


LORD CHESTERFIELD

HILIP DORMER STANHOPE (fourth Earl of Chesterfield), noted in his day as a man of fashion, an accomplished courtier, diplomatist, and scholar, was born in London, Sept. 22, 1694, and died there, March 24, 1773. After studying at Trinity Hall, Cambridge University, he made a tour of the Continent in 1714, and, having the ambition to become an orator, entered Parliament the next year as member for Saint Germain, Cornwall. He succeeded to the earldom in 1726, and thenceforward sat in the House of Lords, where he soon became known as an able and eloquent debater. Between 1734 and 1741 he actively opposed the public measures of Sir Robert Walpole's administration, and some of his speeches during this period won the hearty admiration of even his opponents. He was given the post of lord-lieutenant of Ireland in 1745, and of secretary of state in 1746; but in 1748, owing to increasing deafness and ill-health, he resigned his secretaryship, and for the remainder of his life manifested little interest in political affairs. Henceforward he devoted himself to pleasure, the patronage of literature, and the training of his son Philip, with whom he began his famous correspondence in 1737, when the boy was but five years old, which continued until the son's death in 1760. These "Letters written by the Earl of Chesterfield to His Son," which were published in 1774 by his son's widow, have been greatly admired for their literary style, but they have been criticised for their immorality, and the so-called ethics of fashionable life. After his son's death, Chesterfield adopted a distant cousin as his grandson and heir, and for a period of ten years addressed to him a series of letters similar in character to the earlier correspondence. These were printed entire in 1890 as "Chesterfield's Letters to His Godson." His letters have always been widely read, and upon them rests his literary reputation. Chesterfield was intimate with Bolingbroke, Swift, Pope, and most of the English literary men of his age.

ON LICENSING GIN-SHOPS

[This speech, which was delivered in the House of Lords, Feb. 21, 1743, relates to a bill for granting licenses to gin-shops, by which the ministry hoped to realize a very large annual income.]

THE bill now under our consideration appears to me to deserve a much closer regard than seems to have been paid to it in the other House, through which it was hurried with the utmost precipitation, and where it passed almost without the formality of a debate. Nor can I think

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that earnestness with which some lords seem inclined to press it forward here consistent with the importance of the consequences which may with great reason be expected from it.

To desire, my lords, that this bill may be considered in a committee, is only to desire that it may gain one step without opposition; that it may proceed through the forms of the House by stealth; and that the consideration of it may be delayed till the exigencies of the government shall be so great as not to allow time for raising the supplies by any other method.

By this artifice, gross as it is, the patrons of this wonderful bill hope to obstruct a plain and open detection of its tendency. They hope, my lords, that the bill shall operate in the same manner with the liquor which it is intended to bring into more general use; and that, as those who drink spirits are drunk before they are well aware that they are drinking, the effects of this law shall be perceived before we know that we have made it. Their intent is, to give us a dram of policy which is to be swallowed before it is tasted, and which, when once it is swallowed, will turn our heads.

But, my lords, I hope we shall be so cautious as to examine the draught which these state empirics have thought proper to offer us; and I am confident that a very little examination will convince us of the pernicious qualities of their new preparation, and show that it can have no other effect than that of poisoning the public.

The law before us, my lords, seems to be the effect of that practice of which it is intended likewise to be the cause, and to be dictated by the liquor of which it so effectually promotes the use; for surely it never before was conceived, by any man entrusted with the administration of public affairs, to raise taxes by the destruction of the people.

Nothing, my lords, but the destruction of all the most laborious and useful part of the nation can be expected from the license which is now proposed to be given, not only to drunkenness, but to drunkenness of the most detestable and dangerous kind; to the abuse not only of intoxicating, but of poisonous liquors.

Nothing, my lords, is more absurd than to assert that the use of spirits will be hindered by the bill now before us, or indeed that it will not be in a very great degree promoted by it. For what produces all kind of wickedness but the prospect of impunity on one part, or the solicitation of opportunity on the other? Either of these have too frequently been sufficient to overpower the sense of morality, and even of religion; and what is not to be feared from them when they shall unite their force and operate together, when temptations shall be increased and terror taken away?

