

Committee for the Repeal of the

Blasphemy Laws

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The Prime Minister and the Blasphemy Laws.

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE SPEECHES AT THE RECENT DEPUTATION.

A DEPUTATION waited upon the Right Hon. Herbert Asquith, M.P. (Prime Minister and First Lord of the Treasury), at 10 Downing Street, on Thursday, March 26, for the purpose of explaining the case for the repeal of the Blasphemy Laws, and to ask the Government to provide facilities for the passing of Mr. Holt's Bill which is now before the House of Commons. The Prime Minister was accompanied by the Right Hon. Reginald McKenna (Secretary of State for the Home Department) and the Right Hon. Sir John Simon (Attorney-General).

The deputation, which was introduced by Mr. R. D. Holt, M.P., consisted of Mr. William Archer, Mrs. H. Bradlaugh Bonner, Mr. J. F. L. Brunner, M.P., Mr. Herbert Burrows, Sir William Byles, M.P., Mr. H. G. Chancellor, M.P., the Hon. John Collier, Mr. F. M. Cornford, Mr. G. Lowes Dickinson, Mr. Silas K. Hocking, Mr. A. Lynch, M.P., Dr. J. Ellis McTaggart, Mr. G. H. Radford, M.P., Mr. F. W. Read, Mr. Athelstan Rendall, M.P., Mr. S. H. Swinny, Mr. A. A. Tayler, Mr. Percy Vaughan, Mr. B. W. Warwick, Mr. Charles A. Watts, and Mr. Robert Young.

MR. ASQUITH: I apologise, ladies and gentlemen, for being so late.

MR. HOLT: Mr. Asquith, the honour of presenting this deputation has been entrusted to me, and I should like first of all, in the name of the whole deputation, to thank you most warmly for your kindness in receiving us. (Hear, hear.) We appreciate very highly the fact that you have

received us at a time when you are naturally so busy, and I hope we shall be able to show our gratitude by our brevity, which I imagine will be the most acceptable form in which we can exhibit it.

We come here to-day representing the signatories to a document which was sent to you some time ago, and which no doubt you have read. The signatories to that document may, I think, be described as in the main persons carrying a considerable amount of weight in the intellectual life of the country. We desire to ask you to give the assistance of the Government in removing from the Statute-book all laws which in any form whatever put a penalty upon the holding or the profession of opinion. We submit that, as matters stand at present, that is not the case and that there are actually on the Statute-book very distinct penalties upon opinion which are in fact in certain cases enforced. I think it can hardly be contended that there is not in practice a penalty upon opinion, when we find that persons are punished for certain offences only if they happen in connection therewith to have expressed heterodox opinions. It is not an answer to a charge of religious persecution to say that the object of that persecution is an unworthy person. I submit that there is still religious persecution if the unworthy who hold heterodox opinions are treated differently from the unworthy who hold orthodox opinions.

I do not propose to take up any more of your time, Sir. I will ask Mrs. Bradlaugh Bonner, who is an expert on the subject, to put before you as briefly as possible the objects of this deputation.

Mrs. BRADLAUGH BONNER: Mr. Asquith, Sir,—My colleagues have asked me to represent them on this matter, partly because I happen to be Chairman of the Committee for the Repeal of the Blasphemy Laws, and partly also because I have had, through my father, the late Charles Bradlaugh, close personal contact with the application of those laws. They have thought, therefore, that I may be able to state certain aspects of our case in asking for the assistance of the Government in procuring the repeal of those laws.

I do not know how far I may assume that you are familiar with the origin and development of those laws. I would merely remind you that they have been in existence in some

form or other for upwards of five hundred years. The first was passed at the instigation of Pope Gregory XI in order to strengthen the hands of the Catholic Church in the suppression of heretics. Later on, when Protestantism became in the ascendant, the same laws, with considerable additions, were used to suppress heresy against the Protestant faith. The blasphemy of the fourteenth century had become the orthodoxy of the sixteenth, and the oppressed in their turn became the oppressors.

