

RICHARD COBDEN

RICHARD COBDEN, English statesman, political economist, peace advocate, and "apostle of free-trade," was born near Midhurst, Sussex, June 3, 1804, and died at London, April 2, 1865. After a rather meagre education, supplemented, however, by assiduous and wide reading, as well as later on by travel, he devoted himself to commerce and became partner in a cotton print works at Manchester in 1830. From 1834 to 1838 he travelled extensively on the continent, visited Egypt, and paid a visit to this country, and in the last-named year he founded with John Bright the Anti-Corn-law League. In 1841, he entered Parliament for Stockport, where he became a man of weight in the House, and in the absorbing topic of the time saw the great battle won in the abolition of the Corn Laws and the conversion to free-trade principles of Sir Robert Peel. In recognition of his able services, in 1846, in procuring the repeal of the duties on imported corn, grain, meal, and flour, he was given a national testimonial, which he had well earned by his tireless devotion to free trade as well as by his clear and forceful reasoning and great power of illuminating his speeches by felicitous illustration. For the following ten years he represented in the Commons the West Riding of York, supporting electoral reform and a peaceful foreign policy. In 1857, his opposition to Palmerston lost him his seat, when he paid another visit to the United States, and on his return to England was chosen to represent Rochdale in the Commons. In 1860, he negotiated with M. Chevalier a commercial treaty with France,—a great and memorable service to his country, as Mr. Gladstone characterized it. For this he was offered a baronetcy and a seat in the Privy Council, but declined these honors, as he hitherto repeatedly declined office. His death was mourned alike in England and in this country, whose cause he stoutly maintained during the era of our Civil War. In Parliament, his close friend Mr. Bright attempted to eulogize his career, but was overcome with emotion and had to resume his seat, intimating to the House as he did so that "he must leave to a calmer moment what he had to say on the life and character of the manliest and gentlest spirit that ever tenanted and quitted human form." In France also many sincere tributes were paid to his memory. He left behind him his "Political Writings," in two volumes, and a collection of "Speeches on Questions of Public Policy."

ON THE CORN LAWS

DELIVERED IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS, FEBRUARY 24, 1842

SIR,—The right honorable gentleman who has just sat down [Sir Howard Douglas] would have given still greater satisfaction to the House if he had assured us that he would, when he spoke, always keep strictly to the subject-matter under discussion. I must be allowed to say

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that my honorable friend the member for Wolverhampton [The Hon. C. P. Villiers] has very just grounds for complaining that in all this discussion, to which I have been listening for seven nights, while there has been much talk of our trade with China and of the war with Syria, while there has been much contest between parties and partisans, there has been very little said upon the question really in hand.

I may safely say that, on the other side, not one speaker has grappled with the question so ably laid down by my honorable friend. That question simply is, how far it is just, honest, and expedient that any tax whatever should be laid upon the food of the people. This is the question we have to decide; and when I heard the right honorable baronet [Sir Robert Peel] so often express the deep sympathy he felt for the working classes, I did expect that he would not have finished his last speech without giving some little consideration to the case of the working man in connection with this question. I will venture to call the attention of the committee to the question of the Bread Tax as connected with the laboring classes, as it bears upon the wages of labor; and I call upon you all to meet me upon neutral ground while we discuss the interests of those working people who have no representatives in this House. As I hear from the other side so many and such strong expressions of sympathy, I call upon them to give practical proof of the existence of that sympathy with the hard laboring population, and not to delay until they are reduced to that state when they can only receive the benefits of your legislation in the abject condition of pauperism.

Sir, in reading, which I have done with some attention, the reports of the debates which took place in 1815, prior to the

passing of the Corn Bill of that year, I have been struck with the observation that all who took part in that discussion agreed on one point of the subject, namely, that the price of food regulated the rate of wages. That principle was not only laid down by one side of the House, but it met with the concurrence of both. Men the most opposite in political opinions I find agreeing upon that principle. Mr. Horner, Mr. Baring, Mr. Frankland Lewis, Mr. Philips, Mr. Western, those who opposed the Corn Law, and those who strenuously advocated its principle, all alike agreed upon the same point, that the price of food regulated the price of labor.

So completely did they agree that one speaker laid down the principle mathematically, and framed a computation in figures to show the relative proportions in which the principle would work, and to what extent the payment of labor would rise or fall in ratio to the rise or fall of the price of food. The same delusions existed amongst the capitalists out of doors. There was a petition presented in 1815, signed by the most intelligent merchants and manufacturers in Manchester, praying that the Corn Law should not pass, because it would so raise the rate of wages that the British manufacturers would no longer be able to compete with those abroad, who had to pay wages so much less in amount. That delusion certainly did then exist; but I have been struck with the deepest sorrow to observe that the minds of many men who bear their part in the discussion now should still be laboring under the same erroneous impression.

