MR BRADLAUGH AND MRS BESANT IN BRISTOL

Under the auspices of the Malthusian League a meeting was held last evening at the Hall of Freedom, Newfoundland Road, to hear addresses from Mr. Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant on the population question. There was a large attendance of persons of both sexes, the meeting being presided over by Mr. Voysey, who, after commenting upon the refusal of the Colston Hall Company to grant the use of either the large or lesser hall for the meeting, said the object of the gathering was to form if possible a branch of the Malthusian League, the object of which was to promote discussion among the people with reference to the increase of the population over and above the means of supplying them with the necessaries of existence. Mr. Cawsey moved , “That the discussion of the population question is of vital importance, and that the attempt to suppress it by prosecution ought to be resisted.” The resolution having been briefly seconded, it was supported in a lengthy speech by Mrs. Besant. In the course of her remarks she said they could not put down discussion by prosecution; they simply embittered it, inflamed it, and made it more passionate, more hasty, and one-sided. Over and over again persecution had been tried against a new truth, and the only effect had been that that truth had grown firmer, for it became the more deeply rooted the more the wind blew against it. The population question was of vital importance to the working classes, because it was on them that poverty pressed more heavily and more drearily than on those who were higher in the social scale; but they could not divide one class from another in a State, and that which pressed on the working classes touched really the foundation of society, and a question of importance to one class was question of importance to every other class as well. In the late trial, the Lord Chief Justice said it was an unanswerable truth that population had a tendency to increase faster than the means of subsistence; and, this being the case, it became a question what was to be done in a matter of such importance. Having dwelt at some length on the general question, she said it was for no light cause that they had taken up this question. They could have gained notoriety much easier, without running the risk of a prison, and in what they did they were moved by no desire except a desire to do good to the generation in which they lived. They did not shrink from the prison; they looked through beyond it to that landscape which the prison made possible to those who would come after them; they saw instead of the stones of the prison walls, the faces of women that they had made happier, and the smiles of little children whose paths in life would be made smoother by this work. They had no thought of flinching, no thought of surrendering. What she said in the beginning that she would carry this question through, she said again, now when the threat of the penalty was hanging over her. In no boast did she say these words at the beginning, and with no possibility of boast did she repeat them now, because the only way to close the prison gates was by upsetting the sentence that was passed upon them. Not one word of surrender did they mean to speak; not one syllable of withdrawal did they mean to utter; not one plead of mercy would ever pass their lips – (cheers) – and the only thing their friends must not do; the only thing they would not accept at their hands, was that they should make no sort of petition which would take them out of prison except by right of coming out, having won the victory. They would never finish the fight until they had won it, and never acknowledge that the battle was over until the discussion on the population question was as free as the discussion on political subjects was at the present time. (Cheers.) Mr. Bradlaugh also supported the resolution. He maintained that the conviction obtained against them carried no taint of shame, and Mrs. Besant and himself intended to fight the question to the House of Lords (Cheers.) If people wanted to refute error, the only way to do so was by argument, and not by prosecution. As Mrs. Besant had said, they intended to resist this matter to the end. They might fail on the writ of error, and they ought go to Holloway Gaol; but if they did, when the sentence was over they would be released from their pledge, and they would continue to sell the book –(cheer) – though he did not mean to say he should afford the authorities the same opportunity of prosecuting as he did last time. (Laughter.) If he went to goal he would sell from outside the gaol, and he would leave the authorities to find out how he did it, if they cared. The sentence was a severe one; but the prison should not stop him, persecution should not hinder him, he would try, as those who went before him, to win respect for his opinions even from those who hated him. (Cheers.) The question was asked whether any one wished to propose an amendment, and there being no reply, the resolution was put by Mr. Bradlaugh, and declared carried, with one dissentient. Afterwards some disturbance took place, a Mr. Erasmus Jones stating that he had an amendment to propose. Mr. Bradlaugh said it was now too late, the resolution having been carried, but eventually Mr. Jones was invited to the platform. He spoke at some length on the question, and during his speech, which was frequently interrupted, several of the audience left the room. The amendment he proposed was to the effect that the resolution was unnecessary, as the population question could now be freely discussed. At length Mr. Bradlaugh put it to the meeting whether they desired to hear Mr. Jones any further, and the almost unanimous answer being “No,” Mr. Bradlaugh declared the meeting closed. One or two other persons attempted to speak, but they could not obtain an audience, as most of the people had by this time left the hall, and the others were in the act of clearing out as speedily as possible.