Rudyard Kipling's Uncollected Speeches

Rudyard Kipling

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To the Electors of Rondebosch

3 February 1904

The general election in the Cape Colony, February 1904, was won by the Progressives, the party of Rhodes and Jameson. Sir Lewis Michell (1842–1928), a Cape Town banker, was the friend, confidential agent and biographer of Cecil Rhodes; he succeeded to Rhodes's positions as Chairman of De Beers Consolidated Mines and Director of the British South Africa Company. The Cape Town suburb of Rondebosch, where the meeting was held, is next to Rosebank, where Kipling's house, The Woolsack, stands.

MR. RUDYARD KIPLING, who rose after being loudly called upon for a speech, said that his position was like some of the political situations which had arisen in the course of the last four or five years—a somewhat sudden and unexpected attack, and they could not very greatly blame him if he did not feel quite equal to responding to it, because he had not that versatility which one noticed in so many South African politicians, and he could not swing quite as quickly as the situation demanded. (Laughter.) Now, there was a great deal that might be said about the situation that concerned them in the immediate present, but he did not see yet what they had done to deserve that he should trouble them with his views on the subject. (Laughter.) They had heard the pros and cons of the case put forward day after day by Sir Lewis Michell and Mr. Cloete. They had heard questions dealing with every possible phase of every possible question that might arise, but he thought that at the back of their heads there lay the same knowledge as lay at the back of his own. The bulk of them had some remembrance of the past five years. (Hear, hear.) They knew what the issue was; there was no need to develop it unnecessarily. They all knew what the issue really was—the development of a country which had been almost wrecked and ruined—(hear, hear)—and to that every one of them who was worth the bread that he ate under these skies was pledged. Mr. Brydone had given them the most practical advice on the subject, and that was the most serious thing that they had to consider at present. The issue terminated next Wednesday. Mr. Brydone suggested that every man in possession of a vote should get up on his hind legs and record that vote. (Cheers.) It meant a tax on their time of five minutes, but on their vote depended the future of this land for the next five
years. (Hear, hear.) Could they ask what that would be? Within five minutes after the returns were in for the whole of Cape Colony, and if the party of many aliases, but one end, was in power, they would know what the end was. They would feel it in the air as they had felt a good many years ago.

You will find, concluded Mr. Kipling, it is the beginning of a new era of discontent, weariness, and despair. You will find, quietly and insensibly, the map of South Africa shifted, end for end, and in Cape Town there will begin, under many disguises and aliases, with any number of explanations, and a most profligate display of intellect, the old, old bitter work that began and ended at Pretoria. (Loud cheers.)