It is allowed by those who have hitherto disputed on either side of this question that the people appear obstinately enamored of this new liquor. It is allowed on both parts that this liquor corrupts the mind and enervates the body, and destroys vigor and virtue, at the same time that it makes those who drink it too idle and feeble for work; and, while it impoverishes them by the present expense, disables them from retrieving its ill consequences by subsequent industry.

It might be imagined, my lords, that those who had thus far agreed would not easily find any occasions of dispute. Nor would any man, unacquainted with the motives by which parliamentary debates are too often influenced, suspect that after the pernicious qualities of this liquor, and the general inclination among the people to the immoderate use of it, had been thus fully admitted, it could be afterward inquired whether it ought to be made more common; whether this

universal thirst for poison ought to be encouraged by the legislature, and whether a new statute ought to be made, to secure drunkards in the gratification of their appetites.

To pretend, my lords, that the design of this bill is to prevent or diminish the use of spirits is to trample upon common sense and to violate the rules of decency as well as of reason. For when did any man hear that a commodity was prohibited by licensing its sale, or that to offer and refuse is the same action?

It is indeed pleaded that it will be made dearer by the tax which is proposed, and that the increase of the price will diminish the number of the purchasers; but it is at the same time expected that this tax shall supply the expense of a war on the Continent. It is asserted, therefore, that the consumption of spirits will be hindered; and yet that it will be such as may be expected to furnish, from a very small tax, a revenue sufficient for the support of armies, for the re-establishment of the Austrian family, and the repressing of the attempts of France.

Surely, my lords, these expectations are not very consistent; nor can it be imagined that they are both formed in the same head, though they may be expressed by the same mouth. It is, however, some recommendation of a statesman, when, of his assertions, one can be found reasonable or true; and in this, praise cannot be denied to our present ministers. For though it is undoubtedly false that this tax will lessen the consumption of spirits, it is certainly true that it will produce a very large revenue — a revenue that will not fail but with the people from whose debaucheries it arises.

Our ministers will therefore have the same honor with their predecessors, of having given rise to a new fund; not indeed for the payment of our debts, but for much more valuable

purposes; for the cheering of our hearts under oppression, and for the ready support of those debts which we have lost all hopes of paying. They are resolved, my lords, that the nation which no endeavors can make wise shall, while they are at its head, at least be very merry; and, since public happiness is the end of government, they seem to imagine that they shall deserve applause by an expedient which will enable every man to lay his cares asleep, to drown sorrow, and lose in the delights of drunkenness both the public miseries and his own.

Luxury, my lords, is to be taxed, but vice prohibited, let the difficulties in executing the law be what they will. Would you lay a tax on the breach of the ten commandments? Would not such a tax be wicked and scandalous; because it would imply an indulgence to all those who could pay the tax? Is not this a reproach most justly thrown by Protestants upon the Church of Rome? Was it not the chief cause of the Reformation? And will you follow a precedent which brought reproach and ruin upon those that introduced it? This is the very case now before us. You are going to lay a tax, and consequently to indulge a sort of drunkenness, which almost necessarily produces a breach of every one of the ten commandments? Can you expect the reverend bench will approve of this? I am convinced they will not; and therefore I wish I had seen it full upon this occasion. I am sure I have seen it much fuller upon other occasions in which religion had no such deep concern.

We have already, my lords, several sorts of funds in this nation, so many that a man must have a good deal of learning to be master of them. Thanks to his Majesty, we have now among us the most learned man of the nation in this way. I wish he would rise up and tell us what name we are to

give this new fund. We have already the Civil List Fund, the Sinking Fund, the Aggregate Fund, the South Sea Fund, and God knows how many others. What name are we to give this new fund I know not, unless we are to call it the Drinking Fund. It may perhaps enable the people of a certain foreign territory [Hanover] to drink claret, but it will disable the people of this kingdom from drinking anything else but gin; for when a man has, by gin-drinking, rendered himself unfit for labor or business, he can purchase nothing else; and then the best thing he can do is to drink on till he dies.

