

INTERVIEW WITH MR ASQUITH AND MR BIRRELL;

[1914.]

2nd February.

Mr Asquith told me that he desired to let me know everything that had occurred since his interview with me last November. He said he had had repeated interviews with Mr Bonar Law, and three interviews with Sir Edward Carson; that of the two he had found Sir Edward Carson much the most satisfactory to deal with. These gentlemen maintained their position obstinately that nothing short of the total exclusion of Ulster from the Home Rule Bill could lead to a settlement by consent.

Mr Asquith informed me that he and his colleagues were all firmly opposed to the exclusion of Ulster or any part of Ulster even temporarily. They had come to the conclusion that a temporary exclusion on the part of Ulster would have the most disastrous results on Ireland. He informed me that he had made no offer to Messrs Bonar Law and Carson, but that he had tentatively made suggestions to them, none of which they seriously discussed.

He informed me that the general situation had undergone a very unfavourable change since he saw me in November, and that it would be necessary for him when challenged, as he was sure he would be in the debate on the Address, to announce what concessions the Government were willing to offer Ulster in exchange for a settlement

by consent. He began by assuring me that the Government had no intention of hauling down the flag or of abandoning their determination to pass the Home Rule Bill, but he felt it his duty to point out to me explicitly the grave danger which menaced the Government. He told me a very serious crisis had arisen with regard to the Navy Estimates; that it was a mistake to suppose that this matter had been settled inside the Cabinet. Up to that moment no agreement had been come to, although he had a confident belief that an agreement would be come to shortly, and therefore the Cabinet would not split on this matter. It was different however with the Liberal Party in the House of Commons. He anticipated ^{the} ~~m/~~very gravest trouble and danger not merely from a possibility of hostile votes, but from a general feeling of dissatisfaction and disappointment, which from the Whips' point of view constituted a very grave menace that was likely to lead at any moment to accidents in the Division Lobby.

Still more serious was the position that had arisen with regard to the attitude of the King. He assured me that the King was not in the smallest degree hostile to Home Rule, and had repeatedly stated so, and that no one would be more delighted than the King would be if the matter could be arranged by consent.

The King however has become thoroughly convinced of the reality of Civil War threat, and has pressed the Government very hard for a General Election before the commencement of this Session.

The King admits that Home Rule was before the Electors at the last Election, but says that at that election no one believed for a moment that Home Rule could cause Civil War, or anything approaching to it, and that if they had known what has since occurred, they might have voted differently. He argued that before making himself responsible for the passage of Home Rule, he must be assured that he had his people behind him. The King never contemplated, and does not contemplate, refusing the Royal Assent to the Home Rule Bill, if passed through the House of Commons the third time under the Parliament Act, but he clearly intimated that he considered his power of dismissing his Minister as was done in 1834, as a course open to him, and one which he might feel called upon to adopt. Mr Asquith said that he would not himself have been astonished if the King had taken this course before the opening of Parliament, but he took it ~~down~~ for granted that he would not do so now. Contingencies may arise however, and in Mr Asquith's opinion ~~were~~ likely to arise in which it was quite conceivable that the King would dismiss his Ministers and send for the Leaders of the Unionist Party to form a Government. This of course would lead to an immediate dissolution, but the serious thing would be that, even if the Liberals were elected again at the General Election the sequence of the Parliament Act would have been broken, the last two years would have been wasted, and the work would have to be begun all over again. This the Government were determined to

avert by every means in their power. Mr Asquith said he had reason to believe that the crisis might arise on the Army Annual Bill. This Bill must be passed into law by a certain date in March or April, otherwise the Army is disbanded, and there is no power to ~~pay it~~ or continue it in existence. He expects the opposition in the House of Commons will take up the position that they won't sanction the Army Bill until they know how the Army is going to be used in Ulster. He thinks they will fight the Army Bill in the House of Commons, and possibly resort to extreme disorder of such a character that, probably with the connivance of the Speaker the whole business of the House will be held up. In such an event he believes the King would act in the manner indicated. Further than this, even if the Army Bill were passed through the House of Commons, it would be open to the House of Lords to reject it, a course they would be very likely to pursue, in which case the King would probably meet the deadlock in the manner already indicated.

These considerations have led Mr Asquith to the conclusion that for the safety of Home Rule it is essential that he should make an ~~offer~~ to Ulster of such a character that in the event of their refusal of it, and he thinks at this stage any offer he makes short of the exclusion of Ulster would be rejected, would deprive them of all moral force, and would avert any action by the King.

Mr Asquith then proceeded to indicate to me his idea of what such an offer should be, assuring me that it was only

his own personal idea, and had not been submitted to the Cabinet or accepted by them; although he felt bound to say that the Cabinet would be guided by his view in the matter. He said he had no desire whatever to ask me to commit myself to any opinion until after full consideration and consultation, and that in any case if he made an offer, it would be clearly understood that it was made on the responsibility of the Government alone, and not upon the responsibility, in any way, of the Irish Party.

His idea may be thus summarised :-

(1) To give up the Post Office.

On this point I said that I did not think this suggestion would appease in the slightest degree any single individual in Ulster, and that it would be a gratuitous giving away of something which though not vital was regarded as most valuable by us.

(2) Local Administrative Control in Ulster; the reserved services, police, etc., to remain as they are in the Bill under Imperial Control. Ulster to have a local Education Board of its own on the same basis as the National Board of Education; to have control of Factory Acts Administration, and other matters of that kind.

(3) That a majority of the Ulster Members in the Irish Parliament should have the power to appeal to the English Parliament against the application to Ulster of any legislation passed by the Irish Parliament on certain subjects to be defined and set forth.

I argued generally against the making of any proposals whatever at the present time. I said it would mean to his

opponents very largely an abandonment of his Bill, that the months intervening between now and the discussions of the Bill when it comes up would be spent in most destructive criticism, that the Ulster leaders would not accept any such proposals whatever, that it would be quite impossible for us to accept or support suggestions of this character. He said he had not expected anything of the kind. The most he expected from us was that we would be willing, on the condition of the other side allowing the Bill to be an Agreed Bill and pass by consent, to make large concessions, so long as they were consistent with the limits we ourselves had laid down, namely the creation of an Irish Parliament with an Executive responsible to it, and the maintenance of the integrity of Ireland. He told me he was to see the King again on Thursday, and that he would hold himself free to meet me again whenever I wished or to carefully consider any document which I might send to him.

Mr Birrell took no part practically in the conversation which lasted for an hour and a half.

Handwritten notes:
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