

HOUSE OF COMMONS, MAY 1.

MR. CANNING'S SPEECH.

Mr. CANNING rose, and spoke nearly as follows:—Sir, it would be uncourteous to the House, and to my Right Honourable Friend, were I to allow this opportunity to pass without expressing, in as few words as possible, the sentiments which his speech has excited, or rather confirmed, in my mind; and although, perhaps, I might not have risen for the express purpose of doing so, yet, as there have been calls on me to answer questions on different subjects, and as I am prepared, in the discharge of my duty, to answer those questions, I hope satisfactorily, I certainly shall not fail to express the pleasure I have received from hearing him. To begin with the more agreeable part of my task, the speech of my Right Hon. Friend, I shall confirm the greater part of that speech. I can bear testimony that throughout the whole of the discussions that have taken place since Parliament adjourned, I have kept up with my Right Honourable Friend the most constant intercourse; and throughout have I found in him the same candour and sincerity, and the expression of the same just feelings, and a uniform exhibition of the same high principle, to which he has laid claim in the discourse which he has this night delivered. I assure the house that they much mistake the position in which I have the honour to stand, who believe that position one of gratified ambition, or as conveying the feeling of unalloyed satisfaction.—(Hear, hear.) From the beginning of these discussions, I foresaw—both of us foresaw—that they must terminate in our mutual separation, which I hope to God may be only for a time. Had the question been merely between my right Honourable Friend and myself, and had it been to be decided by his retirement or by mine, I do most solemnly declare it should have been decided by the latter. (Hear, hear.) Sir, my Right Honourable Friend had the courtesy to state to me yesterday, his intention of making some observations to the House on the present occasion. I had, therefore, the opportunity of doing that without which I should never have been able to address the House with satisfaction to myself—of asking His Majesty's gracious permission to state such passages concerning him in the late discussions, as may be necessary to explain my conduct. I know not whether the House will be surprised to hear—my Right Honourable Friend will not, for I have already stated it to him—that when I was first called upon by His Majesty for advice, in the critical situation in which the Government was placed, aware—for why should I disguise the fact?—of His Majesty's individual opinions, I counselled him to make the Government conformable to those opinions. That counsel necessarily involved my own retirement, and that retirement would have been made with a much more cheerful heart, and a more confident assurance, from the position in which it placed me, that I had at any subsequent stage of these transactions. Sir, in offering my advice to His Majesty to constitute a Government opposed to my opinions, I begged leave to withdraw myself, as I could not form a part of such Government. Now, Sir, why did I do this? I, as the House may do me the honour to remember, have always defended, and as I still do defend, the existence of an Administration divided in opinion upon the Catholic question, I will tell the House my reason for so doing. Not many months ago, from quarters which I will not name, strenuous advice was addressed to His Majesty to place his Government on a footing of unanimity with respect to the Catholic question, and that unanimity to be one of uniform opposition to that question. Lord

