

LAWYERS AS IMPERIAL PRIME MINISTERS.

"Law is the ladder into Parliament," said Lord Rosebery in his Glasgow Rectorial Address. No doubt this was more true in a former generation, although even to-day the proportion of lawyers in Parliament is considerable.

It is remarkable how few lawyers have reached the top of the political ladder in the Imperial Parliament. When Lord Oxford and Asquith became Prime Minister in 1908 it was nearly a century since a lawyer had held that high office, and he met with an untimely end which was doubtless a warning to others. Spencer Perceval, after a distinguished legal and Parliamentary record, became Prime Minister in 1809, but three years afterwards in the lobby of the House of Commons he was shot by a madman named Bellingham, a bankrupt with a fancied grievance.

It is to the credit of the legal profession that the innovation proved successful, as Lord Oxford and Asquith (then plain Herbert Henry Asquith) held the office of Prime Minister for eight successive years, with marked distinction and during many important crises. As if to follow the precedent thus established, his successor was David Lloyd George, "the little Welsh lawyer," who held office as Prime Minister from 1916 to 1922, and earned the undying gratitude of the Nation for his services during the Great War.

Asquith retained in Parliament the characteristic speech and pose of a great lawyer. He was thirty-four years of age when he entered Parliament, and for many years continued his lucrative practice at the Bar, which he resumed during the long years he sat in the shades of Opposition. On the other hand, Lloyd George was more "popular" in his appeal both in and out of Parliament, probably because his allegiance to a political career drew him away from the practice of law at the early age of twenty-seven.

It is interesting to note that during the century between Perceval and Asquith there were not a few Prime Ministers who may be said to have dabbled in law.

Canning, who was born in 1770, came to London and read for the Bar in 1792, but by the help of Pitt he entered Parliament in 1793, and soon established his place as the most brilliant speaker on the ministerial side. His political patrons helped him to make

a lucrative marriage with a lady who had a fortune of £100,000, which made it unnecessary for him to earn his livelihood.

Peel was well versed in the principles of law, in order to study which he entered at Lincoln's Inn, but without any intention of following the law as a career.

Lord Melbourne, famous as the statesman who initiated Queen Victoria into her duties as sovereign with such delicate tact, studied law at Glasgow University and was called to the Bar in 1804. The fact that he entered Parliament in 1806 and was so notably lacking in the qualification of attention to details, is sufficient evidence that he was no lawyer. No one would ever suspect that his grand-father had founded the family fortunes on law.

Disraeli's father had him articled to a firm of London Solicitors, although he himself desired to prepare for a political career. Disraeli (afterwards Lord Beaconsfield) endured it for two and a half years when his health broke down and his father reluctantly consented to the cancellation of his articles.

Gladstone had great difficulty in choosing his vocation in life, and in a letter to his father written in 1832 he indicated a preference for the profession of law, to quote his own words: "with a view substantially to studying the constitutional branch of it, and a subsequent experiment as time and circumstances might offer on what is termed public life." In pursuance of this resolve he entered at Lincoln's Inn in 1833, but though he kept thirteen terms he was never called to the Bar, due no doubt to the success of his experiment in public life.

Shortly before the Great War many were calling for a Business Government, but as Lord Asquith shrewdly remarked, during the greater part of his professional career he had been occupied in getting business men out of their difficulties. In recent years, with the exception of the brief period during which Ramsay Macdonald held office, we have had business men at the head of our Government in the person of the late Andrew Bonar Law and our present Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin.

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