

# **TWO RECESS SPEECHES**

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Two recess speeches by Sir Charles Wentworth Dilke

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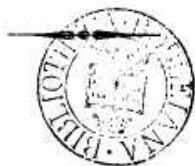


# TWO RECESS SPEECHES.

BY

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## RECESS SPEECHES.

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*A Speech delivered at Hammersmith Town Hall,  
on the 7th of September, 1874, at a Foresters'  
Dinner; the Vicar of Hammersmith in the Chair.*

MR. CHAIRMAN,—You have asked me to perform to-night a difficult task. You have told me to make a political speech which shall be suitable to a non-political occasion ; and that, while I am to talk politics as much as I please, I am not to assume that the whole, or even the majority, of my hearers agree with me. Now, when the Liberals were in office, I might have been able to fulfil the conditions required of me, because I certainly could not be said to make a party speech so long as I confined myself to attacking my own party ; and there was always plenty to say in that direction on occasions when it was not thought desirable to attack the other. I could the more easily do this, seeing that I have never been a party man. Indeed, I have often protested against the evils of party government, without being able to see any way to their termination. I have always lamented, with Lord Brougham, that “many men will not scruple to exaggerate or extenuate facts—nay, to suppress the truth they know, and even forge what they are well aware is false coin, so that they can make concealment available to the defence of their party,

or give the fiction currency to that party's gain." It is ridiculous to pretend that we believe when we do not believe, and to act upon the assumption that there must be at all times two lines of thought, and two only, running side by side, dividing the whole population of the country into two parties, differing upon all questions and fairly equal in numbers. I have seen the administrative advantages which are secured in despotism by the absence of party—as, for instance, in Russia; where an eminent Conservative, Prince Gortschakoff, administers the Foreign Office with extraordinary success, while one of the chief leaders of the Radicals, General Miliutin, has for the last six years made a still more brilliant Minister of War. But in free countries party is inevitable, although there is a tendency in England—a regrettable tendency, perhaps—to substitute for party in the old sense a still more singular state, in which the great majority of the voters, especially in large towns, belong to no party, but invariably throw their weight, from a general feeling of discontent, or, as the French would say, from a *frondeur* sentiment—a stone-throwing sentiment—against the party which holds the seals.

If you had asked me six months ago to make a political but not a party speech, I could have complied with ease; for at that time I was not more hostile to the new than I had been to the late Government. I expected, though differing from them on many questions, to be able to admire, on the whole, their conduct of public affairs. They came in with a strong list of names. Mr. Disraeli, Lord Cairns, and Mr. Gathorne Hardy cannot easily be matched. If Lord Derby represents in foreign affairs weak and sickly principles, we had every confidence in his Under Secretary, who speaks for the department in the House of Commons. Indeed, the Under Secretaries for Foreign Affairs, for India,



and for the Colonies—Mr. Bourke, Lord George Hamilton, and Mr. Lowther—are all three men of mark. Lord Salisbury had previously won a great reputation in the Indian department, which he was expected to maintain. Lord Carnarvon had already been a fair Colonial Secretary. Sir Stafford Northcote, like all the Peclites, knew his figures ; and the bluff manners of Mr. Ward Hunt seemed to fit him for the conduct of the Admiralty. If Mr. Cross were an experiment as Minister for the Home Department, he was an experiment that every member of the House of Commons expected to succeed.

On the other hand, our chiefs were nowhere. Mr. Gladstone was in the sulks, and Mr. Forster had been returned by Tory votes at Bradford, than which nothing is more weakening to a Liberal politician. Mr. Cardwell and Mr. Chichester Fortescue had gone to the Whig heaven ; and Sir William Harcourt, whose great abilities were beginning to be recognized, was draping himself in the mantle of Lord Palmerston, and looked rather to a distant than to an immediate future.

When people talked about the extinction of the Whigs, it certainly then seemed, on the contrary, that that party, instead of being extinct, had become all-embracing, for one knew nobody who was not a Whig. With a Whig Government in office under Mr. Disraeli, and a disorganized Whig opposition on the other side, there seemed to be in question only persons, and not principles. At the same time, many Liberals thought that it would be better, as far as principles went, to keep the Conservatives in office, inasmuch as they possessed a majority in the House of Lords, and, being forced by the House of Commons and the country into passing Whig measures, would have to carry them through both Houses and into law, instead of dropping them half-way, as our people had often been compelled to do. It

certainly seemed that the Liberal party were out of office, not for five years, but for fifteen or for twenty, and that the only possibility which could be foreseen was that, some day or another, a Palmerstonian administration under Sir William Harcourt might succeed the Palmerstonian administration of Mr. Disraeli ; or that, at all events, this would be possible if Sir William Harcourt could be made to understand foreign affairs as well as he does home politics.

As though to strengthen the Conservative position, we were at the same time on our side called upon to surrender our Parliamentary liberties as independent members to a Triumvirate, composed of Mr. Goschen, Lord Hartington, and Mr. Forster,—the title of the first being founded upon the fact that he was the intimate friend of Mr. Gladstone, whom the country had just condemned ; that of the second, that he was a serious Marquis, the son of a highly respectable Duke ; and that of the third, that he had the confidence of gentlemen who sat upon the other side of the House. Believing, as we did, that Mr. Disraeli never made mistakes, it was not easy to foresee the end of his administration. Mr. Gladstone remained at Hawarden, reminding me of a passage in the work of an author whose name is as well known as his books deserve to be, but are not remembered. The passage to which I refer is to be found in the Confucian Analects, where the great Chinese philosopher, speaking of one of his friends, says, "A superior man indeed is Keu Pih Yuh. When good government prevails in his state, he is to be found in office : when bad government prevails, he can roll his principles up and keep them in his breast." Some of the other gentlemen on our front bench showed an amount of prudence at the beginning of this memorable session which reminds me, in its effect on their reputation, of the Californian youth who came to San Francisco without a shilling, and who, by careful

attention to business, was able to leave it at the end of a short time, owing hundreds of pounds. Others again, by the manner in which they flourished, or thought they flourished, in the absence of their former chief, reminded me more of the flower in the song, which

"Perceiving that none  
But exotics were round it, thought itself one."

Now comes to me the "tug of war," because, having told you how matters stood at the beginning of the session, I have to tell you how and why they have changed; and having, as I must have, if I am to deal with politics at all, to censure, in some things, the conduct of the Government, I can only ask those of you who have heard me when the other party were in power, to remember, and those who have not, to take it upon credit and to believe, that I shall only speak of them as I have spoken on former occasions of their opponents,—I trust with candour and impartiality, as well as truth.

It must be remembered that Mr. Disraeli's Government did not come in with a policy: it came in as an opposition to take the place of a Government which had a policy—a policy which had been condemned. This was a change from a condemned policy, and from a condemned Government, to a Government which had opposed that administration and that policy from the first day to the last. As an opposition, as a party of disapproval, hopes had been raised by it which it was difficult to meet. Mr. Disraeli came in, according to his own showing, to content a number of harassed trades and professions. To use the phrase of the Bath letter, which, however, he had stolen from one of his own books, Mr. Disraeli came into office to redress a policy of "plundering" and "blundering." I am not going to pretend that the former Government had not