

A Lecture on Free Trade

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THE present meeting has, by my recommendation, been made completely open and free, and I appeal to you, by carrying it to its close with good temper and perfect order, to honour the bill I have ventured, in full confidence; to draw on the good sense of the people. If you redeem my pledge, those restrictions on public meetings which have of late been borrowed from the fears of Exeter Hall, and which, in the pursuit of freedom, are as little defensible in my estimation as restrictions on trade, will be hereafter discarded, and we shall much extend the basis of the popular union and increase the popular power.

The purpose for which we meet is that I may advocate the total and immediate repeal of the Corn Laws, and call on you to exert yourselves to put an end to them for ever. I make no pretensions to throw any new light on this much-discussed question, but I venture to plead for repeal from a sincere desire to promote it. Do not expect to be amused. Nothing less is involved in this great question than the happiness of the entire community—it even concerns the welfare of the whole human species, and I should hold myself as culpable as I deem those who lightly and unthinkingly make and maintain such laws, were I to speak of them except in the most serious manner. Those who can jest with such a theme may be witty beyond description, but of them I say with the poet,

“There is no blinder bigot, I maintain it still,
Than he who must have pleasure come what will.”

These are times, and this is a theme, which demand the most solemn earnestness; in that state of mind I am about to speak of it, and in that state of mind I hope you are prepared to accompany me. Allow me to add, that the occasion and the subject both justify strong language, and those who complain of the impassioned words of the Anti-Corn Law advocates should remember that they plead for the millions against what they conscientiously regard as an unwarrantable infraction of freedom and justice.

As the labouring classes have unfortunately stood aloof from our agitation, though they are now I believe coming forward and making common cause with us, as it has been asserted that to abolish the Corn Laws would injure them, and as I do not purpose on the present occasion to consider how the abolition would affect them, I must begin by saying that if I had the shadow of a shade of a suspicion that it would lower wages, diminish employment, delay the progress of

freedom, or retard for one hour the emancipation of the masses, I should belie my whole life if I undertook its advocacy.

I take up the question as it affects the whole community, it being infinitely degraded when it is treated as a dispute between the opulent classes, or a mere struggle between landlords and master manufacturers, with which other men have no concern. To treat it too as a question of pounds, shillings, and pence, pretending to decide it by the cost of growing, and the prices of wheat here and abroad, or the number of acres, more or less, of which it may extend or impede the cultivation, is to admit the possibility of the law being justifiable under some circumstances, which I deny—is to forsake the vantage ground of principle and appeal to minute facts which cannot possibly be ascertained with accuracy—which vary with every discovery in art, and every relative change in the density of population in different countries, and which lie far beyond the cognizance of the great body of the people deeply interested in the decision.

The same line of argument applies to what is continually said of the conduct of other governments, of their tariffs and their disposition to meet or thwart our free trade legislation. All their conduct lies beyond our controul, and we must be contented with commanding justice at home, within the sphere of our own power—trusting the issue to PROVIDENCE.

Corn Law Repeal is a question of morals and general legislation, not limited to that object, food, to which it is nominally confined. Such laws it is erroneously supposed affect only corn, as game laws are supposed to affect only game. But all laws are an expression of the will of the whole society, they are carried into effect by the general power, and they have, as we well know, a permanent influence over the morality and well being of all. Of society, the labourers form the largest portion; the protection of peaceful industry is the great object of all laws, and if any man can show that the Corn Laws add to the rewards of the labourers and elevate their character, he shall have me for his follower. Their present deplorable condition forbids any such proof, and warrants the belief that the road to their permanent improvement lies through the repeal of all restrictions on industry, including all the landlord's taxes on food.

That the employers of labourers would be benefited by the repeal is universally admitted. Among them are skilful and painstaking manufacturers, long thought merchants, and enterprising inventors—men who are ever planning some new combinations to enrich themselves. I admit, but which in the end confer benefit on the public. If they should reap advantage from the abolition as well as the labourers, that would be a strong recommendation of the measure; but they are comparatively so few in number, that it is no justification of a law merely to say that it adds to the wealth and power of capitalists.

Our farmers are painstaking, frugal, frank, honest, and industrious; and if, withal, they do not possess the same kind of knowledge as towns-people, they know their own business tolerably well, and by providing subsistence for society to the extent of their means, do their duty. They never were persons of large fortunes or extravagant habits, and are at present impoverished to the verge of insolvency, and degraded to the brink of slavery. With their prosperity the future welfare or even subsistence of society is closely linked; and though the repeal of the Corn Laws might benefit artizans and manufacturing capitalists, if it would inflict the least injury on the farmers, we ought to hesitate long before we demanded it. I believe, and they I am happy to know are beginning to believe, that it would confer prosperity on them, increase their skill, and restore them to independence.

I must beg, however, not to be understood as countenancing a vulgar error of some arcadian Tories. The ancient poets, contrasting the peaceful life of an agriculturist with the savage and

piratical habits of previous hunters and rovers, burst out into rapturous praise of all persons and things connected with the steady cultivation of the soil; and modern writers, from that ignorance of our society which is carefully inculcated at universities, apply that language to our agriculturists, as compared to our manufacturers. This is a grievous misapplication. Our manufacturing and town population, in regularity, order, ingenuity, and love of peace, are as much superior to any rude race of mere agriculturists—as they exist in Spain, Wallachia, and Ireland—as these are superior to the savage hunters and pirates of antiquity. Had those ancient poets lived in our time, their own good sense would have taught them to give at least as much praise to our manufacturers as to our farmers. In truth, all our INDUSTRIOUS classes are equally mutually and reciprocally serviceable, and only prejudice or folly exalts the lives and occupations of one, above the lives and occupations of another.