Prosecutions for blasphemy are usually taken under the common law. In the year 1676 the Lord Chief Justice, Sir Matthew Hale, in trying a man for blasphemy, said that, Christianity being parcel of the law of England, to speak in reproach of the Christian religion was to speak in subversion of the law ; and this reading was rigidly adhered to for upwards of two hundred years. Numbers of persons were pilloried, were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment, and were sentenced to heavy fines. Not only were persons imprisoned, but books such as Lord Byron's *Cain* and Shelley's *Queen Mab* were said to violate the law, and even scientific works were condemned. A volume of *Lectures on Physiology*, by an eminent member of the Royal College of Surgeons, was declared illegal because it impugned the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Contracts for letting halls for lectures against Christianity were broken with impunity ; and when in 1867 an action for breach of contract was brought, and carried on appeal to the Court of Exchequer, four judges justified the breach on the ground that it was impossible to deliver such lectures without committing the crime of blasphemy. Legacies for the propagation of opinions contrary to Christianity have been annulled over and over again, and so late as 1903 a legacy left to the Oldham Secular Society was declared invalid because the bequest was not consistent with Christianity.

In so far as civil proceedings are concerned, therefore, the law has remained unchanged. So far as prosecutions are concerned, it would appear to have been modified by the ruling of Lord Chief Justice Coleridge in 1883. Lord Chief Justice Coleridge, in April of that year, had two cases before him for trial—two cases of blasphemous libel. In one of these my father, Mr. Bradlaugh, was a defendant,

and was acquitted. In the other the defendants were Messrs. Foote and Ramsey, who were already undergoing a sentence of imprisonment for blasphemy passed in the previous month by Mr. Justice North, who, with the counsel for the prosecution, Sir Hardinge Giffard, defined blasphemy on the old narrow lines of the law laid down by Sir Matthew Hale. Lord Coleridge, in trying the case before him only six weeks later, said it was no longer true that Christianity was part of the law of the land, and that, if the decencies of controversy were observed, even the fundamentals of religion might be attacked without blasphemy. This view of the law was immediately traversed by Mr. Justice Stephen, and later by Mr. Baron Huddleston and Mr. Justice Manisty. It was not challenged in the courts at the time, because for twenty-five years after Lord Chief Justice Coleridge's judgment there was no case of blasphemy prosecution. The next case took place in 1908, and in the six years since then—I would respectfully ask your attention to this—in the last six years we have had more prosecutions for blasphemy in this country than in the previous sixty years. In those cases the ruling of the late Lord Coleridge has been accepted, and extended, by five judges in succession.

I would, however, like to point out that in November last, in Melbourne, in a libel case involving an accusation of blasphemy, which was heard before Chief Justice Way, the judge is reported to have said that Christianity is part of the common law, and blasphemy, such as to speak contumeliously of Christ, is a crime. I am well aware that we do not take our law from Australia; but it is by no means uncommon for precedents to be cited from the colonies, and even from America, in order to throw light on a confused or doubtful point in our own law; and the law of blasphemy is at the present moment in an extremely confused condition, the reading as applied to civil cases being very different from that as applied to criminal proceedings during the last few years.

We desire to point out that the laws are not enforced consistently, and that they are enforced at irregular intervals. Sometimes, as in the case of Mr. Bradlaugh, the law is even used as a cloak to gratify private malice. In recent prosecutions there is not one case of any proceeding being taken

against a man of high position or a person of reputation. All such are allowed to continue their arguments subversive of Christianity without demur. The proceedings in every case, without exception, have been taken against uncultured men speaking at street corners, who raise a prejudice against themselves and against the cause they advocate by their manners and the methods they employ.