Surely, my lords, men of such unbounded benevolence as our present ministers deserve such honors as were never paid before: they deserve to bestride a butt upon every sign-post in the city, or to have their figures exhibited as tokens where this liquor is to be sold by the license which they have procured. They must be at least remembered to future ages as the "happy politicians" who, after all expedients for raising taxes had been employed, discovered a new method of draining the last relics of the public wealth and added a new revenue to the government. Nor will those who shall hereafter enumerate the several funds now established among us forget, among the benefactors to their country, the illustrious authors of the Drinking Fund.

May I be allowed, my lords, to congratulate my countrymen and fellow subjects upon the happy times which are now approaching, in which no man will be disqualified from the privilege of being drunk; when all discontent and disloyalty shall be forgotten, and the people, though now considered by the ministry as enemies, shall acknowledge the leniency of that government under which all restraints are taken away?

But, to a bill for such desirable purposes, it would be

proper, my lords, to prefix a preamble, in which the kindness of our intentions should be more fully explained, that the nation may not mistake our indulgence for cruelty nor consider their benefactors as their persecutors. If, therefore, this bill be considered and amended (for why else should it be considered?) in a committee, I shall humbly propose that it shall be introduced in this manner: "Whereas, the designs of the present ministry, whatever they are, cannot be executed without a great number of mercenaries, which mercenaries cannot be hired without money; and whereas the present disposition of this nation to drunkenness inclines us to believe that they will pay more cheerfully for the undisturbed enjoyment of distilled liquors than for any other concession that can be made by the government; be it enacted, by the King's most excellent Majesty, that no man shall hereafter be denied the right of being drunk, on the following conditions."

This, my lords, to trifle no longer, is the proper preamble to this bill, which contains only the conditions on which the people of this kingdom are to be allowed henceforward to riot in debauchery, in debauchery licensed by law and countenanced by the magistrates. For there is no doubt but those on whom the inventors of this tax shall confer authority will be directed to assist their masters in their design to encourage the consumption of that liquor from which such large revenues are expected, and to multiply without end those licenses which are to pay a yearly tribute to the Crown.

By this unbounded license, my lords, that price will be lessened from the increase of which the expectations of the efficacy of this law are pretended; for the number of retailers will lessen the value, as in all other cases, and lessen it more than this tax will increase it. Besides, it is to be considered that at present the retailer expects to be paid for the danger

which he incurs by an unlawful trade, and will not trust his reputation or his purse to the mercy of his customer without a profit proportioned to the hazard; but, when once the restraint shall be taken away, he will sell for common gain, and it can hardly be imagined that, at present, he subjects himself to informations and penalties for less than sixpence a gallon.

The specious pretence on which this bill is founded, and, indeed, the only pretence that deserves to be termed specious, is the propriety of taxing vice; but this maxim of government has, on this occasion, been either mistaken or perverted. Vice, my lords, is not properly to be taxed, but suppressed; and heavy taxes are sometimes the only means by which that suppression can be attained. Luxury, my lords, or the excess of that which is pernicious only by its excess, may very properly be taxed, that such excess, though not strictly unlawful, may be made more difficult. . . .

I cannot, my lords, yet discover why a reprieve is desired for this manufacture — why the present year is not equally propitious to the reformation of mankind as any will be that may succeed it. It is true we are at war with two nations, and perhaps with more; but war may be better prosecuted without money than without men. And we but little consult the military glory of our country if we raise supplies for paying our armies by the destruction of those armies that we are contriving to pay.

We have heard the necessity of reforming the nation by degrees urged as an argument for imposing first a lighter duty, and afterward a heavier. This complaisance for wickedness, my lords, is not so defensible as that it should be battered by arguments in form, and therefore I shall only relate a reply made by Webb, the noted walker, upon a parallel occasion.