Liverpool, to whom this advice was communicated, at the same time that it was addressed to His Majesty, in a letter to His Majesty, stated first that having been one of the original authors of a Government divided in opinion on that question, he, for one, never could concur in Administration excluding one party. Lord Liverpool added also his advice, or rather his opinion, of the great difficulty that would attend the forming such a Government. Such was Lord Liverpool's opinion, and when I advised His Majesty to form such a divided Government, it was not for me to estimate the difficulties which would impede it. It was, had His Majesty thought fit to adopt the advice, for those of his Councillors, who were to form part of an Administration so constituted, to counsel such a course as they might have thought would attain their end. I did not disguise either from my Sovereign or myself, that it would be a work of difficulty, but I was far from thinking it a work of impracticability. What became of that advice is manifest by the result. It was not acted upon; but for what reason it was not acted upon, I am not aware; and more than I know, I will not state. This I can say, that from the time I first saw His Majesty, down to the period at which he came to town, so far from seeking to obtain the situation in which I now stand, my first act was to advise that the experiment so loudly called for in debate in this House, and which I understood was intended to be brought forward in the abortive motion of the Honourable Member for Somersetshire, (a laugh,) should be tried. I earnestly desire that it might have met with a fair trial; and I declare to God, that there was nothing I more wished, or was nearer to my heart, than to step out of the way, in order that the experiment might be made. But when I was told that such a Government could not be formed, and when I said I could not be a Member of an exclusive Administration, or, indeed, of any which was not constituted upon the same principle as that of Lord Liverpool, with respect to the Catholic Question, viz. a division of opinion on that question, and as a necessary consequence, us not being made a Cabinet measure, a totally new question then arose. It was not whether I should or should not remain in the Government to be formed, but whether I should remain in a Government discredited in my own and the country's opinion. God knows whether I cast myself in the way of the embarrassing situation in which I afterwards found myself. It was proposed to me, that an Administration should be reconstructed upon the same principle as that of Lord Liverpool's, placing at the head of it, in the same situation as was held by that Noble Lord, some Peer holding his Anti-Catholic opinions. What principle was I then, in my own person, desired to sanction?—I was desired to give my assent to this principle:—that holding the opinions I do hold upon the Catholic Question, was a disqualification for holding the highest office the King had to bestow. (Hear.) I care not for office; I will quit any office; I will go to the extremity of the earth, rather than submit to a condition that I should not hold office on account of holding those opinions. That principle of exclusion would be next in degree only to the exclusion of the Catholics themselves. Now, Sir, that was a condition to which I would not, and never will, submit. I would have quitted office a thousand times, and have consented to be prescribed from it for ever, rather than that any future statesmen should have had to exonerate my memory for having affixed such a blot upon the character of a question, my strenuous support of which I had ever, up to this time, thought myself free to proclaim. (Cheers.) I hope, Sir, I have now vindicated

myself, to the satisfaction of the House from the charge of overweening ambition. (Cheers.) My first object was to quit office altogether. I was willing to retire from office with the other members of the former Government; but I was willing to remain in with them, had I not held the opinions that I did hold on the Catholic Question. I have only to repeat, Sir, here, in reply to another charge which some have preferred against me, (although in coarser language, and in a manner, I confess, much less interesting to my feelings)—“that the new Government which has been formed, consists chiefly of Catholics,” (that is, of members friendly to the question of emancipation)—a charge that has been made, and not unintentionally, I think, in a speech which has been delivered this evening—as if there had been a breach of faith on my part, in dealing with the late Cabinet, for not having proposed to my Sovereign a plan of a new Cabinet, that should have embraced an equal portion of the supporters of both sides of that question—I have to make only this reply. The Honourable Secretary who makes the charge, is himself well informed, that I did suggest, and did endeavour and intend to execute, such a plan of a new Administration. (Hear, hear.) But, Sir, that Honourable Secretary is equally well informed, moreover, that when upon the 12th of April last, I went to the chamber of my Sovereign, intending to propose a plan and arrangement which should comprise all the Members of Lord Liverpool's Government, and embrace, therefore, an equality of Protestant and Catholic votes, or rather, I should say, a preponderancy of Protestant voices—he is well informed, that a circumstance occurred which prevented that intention from taking effect. And was it my fault, Sir, that, by any sort of concert I certainly will not venture to say, but by a singular coincidence, undoubtedly,—at that very time, on that very day, and in that very chamber, six Protestant resignations (I call them Protestant only in the parlance of this House) were put into my hands? (Hear, hear.) Observe, Sir, the charge against me is that I have organised a Government all Catholic, as to its views upon that question, having promised to form one that should be half and half; and my Honourable accuser sinks the indisputable fact, that the Protestant half of the Administration contemplated, had withdrawn themselves. (Cheers.) I think that it is rather too hard to charge that resignation upon their parts, as a breach of faith upon mine.

