CHAPTER XCVII

PREFERENCE AND THE CABINET—
THE TURNING-POINT

(September 1902–February 1903)


The Education Act of 1902 has been described as one of ‘the two or three greatest constructive measures of the twentieth century’.\(^1\) It has certainly stood the test of time. Its main provisions have never been reversed; and the principles which underlie them have informed all the subsequent reforms of our educational system.

The perspective of politics is very short. To most public men of the day, the passage of the Bill appeared as a great victory for the Establishment over Nonconformity. It was for this, indeed, that the rank and file of the Conservative party had been induced to fight. Yet the real victors were those, on all sides in politics, who represented the growing reaction to the individualism of the previous century. Public controversy might centre on such questions as ‘Local Option’ and the appointment of Managers, but, as Sidney Webb wrote, the real significance was that for the first time the Bill definitely includes as a public function\(^2\) education as education — not primary education only, or technical education only, but anything and everything that is education from the kindergarten to the University.\(^3\)

Salisbury and Hicks Beach had recognised the state socialist

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2. My italics. — J. A.
character of the Bill. They had resisted it in Cabinet on the grounds that the expenditure involved must dangerously increase the burden upon the ratepayer or the taxpayer; and Balfour’s determination to press on with it was not the least of the causes which determined the resignation of the Chancellor. Years later, indeed, Balfour himself would admit: ‘I did not realise that the Act would mean more expense and more bureaucracy’. Here is one of the many ironies in our story. Balfour, acting in the interests of the Establishment, introduced a measure which otherwise ran counter to all his political opinions. Chamberlain, who represented the rising spirit of ‘State Socialism’ more than any other statesman of his day, was compelled to resist it by a sectarian interest with which he no longer sympathised.

Earlier in this work, Mr. Garvin described Chamberlain’s agitation against the Education Bill of 1870 as Nonconformity’s ‘last fight for the leadership of National Politics’. Thereafter the Nonconformists had abandoned hope of political supremacy. They had remained a powerful political interest in the nation; but on the defensive. By 1902, the initiative had passed to frankly secular forces; and, to complete Mr. Garvin’s metaphor, the great agitation against Balfour’s Education Bill may fitly be described as Nonconformity’s Last Stand. Rosebery was not far wrong when he said:

If the Nonconformists of England submit tamely to the enactments of this Bill, I will not say that they would be weakened religiously; but I will say this — that in my judgment, politically they will have ceased to exist.

The Nonconformist conscience has remained a powerful and pervasive influence; but never again would a nation-wide political movement gather round the Chapel. The truth is that, as a political interest, Nonconformity had lost its raison d’être. The disabilities under which the Dissenters had lain had all been removed. The long fight against religious discrimination had been won; and only old men could still remember the injustices of an earlier age. Henceforth the congregations of Chapel as of Church would be subjected to the stresses and strains of a new age no longer thinking in denominational terms.

Chamberlain was well aware of the decline of Nonconformist power. He never abjured his own Dissenting background, nor

2 Ibid. vol. i, p. 143.
3 On receiving a Nonconformist deputation at Spencer House, 8 December 1902.