change barbarous Gaul to modern France. But it has taken only twenty years of King Leopold's civilisation to reduce the population of the Congo so greatly that already these modern civilisers of the Dark Continent, these State-constructors, are speculating upon the future of Central Africa *minus* the black-man.* Statistics have been

* See Captain Baccari's comments on Signor E. Nisco's article in *La Tribuna* of July 5th, 1904.—Official organ of the Congo Reform Association, September, 1905.

published, showing that in sixteen districts, all riverain, the population has fallen from 122,000 to 17,000 in seventeen years, in spite of the fact that the Congo officials have driven people from the bush to replace the dying river-tribes. The extermination of the people in the Kivu and Ruzizi region is noted by Captain Baccari in his report, confirming Grogan's observations some years previously. The Commission of Inquiry admits the decimation of the tribes subjected to the food-tax around the great centres of military activity. The Commission also notes the "partial extermination" of the tribes in the neighbourhood of the caravan routes to the Nile, and Eastern frontier. Italian officers' reports confirming the latter, and the Tilkens revelations of 1903 confirming the former. Campbell's accounts from Katanga are equally emphatic. Restricted in specific particulars as the data regarding depopulation must necessarily be, the entire body of evidence affecting the condition of the native population of the Congo, official and unofficial, points without possible dispute to the same conclusion—the Congo natives are disappearing wherever the State-constructors make their influence felt. They are disappearing by slaughter, oppression, privation, misery, impoverishment, disease.

Yes, this is the tragedy—the immense tragedy—the extermination of a people—and while it is being enacted, the walls of the Belgian Chamber resound with oratorical whirlwinds, such as are here set forth.

State-construction in Tropical Africa, by a Corporation which destroys the African, and pirates his wealth for private ends, for personal enrichment, or to build edifices to Art in one of the capitals of Europe!

What is being constructed on the Congo? What are the constituents of this "State"? Not, assuredly, the people of the land, who have been robbed of everything. The European cannot colonise or people the African tropics! *Nothing* is being reared upon this hecatomb of African lives. The tragedy is serving *no* purpose, save the temporary profit of its beneficiaries. The future is but dust and ashes . . . and shame.

Shame upon those who know and permit. Shame upon civilisation, which stands idly by. Shame upon the rulers of the world, who, like Frankenstein, shrink from dealing with the monster of their own creation.

E. D. MOREL.