We would further point out that these men are sent to prison solely because they are Freethinkers using offensive arguments against Christianity. Christians may use exactly similar arguments against Judaism or Mohammedanism or Atheism, or even against some branch of Christianity other than the Established Church; and they may continue to do so from one year's end to another without coming within the scope of the law. It is notorious that zealous Protestants do deliberately speak of the Virgin Mary in terms grossly offensive to Roman Catholics, and Christians of a certain type have no hesitation whatever in using coarse and scurrilous language in speaking of Atheism in a manner calculated to wound the feelings of other persons.

Mr. ASQUITH: As far as it goes, that is rather an argument for the extension of the Blasphemy Laws so as to cover a wider field.

Mrs. BRADLAUGH BONNER: I was just going to say that, because none of those persons are put into prison, no one is the worse; and, if they were, no one would be the better. All that we are asking this afternoon is that we who are not Christians should be put on exactly the same level as those who are Christians. We are asking for no special privileges. We are only asking for equal treatment under the law. In 1889 Mr. Bradlaugh brought in a Bill for the repeal of the Blasphemy Laws—a Bill which was based upon one drafted by Mr. Justice Stephen a few years earlier. It was rejected upon its second reading, but Mr. Bradlaugh had every intention to bring in the Bill again and again until he succeeded in carrying through the House a measure which would result in the abolition of all prosecutions for the expression of opinion in matters relating to religion.

Mr. ASQUITH: I rather think I voted for his Bill.

Mrs. BRADLAUGH BONNER: I have the happiness and pleasure to know that you did, Sir. It will be unnecessary for me to add that there has been since his death—

which, unfortunately, took place almost immediately, and his work was cut short in that as in other matters—nothing further done in that way until Mr. Holt courageously undertook the task last year.

Now we are here this afternoon to ask the assistance of the Government either in giving special facilities to Mr. Holt, or in themselves bringing in a measure for the repeal of those laws which the late Lord Coleridge pronounced to be ferocious and inhuman, which Mr. Justice Stephen said were essentially and fundamentally bad, which Lord Justice Lindley said were cruelly persecuting, and which, he added, judges could only hold remained unrepealed for the express purpose of being enforced. We are here to ask your assistance in striking off the last legal fetter on the expression of opinion in matters of religion—a fetter forged five hundred years ago. The repeal of these laws could do no possible injury to Christianity; it could not injure any single human being. On the other hand, it would remove a grave evil, by giving the Freethinkers a legal right to be honest. At present the law denies us that right. We are honest at our own risk. Many of us cheerfully take that risk, although we feel that no one has any right to ask us to do so. But, while we do that, we are only too conscious that those laws create an atmosphere of such bitter prejudice against the individual that it drives the weaker brethren to silence and evasion. We venture to express the hope that if you, Sir, and the Government agree with the opinions expressed by judges, scholars, and broad-minded Churchmen such as Canon Scott Holland and the Lord Bishop of Lincoln—if you agree that these laws are bad, then we venture to hope that you will give an ear to our appeal. If, on the other hand, you think they are wise and just and expedient, then personally my prayer would be that they should be enforced according to the strict letter, first of all against the wealthiest—those in the highest position and those the most capable of defence—and that not until those had been before the courts should the authorities condescend to use this sorry weapon against the poor, the defenceless, the ignorant, and the worthless. (Hear, hear.)

Professor LOWES DICKINSON: Mr. Asquith, I desire to say a few words to associate myself with the purposes of

this deputation. I should like especially to emphasize the point made by Mrs. Bradlaugh Bonner, that we are not pleading for the abrogation of laws which have fallen into desuetude, but of laws which are beginning to be put into operation more and more. It is for that reason that this question appears to me to be a really urgent question, because prosecutions are increasing and not diminishing under these laws, which I personally believe would be advocated by very few people in this country to-day.

MR. ASQUITH: How many of these prosecutions have there been?

PROFESSOR LOWES DICKINSON: I have not the exact number, Sir.

MR. ASQUITH: Mrs. Bradlaugh Bonner said they had increased very much of late years. Have you any figures to show the numbers?

MRS. BRADLAUGH BONNER: I cannot give you the exact figures. We have had three or four a year during the past six years.