I beg pardon Sir; I have unwillingly included in the number of these resignations my Lord Melville, and am well reminded that we have been told, on the present occasion, that his resignation, also, was upon the ground of the Catholic question, of which he has always been a supporter. (Hear, hear.) Lord Melville's resignation I did not mean to include in this enumeration; so that, instead of six, I should have said five, Protestant resignations. However, five Protestant resignations, at all events, came into the King's hands, within twenty-four hours; and thus, five of the members on whom I had reckoned for the new Cabinet, were at once withdrawn: and, upon this statement, I do again ask, whether it is fair to impute to me a wilful non execution of the orders of my Sovereign, in the formation of that Cabinet? (Hear, hear.) But did the matter rest here, Sir? I received these resignations about the middle of Thursday, and within some two hours of the meeting of this House. I had already given directions for the moving of the new writ—(i. e. for the borough of Newport we presume)—when I received these resignations. Upon receiving them, I said to my Sovereign, “Here, Sir, is that which disables me from executing the orders I have received from you,

respecting the formation of a new Administration. It is now open to your Majesty to adopt a new course, for no step has yet been taken in the execution of those orders that is irrecoverable; but I must fairly state to your Majesty, that if I am to go on in the position where you have been pleased to place me, my writ must be moved for to day, for if we wait until the holidays, without adopting any definitive steps, I see that it is quite hopeless for me to attempt to persevere in the objects I have undertaken.” I need not repeat to the house, the words in which my Sovereign graciously replied to this representation, but I may state that he gave me his hand to kiss, and confirmed me in the office to which I had been named. (Loud and repeated cheers.) These, then, Sir, are the steps which I really have taken; these are the means by which I have been placed in the station I at present fill. I have meddled not with the conduct or the opinions of any other man, I have already expressed my unequivocal, unqualified, approbation of the course pursued by my Right Honourable Friend (Mr. Peel,) and of the candour with which he has declared himself on that point. What have been the principles of conduct of others among my late colleagues, for the best of reasons and the wisest, I do not pretend to say; for really I do not know them. (Hear.) That conduct I can only view by its results; results which have been assuredly most painful; and I may truly say, to me, as painful as, in almost every instance—(every instance I do not say, for I sedulously except my Right Honourable Friend)—they were unexpected. Sir, I really knew not in what way I had sinned in the eyes of my colleagues—those other of my colleagues, I should rather say—that they should decline acting with me. I had never offended them intentionally, nor did I know that I had ever excited among them unwittingly any feeling so hostile or personal to me, as to be at all likely to lead to this result. (Hear, hear.) Between my Right Honourable Friend and myself, it is almost unnecessary for me to observe, that upon every subject, in every discussion I can call to mind, upon all great questions of foreign or domestic policy and legislation—this one unhappy question of Catholic Emancipation excepted—there has been that sort of general agreement, that I do not believe there exists the individual with whom my opinions are in a more complete accordance.—(Loud cheers)—and I do not think any greater calamity could have befallen the country than my Right Hon. Friend's secession from office, not only as respects his Administration of the Home Department, but as regards the important share which he has so long taken in the great councils of the country, and the share that is still open, and still, I trust to be filled by him, in the general discussion of this House. (Cheers.) But as to others of my late colleagues, I am not prepared to express an opinion on the proceeding that they have adopted, because of its motives I am not aware. So far, indeed as I had reason to know any thing of their dispositions in relation to myself—I speak now more particularly in reference to the line of foreign policy I have pursued, as being that department of the Government with which I was more immediately connected. I understood that my official conduct had received their approbation. Both in the Cabinet, and in the two Houses of Parliament, they expressed such favourable opinions; nor can I charge myself with having, by any measures of my own, produced intentionally any such change in those opinions as should have led to this unwillingness or their parts to continue to act with me. I am determined, however, to say nothing of the conduct of any body, with the motives of whom I am unacquainted, and to abstain from animadver-