The great body of those who legislated in 1815 passed their bill in the honest delusion that the operation of the law would be such as I have described. I believe that if the fact, if the true state of the case had been then known, if they had known what now we know, that law would never have

been passed in 1815. Every party in the House, and many out of doors, were deceived; but there was one party which was not deluded—the party most interested in the question—namely, the working classes. They were not deluded, for they saw with instinctive sagacity, without the aids of learning and education, without the pretence of political wisdom, what would be the operation of the law upon the rate of wages.

Therefore it was, that when that law was passed your House was surrounded by the excited populace of London, and you were compelled to keep back an enraged people from your doors by the point of the bayonet. When that law passed murder ensued. Yes, I call it murder, for a coroner's jury returned a verdict of wilful murder against the soldiers. The disturbances were not confined to London; but throughout the north of England, from 1815 to 1819, when the great meeting took place on Peter's-field, there never was a meeting in the north of England in which banners were not displayed with inscriptions of "No Corn Laws!"

There was no mistake in the minds of the multitudes upon this question. It was always understood by them. Do not let honorable gentlemen suppose that there is any mistake in the minds of the working classes upon this topic. There never was, and there is not now. They may not indeed cry out exclusively for the repeal of the corn laws; they have looked beyond the question, and they have seen at the same time other evils greater than this which they are now calling upon you to remedy; and when they raise the cry of Universal Suffrage and The People's Charter, do not let honorable gentlemen opposite suppose, because the Anti-Corn Law League may, perchance, have run into collision with the

masses upon some points, that the people are consequently favorable to the existence of the corn laws.

What has surprised me more than anything is to find that in this House, where lecturers are, of all men, so much decried, there exists on the other side such an ignorance upon this subject. Yes, I say, an ignorance upon this subject that I never saw equalled in any body of working men in the north of England. Do you think that the fallacy of 1815, which, to my astonishment, I heard put forth in the House last week, namely, that wages rise and fall with the price of food, can prevail with the minds of the working men after the experience of the last three years? Have you not had bread higher during that time than during any three years during the last twenty years?

Yes. Yet during those three years the wages of labor in every branch of industry have suffered a greater decline than in any three years before. Still, honorable gentlemen opposite, with the reports of committees before them, which, if they would take the trouble to consult them, would prove the decline of wages within those three years, are persisting in maintaining the doctrine that the price of food regulates the rate of wages under the belief that this new law will keep up the price of labor. Then I am told that the price of labor in this country is so much higher than the wages abroad that the corn laws must be kept up in order to keep up labor to the proper level.

Sir, I deny that labor in this country is higher paid than on the continent. On the contrary, I am prepared to prove, from documents on the table of your own House, that the price of labor is cheaper here than in any other part of the globe. I hear an expression of dissent on the other side, but I say to honorable gentlemen, when they measure the

labor of an Englishman against the labor of the foreigner, they measure a day's labor indeed with a day's labor, but they forget the relative quality of the labor. I maintain that if quality is to be the test, the labor of England is the cheapest in the world. The committee which sat on machinery in the last session but one demonstrated by their report that labor on the Continent is dearer than in England.

You have proof of it. Were it not so, do you think you would find in Germany, France, or Belgium so many English workmen? Go into any city from Calais to Vienna containing a population of more than 10,000 inhabitants and will you not find numbers of English artisans working side by side with the natives of the place and earning twice as much as they do, or even more? Yet the masters who employ them declare, notwithstanding the pay is higher, that the English labor is cheaper to them than the native labor.

Yet we are told that the object of the manufacturers in repealing the corn laws is to lower wages to the level of the Continent. It was justly said by the honorable member for Kilmarnock that the manufacturers did not require to lower the rate of wages in order to gain high profits. If you want proof of the prosperity of manufacturers you will find it when wages are high; but when wages drop the profits of the manufacturer drop also. I think manufacturers take too intelligent and enlightened a view of their own position and interest to suppose that the impoverishment of the multitudes they employ can promote or increase manufacturing prosperity.

Sir, by deteriorating such a vast population as that employed in manufactures, you run the risk of spoiling not the animal man only, but the intellectual creature also. It is not from the wretched that great things can emanate; it is not a

potato-fed population that ever led the world in arts or arms, in manufactures or commerce. If you want your people to be virtuous or happy, you must take care that they are well fed.

Upon this assumption, then, that the manufacturers want to reduce wages, and upon the assumption that the corn laws keep up the price of labor, we are going to pass a law to tax the food of the hardworking, deserving population! What must be the result? You have heard, from the right honorable baronet [Sir Robert Peel] an answer to the fallacy about our competing with foreign manufacturers. He has told you we export forty or fifty millions. We do then already compete with foreigners. You tax the bones and muscles of your people. You put a double weight upon their shoulders, and then you turn round upon them and tell them to run a race with Germany and France. I would ask, with Mr. Deacon Hume, who has been before quoted in this House, "To whom do the energies of the British people belong? Are they theirs or are they yours?"