MR. ASQUITH: In different parts of the country?

MRS. BRADLAUGH BONNER: Yes.

MR. ASQUITH: These prosecutions have always been initiated by the local authorities?

MRS. BRADLAUGH BONNER: Yes.

MR. ASQUITH: Never by the Government?

MRS. BRADLAUGH BONNER: No.

PROFESSOR LOWES DICKINSON: These prosecutions are now brought according to the law of blasphemy as laid down by Lord Coleridge. It is no longer maintained that attempts to subvert Christianity are contrary to the laws of England. Such a contention would be contrary to the whole facts of modern society, and if the law were interpreted in that sense men of eminence in every occupation and those holding the highest offices under the Crown would be liable to prosecution. But I may say, as I understand the matter, it is not certain how this law may be interpreted, and certainly Mr. Justice Stephen gave it as his opinion that as things then stood a publisher could be prosecuted for publishing the *Cours de Philosophie Positive* and it is clear that numerous other books would fall under the same ban.

MR. ASQUITH: Is there any case in recent years in which

persons have been convicted under these laws for what I may call blasphemy in the strict sense—that is to say, blasphemy not accompanied by indecency or profanity of expression? When you talk of Comte's work, for instance, has there been any prosecution for any publication comparable with that?

Professor LOWES DICKINSON: My point was that at present it is still in dispute.

Mr. ASQUITH: I wanted to know if there was any case of successful prosecution of anybody. Take *Queen Mab* and Paine's *Age of Reason*, both of which would have been held in olden days to be blasphemous.

Professor LOWES DICKINSON: I am not saying that there is any recent case of the kind.

Mr. PERCY VAUGHAN: The *Queen Mab* prosecution was in the 40's—a little more than half a century ago.

Mr. ASQUITH: That is the last where there is not some element of indecency of expression, is it not?

Professor LOWES DICKINSON: I do not know of any recent case where there was not an expression of indecency or profanity—or rather coarse argument perhaps.

Mrs. BRADLAUGH BONNER: Which might have been used by Christians without any objection being taken.

Professor LOWES DICKINSON: On the point of language, I only want to say this, that in effect this creates one law for uneducated persons and another for educated persons; one law for one class and another law for another class. Because poor and uneducated men do not choose their words with the same regard for other people's feelings which more educated people endeavour to show—

Mr. ASQUITH: I do not know that Shelley showed much regard for other people's feelings.

Professor LOWES DICKINSON: I was not referring to Shelley; but in recent years the prosecutions have all been of poor men, and I think it is likely that that will continue to be the case in the future. I am not a distinguished person myself; but I think if I had stood up in the marketplace and repeated what Mr. Stewart said at Leeds, it is very doubtful whether I should have been prosecuted, and if I had I think there might have been rather more public disturbance than there was in the case of the prosecution of Mr. Stewart. I think it is a preposterous state of the

law to say it shall be an offence to hurt people's feelings, whether about religion or anything else.

I am not myself in the habit of deliberately wounding people's feelings. But I am certain you cannot come into contact with certain matters without doing so ; and many people's feelings are daily being wounded about matters as to which they feel strongly. This particular offence of wounding people's feelings may exist in all sorts of matters, but at present it is only punishable by law in matters of religion. I venture to suggest that the ordinary Englishman feels a good deal more strongly about politics than he does about religion. My own feelings are exasperated daily by what I read about political subjects, and I venture to say that if this law of blasphemy was extended so as to cover the wounding of people's feelings in regard to politics the whole of the House of Commons would be in prison. (Laughter.)

