

**THE SIX-YEAR-OLD PARLIAMENT
AND ITS APPROACHING
DISSOLUTION; A HANDBOOK
FOR CANDIDATES AND ELECTORS**

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The six-year-old parliament and its approaching dissolution; a handbook for candidates and electors by Various

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VARIOUS

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A HANDBOOK FOR CANDIDATES AND ELECTORS.

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P R E F A C E .

THE greater portion of this Pamphlet is a republication, by permission, of an article which appeared in the 'Edinburgh Review' for October 1864, under the title of 'The Five-Year-Old Parliament.' It has been extended to embrace the principal events of the present Session, and some observations have been added applicable to the coming General Election.

THE
SIX-YEAR-OLD PARLIAMENT.

THE PARLIAMENT which will shortly conclude its seventh Session was elected in May 1859, under the auspices of the Derby-Disraeli Administration, in answer to an almost personal appeal made by those Ministers to the country. We say a personal appeal, because, as at a former election, the great object of the Conservative Government, as of the Conservative party, appeared to be to clear itself of its antecedents and its character, and, if possible, to divest itself of its identity. Only in 1859, more prudent than in 1852, while breaking with the past, it committed itself to no promises for the future. On the hustings in 1859, the members and supporters of Lord Derby's Government abjured its recent Reform Bill; they professed no financial policy, for, scared by the failure of Lord Ellenborough's India Bill, Mr. Disraeli had contented himself with a budget that was confessedly a makeshift. Their foreign policy was avowedly one of peace and of neutrality; but peace had in

the South of Europe turned to war, and their neutrality was suspected of Austrian tendencies.

The Parliament returned by the country in answer to the appeal so made, at once, by a majority of thirteen, pronounced a vote of want of confidence in those who had summoned it, and installed their opponents in power. After a trial of five years, it solemnly ratified, on the occasion of the Dano-German debate, by a majority of eighteen, the verdict it had given in 1859. It remains for the country to say whether the House of Commons has been justified in the support it has so long given to Lord Palmerston's Government; and this will best appear from a brief survey of the policy it has approved, and of the measures it has sanctioned.

The Reform Bill condemned by the former Parliament, and still more decisively by the country, was a Reform Bill in no ordinary sense of the term. It disingenuously sought, not so much to amend the representation in accordance with the wants of the people, as to cut and carve it to suit the exigencies of the Conservative party. That Bill disfranchised a large body of the most independent electors in counties, namely, the forty-shilling freeholders voting for property within the limits of parliamentary boroughs. It admitted absentee freeholders to vote for boroughs, and proposed a suspicious revision of their boundaries.

The affirmation of Lord John Russell's resolutions defeated the manœuvre of the Tory leader; it preserved the integrity of the county constituencies, and saved the boroughs from faggot votes and a 'rectification of their frontiers' dangerous to independence. Lord Derby's successors did not fail, in accordance with promises given, to introduce in the present Parliament a Bill extending the suffrage both in counties and in towns, and providing for a redistribution of seats. That Bill fell to the ground, from want of support in the country. Neither electors nor non-electors evinced any active interest in the fate of the measure, but rather, as the result of Mr. Bright's Reform campaign in the preceding autumn had indicated, viewed the subject with, at all events, temporary indifference. Now, it is an undoubted fact that the Reform Act of 1832, the increasing power of the press, and the diffusion of education, have rendered Parliament more immediately responsive and responsible to the voice of the country. But, then, it can hardly be a just subject for complaint, if Parliament be found in a corresponding degree sensitive to the silence of the country. More especially is this result to be expected in the case of a reform in the representation. Such a measure necessarily clashes with many local and personal interests, while directly it offers no tangible advantage to the community

at large, but only satisfies a sense of right, or indirectly benefits those to whom the power of voting is extended.

The Conservatives, regardless of the fact that in two successive speeches from the Throne their Government had urged the importance and advantage of an early Reform, eagerly availed themselves of the forbearance of the country to repudiate those pledges, and have since laboured to close the door against all Reform, now and hereafter. The Liberals, on the contrary, have steadfastly upheld the principle of Reform. The debates on Mr. Locke King's and Mr. Baines's Bills, introduced rather as protests than with a serious hope of passing them into law, have served to display the spirit that animates political parties on this question. In 1864, more especially, the language held on the Conservative side of the House was tantamount to a declaration that those in possession of the suffrage, and satisfied with that condition of things, were, without further reason, justified in refusing the same right to those not equally fortunate with themselves. This climax of selfish exclusiveness called forth an indignant protest from so moderate a Reformer as Mr. Gladstone. In the course of a celebrated speech, he pointed out that such a refusal was a mere insult to the applicants for the franchise, and that although that privilege might be withheld from