This man, who must be remembered by many of your lordships, was remarkable for vigor, both of mind and body, and lived wholly upon water for his drink, and chiefly upon vegetables for his other sustenance. He was one day recommending his regimen to one of his friends who loved wine, and who perhaps might somewhat contribute to the prosperity of this spirituous manufacture, and urged him, with great earnestness, to quit a course of luxury by which his health and his intellect would equally be destroyed. The gentleman appeared convinced, and told him "that he would conform to his counsel, and thought he could not change his course of life at once, but would leave off strong liquors by degrees." "By degrees!" says the other, with indignation. "If you should unhappily fall into the fire, would you caution your servants not to pull you out but by degrees?"

This answer, my lords, is applicable to the present case. The nation is sunk into the lowest state of corruption; the people are not only vicious, but insolent beyond example. They not only break the laws, but defy them; and yet some of your lordships are for reforming them by degrees!

I am not so easily persuaded, my lords, that our ministers really intend to supply the defects that may hereafter be discovered in this bill. It will doubtless produce money, perhaps much more than they appear to expect from it. I doubt not but the licensed retailers will be more than fifty thousand, and the quantity retailed must increase with the number of retailers. As the bill will, therefore, answer all the ends intended by it, I do not expect to see it altered; for I have never observed ministers desirous of amending their own errors unless they are such as have caused a deficiency in the revenue.

Besides my lords, it is not certain that, when this fund is

mortgaged to the public creditors, they can prevail upon the Commons to change the security. They may continue the bill in force for the reasons, whatever they are, for which they have passed it; and the good intentions of our ministers, however sincere, may be defeated, and drunkenness, legal drunkenness, established in the nation.

This, my lords, is very reasonable, and therefore we ought to exert ourselves for the safety of the nation while the power is yet in our own hands, and, without regard to the opinion or proceedings of the other House, show that we are yet the chief guardians of the people.

The ready compliance of the Commons with the measures proposed in this bill has been mentioned here, with a view, I suppose, of influencing us, but surely by those who had forgotten our independence or resigned their own. It is not only the right, but the duty of either House, to deliberate, without regard to the determinations of the other; for how should the nation receive any benefit from the distinct powers that compose the legislature unless the determinations are without influence upon each other? If either the example or authority of the Commons can divert us from following our own convictions, we are no longer part of the legislature; we have given up our honors and our privileges, and what then is our concurrence but slavery, or our suffrage but an echo?

The only argument, therefore, that now remains, is the expediency of gratifying those by whose ready subscription the exigencies our new statesmen have brought upon us have been supported, and of continuing the security by which they have been encouraged to such liberal contributions.

Public credit, my lords, is indeed of very great importance; but public credit can never be long supported without public virtue; nor indeed, if the government could mortgage the

morals and health of the people, would it be just and rational to confirm the bargain. If the ministry can raise money only by the destruction of their fellow subjects, they ought to abandon those schemes for which the money is necessary; for what calamity can be equal to unbounded wickedness?

But, my lords, there is no necessity for a choice which may cost our ministers so much regret; for the same subscriptions may be procured by an offer of the same advantages to a fund of any other kind, and the sinking fund will easily supply any deficiency that might be suspected in another scheme.

To confess the truth, I should feel very little pain from an account that the nation was for some time determined to be less liberal of their contributions; and that money was withheld till it was known in what expeditions it was to be employed, to what princes subsidies were to be paid, and what advantages were to be purchased by it for our country. I should rejoice, my lords, to hear that the lottery by which the deficiencies of this duty are to be supplied was not filled, and that the people were grown at last wise enough to discern the fraud and to prefer honest commerce, by which all may be gainers, to a game by which the greatest number must certainly be losers.

The lotteries, my lords, which former ministers have proposed, have always been censured by those who saw their nature and their tendency. They have been considered as legal cheats, by which the ignorant and the rash are defrauded, and the subtle and avaricious often enriched; they have been allowed to divert the people from trade and to alienate them from useful industry. A man who is uneasy in his circumstances and idle in his disposition collects the remains of his fortune and buys tickets in a lottery, retires from business, indulges himself in laziness, and waits, in some obscure place,

the event of his adventure. Another, instead of employing his stock in trade, rents a garret, and makes it his business, by false intelligence and chimerical alarms, to raise and sink the price of tickets alternately, and takes advantage of the lies which he has himself invented.