Mr. SILAS K. HOCKING : Mr. Asquith, I have not very much to say. I associate myself with this deputation because, as what would be termed an ordinary Christian man, I feel that those laws are out of harmony with the free spirit of the twentieth century. I do not think any man ought to be punished for his beliefs or unbeliefs, or for criticizing the beliefs of other people, or for defending strongly his own beliefs. Of course it is almost impossible, I think, to criticize the beliefs of other people without using what is termed offensive language. It is so in politics, and it is equally so in religion. I myself deprecate as strongly as anybody the use of coarse or unseemly language ; but language, like deportment, is a matter largely of taste and of gentlemanly feeling. And it does not seem to be right that a man should be punished just because he is not a gentleman. Moreover, in the strict interpretation of these laws, if they were strictly and literally interpreted and enforced, I fancy that a great many very respectable people, and a great many religious people, would find themselves in the dock, or perhaps in prison. And as I look at the question myself, I agree with what has been said by others—that there is as much blasphemy, shall we say, inside the Churches as outside. For, after all, what is blasphemy to one may be a sort of beatitude to another. It depends upon the point of view. And, consequently, these laws have to be interpreted

very loosely, it seems to me, and cannot be decided except from the point of view of a particular individual. For instance, a Unitarian denying the divinity of Christ—well, many of us would say that that is blasphemy. A priest preaching about transubstantiation—some strong Protestants might think his language was blasphemous. So that the whole question of these laws seems to be confused, and I do think that the time has come in the interests of freedom of speech—not of offensive speech or of obscene speech, at any rate, but in the interests of speech, in the interests of freedom of conscience—when these abuses should be swept away. I understand that you yourself, Sir, voted for Mr. Bradlaugh's Bill when he brought it in; and I gather from that that you do not need convincing by this deputation.

Mr. ASQUITH: That was in my hot youth.

Mr. SILAS K. HOCKING: Well, it was in my hot youth that he brought it in, and now that I am as old as you, Sir, or a little older, I find myself to-day in precisely the same position as then; and I feel as strongly about these laws of blasphemy now as I did then. I hold no brief for the particular individual whose imprisonment has brought this case to a head; I am not here on that ground at all. I dissociate myself from him altogether in his views and in the expression of his views. But in the interests of religious freedom I submit that it is time something should be done by the Government to remove these, as I think, objectionable laws from the Statute-book. (Hear, hear.)

Mr. S. H. SWINNY: I just want to mention two points. The first point is that we do not want to abolish prosecutions for obscenity or indecency under the ordinary law; and secondly (this was suggested to me by a remark you made), so far from these laws being a means of promoting propriety of controversy, they have the opposite effect—that they render it extremely difficult for those who are anxious that their friends should keep to the decencies of controversy, to in any way interfere with them or object to what they are doing. Where people, for pursuing a certain kind of controversy, are liable to criminal prosecution, it becomes extremely difficult for those who would have most influence over them—that is, for those persons who agree with their views and disagree with their methods—to object strongly

to the methods they pursue, for by so doing they may hold them up as proper objects for prosecution.

Sir WILLIAM BYLES: Mr. Asquith, I am sure you don't want any more. You know all about it as well as any of us. But there are quite a group of members of Parliament here, and I think it has been thought that perhaps one of us—I am the eldest—should add just one word of agreement with the speakers who have addressed you.

I myself come of ancestry on both sides of men and women who have suffered for their opinions, and that has made me an active antagonist of these restraining laws. They are medieval in character. They are utterly out of date, they are incongruous, and they are unfit for the twentieth century. They are a challenge to every new-born thought; they are an insult to every unorthodox person, and our friend Mr. Holt has introduced a Bill in the House of Commons, as I think you know—a very short Bill—and we want to get it through. You know well enough the difficulty even of getting a second reading in private members' time for a Bill of that kind. You have the power to help us to pass it if we can get a majority of members of the House of Commons. (Hear, hear.) You are very firm in your saddle, Mr. Asquith, but you have had a warning that the end might come rather quickly some day—

Mr. ASQUITH: I do not know what you mean at all.

Sir WILLIAM BYLES: You have had a warning not to defer too late to add this fresh sprig to your laurel wreath. (Laughter.) You will have many things to your credit when you go out; you will have much honour from your people; but if you were to associate yourself with this movement for the liberation of thought from all these legal restrictions, I think that all intellectual, thoughtful people would be grateful.

