

THE DISFRANCHISING BILL.

The War-time Election Bill is a party measure. The attack on the political rights of a large group of foreign-born Canadians is tempered by their exemption from combatant service, but the principle of the Bill is wrong. It is inconsistent with national honor and British traditions. When men of alien birth were given their naturalization papers they were also given the full privileges of Canadian citizenship. It was a contract to which the good faith of the country was pledged. The Bill will cancel the chief article of the contract, the franchise, without proof that the voter has forfeited it by conduct unbecoming a patriotic Canadian. The presumption of innocence until guilt be proved, which underlies the common law, is reversed. It is true that the disability applies only to men who have been naturalized within the past fifteen years, but the country offered them the franchise three years after their arrival, in order to hasten the process of Canadianizing them. It is now proposed to deprive them of the badge of citizenship.

The Bill is aimed at the large element in the West of German and Austrian birth. These men came to Canada to escape the conditions of life in their native lands, and they came upon the invitation of the Canadian people, whose agents scoured Europe for immigrants to till the empty prairies. They have added immeasurably to the wealth of the country. During the war they have given no trouble as a class; one hears no echo among them of the seditious propaganda of Teutons across the line. Many are Ukrainians—the Galician branch of the family—whose sympathies, formerly with Austria, though never troublesomely so, have turned to Russia since the Revolution, which has given a new hope and vision to their race in Europe. Disfranchisement will be only for the period of the war, but the memory of it will survive for a generation, and will tend to undo the great work of assimilation carried on by the schools, the churches, and, not least, by the ballot, the pledge of their civil and political equality. The Bill is therefore not good national policy. It is more German than Canadian or British in its character.

The refusal of the vote to all the women of Canada, in view of the fact that the majority of them enjoy the Provincial franchise, and have exercised it in the West, is another blemish on the Bill. The Solicitor-General promises them the ballot after the war. Surely the women of Canada have earned it by their magnificently patriotic spirit and their war work. British women have been given it by a grateful nation. Why are their Canadian sisters slighted? The exception in favor of the women relatives of the soldiers will be welcomed, but there should be no restrictions upon one sex that do not apply to the other. It is to be hoped that the Government will be persuaded to widen the Bill in this respect.