Such, my lords, is the traffic that is produced by this scheme of getting money; nor were these inconveniences unknown to the present ministers in the time of their predecessors, whom they never ceased to pursue with the loudest clamors whenever the exigencies of the government reduced them to a lottery.

If I, my lords, might presume to recommend to our ministers the most probable method of raising a large sum for the payment of the troops of the Electorate, I should, instead of the tax and lottery now proposed, advise them to establish a certain number of licensed wheelbarrows on which the laudable trade of thimble and button might be carried on for the support of the war, and shoe-boys might contribute to the defence of the house of Austria by raffling for apples.

Having now, my lords, examined, with the utmost candor, all the reasons which have been offered in defence of the bill, I cannot conceal the result of my inquiry. The arguments have had so little effect upon my understanding, that, as every man judges of others by himself, I cannot believe that they have any influence even upon those that offer them, and therefore I am convinced that this bill must be the result of considerations which have been hitherto concealed, and is intended to promote designs which are never to be discovered by the authors before their execution.

With regard to these motives and designs, however artfully concealed, every lord in this House is at liberty to offer his conjectures.

When I consider, my lords, the tendency of this bill, I find

it calculated only for the propagation of diseases, the suppression of industry, and the destruction of mankind. I find it the most fatal engine that ever was pointed at a people; an engine by which those who are not killed will be disabled, and those who preserve their limbs will be deprived of their senses.

This bill, therefore, appears to be designed only to thin the ranks of mankind, and to disburden the world of the multitudes that inhabit it; and is perhaps the strongest proof of political sagacity that our new ministers have yet exhibited. They well know, my lords, that they are universally detested, and that, whenever a Briton is destroyed, they are freed from an enemy; they have therefore opened the flood-gates of gin upon the nation, that, when it is less numerous, it may be more easily governed.

Other ministers, my lords, who had not attained to so great a knowledge in the art of making war upon their country, when they found their enemies clamorous and bold, used to awe them with prosecutions and penalties, or destroy them like burglars, with prisons and with gibbets. But every age, my lords, produces some improvement; and every nation, however degenerate, gives birth, at some happy period of time, to men of great and enterprising genius. It is our fortune to be witnesses of a new discovery in politics. We may congratulate ourselves upon being contemporaries with those men who have shown that hangmen and halters are unnecessary in a state; and that ministers may escape the reproach of destroying their enemies by inciting them to destroy themselves.

This new method may, indeed, have upon different constitutions a different operation; it may destroy the lives of some and the senses of others; but either of these effects will answer the purposes of the ministry, to whom it is indifferent, pro-

vided the nation becomes insensible, whether pestilence or lunacy prevails among them. Either mad or dead the greatest part of the people must quickly be, or there is no hope of the continuance of the present ministry.

For this purpose, my lords, what could have been invented more efficacious than an establishment of a certain number of shops at which poison may be vended — poison so prepared as to please the palate while it wastes the strength, and only kills by intoxication? From the first instant that any of the enemies of the ministry shall grow clamorous and turbulent, a crafty hireling may lead him to the ministerial slaughter-house and ply him with their wonder-working liquor till he is no longer able to speak or think; and, my lords, no man can be more agreeable to our ministers than he that can neither speak nor think, except those who speak without thinking.

But, my lords, the ministers ought to reflect that though all the people of the present age are their enemies yet they have made no trial of the temper and inclinations of posterity. Our successors may be of opinions very different from ours. They may perhaps approve of wars on the Continent, while our plantations are insulted and our trade obstructed; they may think the support of the house of Austria of more importance to us than our own defence; and may perhaps so far differ from their fathers as to imagine the treasures of Britain very properly employed in supporting the troops and increasing the splendor of a foreign Electorate.