Mr. H. G. CHANCELLOR, M.P.: May I be allowed to say just one word? The position of Liberal members in the House is rather unpleasant, arising from the fact that, although you have nothing whatever to do with the administration of these laws (they are administered locally by local magistrates), you get all the discredit for them. And the thing that is being said now is that under a Liberal Government more prosecutions are taking place on this ground

than during the long years of the previous administrations of Conservative Governments. Those of us who are Liberals, and who believe in the right to free thought, and to whom these laws are detestable, are rather restive under the continuance of such a state of things, and we sincerely hope that you will see your way to giving the necessary facilities to enable this Bill to pass into law.

Mr. ASQUITH: Ladies and Gentlemen, I am glad to have the pleasure of seeing you here to-day, and of hearing what you have had to say upon this subject. I am glad to notice, as I should have expected, that, whatever increase there may have been of recent years in prosecutions under this head of the law, you realize it is not due to any action on the part of the Executive Government. (Hear, hear.) The matter rests entirely with the local police authorities, and I am not aware of any case in which the Metropolitan Police, which is under the control of my right honourable friend the Home Secretary, has initiated proceedings in any case of this kind.

A MEMBER OF THE DEPUTATION: There was Boulter's case—at Islington—which came before Mr. Justice Phillimore.

Mr. MCKENNA: That was before my time.

Mr. ASQUITH: That is the latest, at any rate.

Mr. MCKENNA: I have had none during my time.

Mr. CHANCELLOR: There was a case at Clapham Common since that of Boulter—in 1910.

Mr. MCKENNA: That was a breach of the peace.

Mrs. BRADLAUGH BONNER: The Highbury case—Boulter's case—was in 1908.

Mr. MCKENNA: Yes, 1908.

Mr. ASQUITH: I only wanted to make that clear—that, as a matter of fact, whatever increase there may have been in such prosecutions has been due to the zeal, well or ill directed, of the local authorities, and not to the action of the central Government.

Well, of course, there is a great deal in all this that is absolutely common ground among us. No one can defend the machinery of the existing state of the law upon this subject. It is partial, because such protection as it gives, and such offences as it creates, are mainly in defence of Christianity, according to the dictum of Lord Hale part of

the law of England, and I think in a more limited sense Christianity as established by law—that is to say, as embodied in the doctrines and discipline of the Church of England. I do not think you could at any time have undertaken a successful prosecution for blasphemy against the doctrines of the dissenting sects—certainly not of the Roman Catholic Church or of the Jewish communion ; and our fellow subjects in India, who live under a comprehensive criminal code, are, at any rate in this matter, in advance of us. For the offence there is an offence treated impartially against any form of religion, whatever that form may be. That is an obvious and unjustifiable flaw in our existing law.

As regards the statute law, I have been looking at this Bill of Mr. Holt's, and I do not imagine that there is anybody who would dissent from the statement that most of these statutes are altogether obsolete. I do not think any of the recent prosecutions have taken place under them, and I agree with you in thinking they might all be swept off the book with very great advantage, or at least with no real hurt. In fact, the real difficulty is the common law—not the statute law made by Parliament, but the common law as made by the judges. The interpretation of the common law by the judges has varied from time to time. In the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth century the publication of works like *The Age of Reason*, *Queen Mab*, *Cain*, and so forth, was held to fall within the scope of the Blasphemy Laws, and was punished accordingly. Of late years a more restricted view has been taken by the judges and applied by the courts. How it originated (it is one of the many illustrations we have of judge-made law in this country) it is difficult to say, but it amounts to this—that, according to the dictum of Lord Coleridge, which has been referred to several times, and in which he was repeating, if my memory serves me rightly, a similar decision given by his father, Mr. Justice Coleridge, many years before, so long as the decencies are observed the fundamentals of religion may be attacked—a statement which would have given great trouble and disquietude to Lord Hale, Lord Eldon, and many other of our most eminent judges in the past. That shows, of course, a tendency—I do not say it is other than a very beneficial