Think you that these energies were given to the English people that they might struggle for a bare existence, whilst you take from them half of what they earn? Is this doing justice to the "high-mettled racer"? Why, you don't treat your horses so. You give your cattle food and rest in proportion to their toil, but men in England are now actually treated worse. Yes, tens of thousands of them were last winter treated worse than your dogs and your horses. What is the pretence upon which you tax the people's food? We have been told by the right honorable baronet that the object of the law is to fix a certain price for corn. Since I have been listening to this debate, in which I heard it proposed by a prime minister to fix the price of corn, I doubted

whether or not we had gone back to the days of our Edwards again, and whether we had or had not travelled back some three or four centuries, when they used to fix the price of a table-cloth or a pair of shoes.

What an avocation for a legislator! To fix the price of corn! Why, that should be done in the open market by the dealers. You don't fix the price of cotton, or silk, or iron, or tin. But how are you going to fix this price of corn? Going back some ten years, the right honorable baronet finds the average price of corn is 56s. 10d., and therefore, says he, I propose to keep up the price of wheat from 54s. to 58s. The right honorable baronet's plan means that or nothing.

I have heard something about the prices which it has been proposed by legislation to affix to wheat. I remember that Lord Willoughby D'Eresby said the minimum price ought to be 58s., and I see by the newspapers that the Duke of Buckingham has just announced his opinion that 60s. ought to be the lowest. There is one honorable gentleman in this House who, I hope, will speak on the subject—for I have seen him endeavoring to catch the Speaker's eye—and who has gone a little more into particulars respecting the market price he intends to procure for commodities by act of Parliament. I see in a useful little book called "The Parliamentary Pocket Companion," in which there are some nice little descriptions given of ourselves under the head "Cayley," that that gentleman is described as being the advocate of "such a course of legislation with regard to agriculture as will keep wheat at 64s. a quarter, new milk cheese at 52s. to 60s. per cwt., wool and butter at 1s. per lb. each, and other produce in proportion."

Now it might be very amusing that there were to be found some gentlemen still at large who advocated the principle of

the interposition of Parliament to fix the price at which articles should be sold; but when we find a prime minister coming down to Parliament to avow such principles, it really becomes anything but amusing. I ask the right honorable baronet, and I pause for a reply: Is he prepared to carry out that principle in the articles of cotton and wool?

[Sir Robert Peel: It is impossible to fix the price of food by legislation.]

Then on what are we legislating? I thank the right honorable baronet for his avowal. Perhaps, then, he will oblige us by not trying to do so. Supposing, however, that he will make the attempt, I ask the right honorable gentleman, and again I pause for a reply: Will he try to legislate so as to keep up the prices of cotton, silk, and wool? No reply.

Then we have come to this conclusion—that we are not legislating for the universal people. We are openly avowing that we are met here to legislate for a class against the people. When I consider this I don't marvel, although I have seen it with the deepest regret, and I may add indignation, that we have been surrounded during the course of the debates of the last week by an immense body of police.

I will not let this subject drop, even though I may be greeted with laughter. It is no laughing matter to those who have got no wheat to sell, nor money to purchase it from those who have. If the agriculturists are to have the benefit of a law founded on the calculation of ten years' average, to keep up their price at that average, I ask, are the manufacturers to have it too? Take the manufacturers of the midland counties, the manufacturers of the very articles the agriculturists consume. Their goods have depreciated thirty per cent in the last ten years. Are they to continue to exchange

their commodities for the corn of the landlord, who has the benefit of a law keeping up his price on a calculation of a ten years' average, without the iron manufacturer having the benefit of the same calculation?

I have great doubts whether this is legislation at all. I deny that it is honest legislation. It is no answer for the right honorable baronet to say that he cannot, even if he wished, pass a law to keep up the price of manufactures. It is no satisfaction for being injured by a prime minister to be told that he has not the power, even if he has the will, to make amendment. I only ask him to abstain from doing that for which he cannot make atonement, and surely there is nothing unreasonable in that request. I have but touched upon the skirts of this subject. I ask the right honorable baronet whether, while he fixes the scale of prices to secure the landowners 56s. a quarter, he has got also a sliding scale for wages.

I know but of one class of laborers in this country whose interests are well secured by the sliding scale of corn duties, and that class is the clergy of the Established Church, whose tithes are calculated upon the averages. But I want to know what you will do with the hardworking classes of the community, the laboring artisans, if the price of bread is to be kept up by act of Parliament. Will you give them a law to keep up their rate of wages? You will say that you cannot keep up the rate of wages; but that is no reason why you should pass a law to mulct the working man of one third of the loaf he earns. I know well the way in which the petitions of the hand-loom weavers were received in this House.

"Poor ignorant men," you said, "they know not what they ask, they are not political economists, they do not know that the price of labor, like other commodities, finds its own level