MR. BRADLAUGH AND MRS. BESANT AT THE HALL OF FREEDOM

Last night a meeting convened by the Malthusian League was held at the Hall of Freedom, Newfoundland-road, to hear addresses by Mr. C. Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant on the population question. There was a large attendance. Mr. Voysey presided, and in opening the proceedings stated that it was intended to hold the meeting in the Colston-hall, but the directors of the building had refused to let it for the purpose. They had met to discuss the population question, and were assembled with a view to form a branch of the Malthusian League, whose sole object was to promote the 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. The interest of the people was the sole aim the League had at heart. Mr. Cawsey proposed ---- “That the discussion of the population question is of vital importance, and that the attempt to suppress it by prosecution ought to be resisted.” Mr. Bartholomew seconded the resolution, which was supported by Mrs. Besant. The lady, who was received with cheers, defended the right to fair and open discussion of any question, and said that they could never put down discussion by prosecution ---- they simply embittered it, they simply inflamed it: they made it more passionate, more hasty, more one-sided. Over and over again prosecution had been tried against a new truth, and the natural effect was that the truth grew the firmer, for it became the deeper rooted the more the winds blew upon it. She took it that the population question was of vital importance, and she might add of vital importance more especially to the working classes. For it was on them that poverty pressed more heavily and more really than on those who were higher in the social scale. But that which pressed on the working classes touched really the foundation of society, and a question of importance to one class in England was a question of importance to every class, as well. What was, then, this population question? Stated first clearly by Mr. Malthus, it was that population had a tendency to increase faster than the means of subsistence. In the late trail the Lord Chief Justice stated that that law was unanswerable truth. She argued that it would tend to the happiness of the people that the growth of the population should be restricted, and remarked that they would never destroy the vice of great cities until they made early marriage possible for young men and young women. What had she and Mr. Bradlaugh to gain by taking up this question? Not notoriety or fame, but they wished to do good to the generation in which they had been born. They did not see the prison; they saw right through beyond it to that landscape that the prison made possible for those who might come after them. They had no idea of flinching ---- no thought of surrendering. What she had said in the beginning when taking up this question she meant to carry out, and so she said again when threat of the penalty had fallen upon her. The only way to close the prison gates was by upsetting the sentence that was passed upon them. There was no other way for them, but no word of surrender did they mean to speak, not one syllable of withdrawal did they mean to utter, not one word of plea for mercy should ever pass their lips (cheers). But there was one thing their friends must not do, there was only one thing that they would not take at their hands, and that was no sort of asking, no sort of petition, that would take them out of prison, except by right of coming out, having won the victory that they might go there to win. She and Mr. Bradlaugh were striving to do their duty, and her hearers must do theirs by trying to form a mighty public opinion on this question. They would never finish the battle until they had won it, and they would acknowledge the battle was over until discussion on the population question was as free as discussion on any political question was now. Mr. C. Bradlaugh also supported the resolution and said it was not intended to defend a particular pamphlet, but it advocated the liberty of discussion on social questions. They said no expression of opinion on politics, theology, or social questions ought to be made the subject of legal penalties unless it involved personal libels against an individual or incitement to personal violence against individual. He considered that it was a narrow refusal on the part of the directors of the Colston-hall not to allow the meeting to be held in their building. The effect of the recent ill-advised prosecution was that the circulation of the particular pamphlet for which he and Mrs. Besant had been convicted had been greatly increased, and up to the day of the sentence something like 133,000 copies had been sold by himself. The prosecution had not stopped discussion, but had made it possible right through the country. A conviction had been obtained against them, but it was a conviction which he maintained carried no taint of shame with it. He made no complaint of the trail, which he thought was a thoroughly fair one, but he meant to appeal against the ruling of the Lord Chief Justice, even if he had to carry the case to the House of Lords. They had not been convicted of publishing an obscene book, but for advocating checks for the surplus population. That was a new offence. The conviction put a greater barrier in the way of his political career than ever existed before. They intended to resist the conviction. They might be beaten; they might go to Holloway prison, but if they did they should continue to sell the book (loud cheers). He did not mean to afford the authorities the same opportunity of convicting him he did on the last occasion, but he would sell from inside the gaol, and he would leave the authorities to find out how he did it if they could (applause). The resolution was then put to the meeting and carried, only one hand being held up against it. A vote of thanks to the chairman was then proposed by Mr. Bradlaugh, but a scene of some confusion ensued. Mr. E. Jones wished to address the meeting in reply to the arguments of Mr. Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant, but Mr. Bradlaugh urged that he ought to have spoken before the resolution was put. Mr. J.F. Collins argued that discussion should be permitted, and eventually Mr. Jones was allowed to speak. Amidst frequent interruptions, he declared that Mr. Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant had been convicted not of discussing population question, but of publishing a book which the jury declared to be of immoral tendency and degrading to the morality of the people. The discussion of the population question was as free to-day as it was in the time of Malthus, and, therefore, there was no need of such resolution as had been passed. He moved an amendment to this effect, and was proceeding to enter into some of the subjects discussed in the pamphlet, when Mr. Bradlaugh put it to the meeting whether the speaker should be allowed to continue. There was a loud shout of “No,” and Mr. Jones having sat down, the proceedings, which towards the close were of noisy character, terminated.