tendency—on the part of the judges to restrict the scope within which this doctrine can be applied. Now I understand your desire to be that we should go a step further, and that even this attenuated fragment, or relic, of the old Blasphemy Law should altogether disappear. (Hear, hear.) And I confess, speaking for myself, and only for myself, I am in sympathy with you. (Hear, hear.) I can see no good object—certainly no object which is bound up in any way with the cause of religion—in the maintenance and enforcement of these laws. (Hear, hear.) They are partial, as I have already pointed out; they are uncertain, being differently interpreted from generation to generation; and I am afraid there is a certain amount of truth in what was said by some of the speakers to-day—that they are rarely enforced except against comparatively ill-educated and humble persons, which of course adds a sense of injustice—special injustice—to a grievance which is already not inconsiderable. I do not know of any object which they serve. I think, of course, it is necessary to see that we do not lose any security or safeguard that the law at present provides against breaches of the peace—(hear, hear)—or violent or offensive language. (Hear, hear.) That is not confined, as has been pointed out, to the sphere of religion. There are many other spheres of life in which, as some of us are more or less voluntarily cognisant, offences of that kind are probably of more frequent occurrence, but in which they are rarely visited with any prosecution or penalty. I see no reason myself for making any special category of offences in regard to religious as distinguished from other forms of controversy. I think, if the law is adequately defined and maintained against the use of any form of language which is reasonably calculated to create a breach of the peace, the context in which that language is used, or the purpose for which it is used, is wholly irrelevant. Therefore, as I say, speaking for myself—and I think the right honourable gentleman the Home Secretary agrees with me, and the Attorney-General too—I think that this rather outworn and obsolete chapter in our law might very well disappear not only from the Statute-book, but from the common law of the land. And although, as I said a few moments ago, the vote which I gave in favour of Mr. Bradlaugh's Bill was given at a much earlier stage of my

political existence, I see no reason to repent it, or to doubt that if the opportunity offered I should give a similar vote again. (Hear, hear.)

I do not know what more you want.

Sir WILLIAM BYLES: Facilities for the Bill.

Mr. ASQUITH: Oh yes, I know. But there are so many changes in the law of this country which are desirable on their merits that, as my friend Sir William Byles knows very well, no Government, even with the most comprehensive programme and with the most stable majority, not liable to any of those accidents or incidents to which he rather obscurely referred—(laughter)—can possibly include all of them in its legislative projects for any given year. We have a pretty heavy cargo to carry at present.

Sir WILLIAM BYLES: This is a very little thing.

Mr. ASQUITH: It is a little thing; but every little counts, and I am not at all sure that there is any room in the hold of our ship for an additional legislative parcel, large or small. Therefore I cannot honestly promise you anything in the nature of Government time—which is what you mean by this; that is what you really mean, you know—which must be subtracted from other legislative purposes. But sympathy and goodwill I do give you in full measure, as far as I, at any rate, personally am concerned; and if you can manage, in the many opportunities—the many opportunities—which are still open to private members to prosecute legislation which is beneficent in itself, and which is generally desired—if you can manage to find a nook or a cranny for this little Bill of yours, we shall be very happy to support you to the utmost of our power. I cannot say more than that.

Mr. R. D. HOLT: It only remains for the deputation to thank you most heartily for the way in which you have received us, and for the speech which you have made to us. I must say I quite appreciate your unwillingness to provide Government time for the Bill, although it is quite obvious—there is no use in concealing the fact—that we have no more chance of passing that Bill unopposed after eleven at night than we have of going off in an aeroplane; indeed, rather the less chance of the two. Nevertheless, I should like—and I am sure I speak on behalf of the whole deputation—to thank you most warmly for your sympathy and

for your promise, and we shall live in hopes that circumstances may enable you later on to go rather better even than your promise.

The deputation then withdrew.

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