The landlords and the clergy, supposed to be particularly interested in this question, are so few in number and so little serviceable to other men, contributing neither to feed, clothe, protect, nor teach them any useful knowledge, that their interest cannot for one moment be put in competition with that of the rest of the community, and I should advocate the repeal if it would benefit the rest, though its certain consequence would be to annihilate both those classes. But I do not believe such would be its effect. Granting that they might possibly suffer to a slight extent in a pecuniary sense, which I doubt, in reputation, credit, honour, public respect, and personal security, they would gain immeasurably.

The Corn Laws are intended, I know, to confer advantages on them, but that intention is not realized. The best meant laws may inflict, as is well known, only misery on the whole society, including the very classes they were intended to benefit. I shall clear the way, therefore, for a fair consideration of the question, by reminding you of a few laws intended to promote class interests or subserve the interests of some individuals, which experience has demonstrated to have had contrary effects, and which, in our time, have been abolished with unspeakable advantage.

You are well aware that in 1828 the Test and Corporation Acts were abolished after a long struggle. They were intended to maintain the Church in peace, security, and strength; they raised against her implacable animosity, while they inflicted insult and vexation on Dissenters; they fostered impudent arrogance on the one hand, and on the other discontent and anger. They injured the Church as well as the Dissenters. A numerous and affluent party struggled to maintain them as a matter of life and death, but twelve years' experience has convinced us, that to abolish them conferred an unmixed good on the community. It relieved Dissenters, but it taught the Church modesty and self-examination, and was one of the parents of that revived energy and zeal of which its friends now loudly boast.

The Act for abolishing the penal laws against the Catholics had precisely similar effect. It induced the clergy to look less to the law and more to their doctrines. It released the Catholics from ignominious and rankling disabilities, and extinguished in the state a source of fierce contention and discord. Not an individual in the empire—not even Sir Harcourt Lees—was injured by the almost total and immediate abolition of those penal laws, and nothing but good has flowed from emancipating the Catholics.

It is also true, and pertinent to our subject, that in 1825 a law to prohibit the exportation of wool was repealed, though some manufacturers and some statesmen resisted the repeal, and predicted that it would ruin the woollen trade. At the same time, the duty on wool imported from abroad was lowered from 6d. per 1b. to 1d., which the flock-masters clamorously asserted would ruin them. Since then, however, our woollen manufactures have extended in an unprecedented

manner, and the price of wool rose, and the flock-masters were rewarded beyond their expectation. Not a single soul was injured, but manufactures were extended, trade was promoted, rent was increased, and the whole community was enriched.

The abolition of the East India Company's monopoly, to quote another similar example, has been followed by a great increase of trade, both with India and China, while not even the Company's labourers were injured by the change. In 1819, Mr. now Lord Wallace began a series of alterations in our commercial code, the principle of which was to do away with prohibitions and lower restrictive duties, and one of the first of which was to put an end to more than a thousand Acts of Parliament concerning the customs. Mr. Huskisson followed up that plan, though slowly, till his death; and every prohibition abolished and every duty lowered have contributed to increase employment, to extend the national resources, and arrest the mischievous consequences of excessive taxation and of the prohibitions and restrictions that are still suffered to remain on the statute-book. You are also, perhaps, aware that within a few years many laws inflicting capital punishments have been abolished, to the improvement of the public feelings and to no man's detriment, not even to the detriment of the disgraced and dishonoured hangman. The number of offences to which by our laws the punishment of death was attached in the beginning of this century, was nearly three hundred. By the efforts of many enlightened men, though the most eminent members of the bar opposed them, the number had been reduced, in February 1841, to nearly thirty, which was subsequently lessened by a measure introduced by Lord John Russell. Now, the successive and extensive abolition of cruel penal laws, nearly three hundred capital punishments having been swept from our statute-book in little more than thirty years, has been of inestimable advantage to the whole community. Permit me to add, with reference to a recent and lamentable occurrence, that the crime of assassination, which appears unhappily to be increasing, is still punishable with death, that the punishment—unless the assassin be insane—is never remitted, and that the increase of that crime is in nowise owing to the improved humanity of the law.

It is manifest, from these examples, that a law, though well meant, may not be beneficial either to a class or to the community. In fact, every law is a restraint on freedom, and *per se* mischievous, though this truth is continually lost sight of; and on those who make or enforce a law lies at every moment the burthen of proving its utility. We should be warranted, therefore, in demanding the repeal of the Corn Laws, though nothing further could be said against them than that THEY EXIST without their advocates being able to supply the least proof that they are beneficial to the whole society. They are examples of bad laws, the offspring of ignorance and bad passions, like the Test Acts, like the penal laws against the Catholics, like the laws prohibiting the exportation of wool, like the laws for putting men to death for nearly three hundred different offences,—while the Decalogue forbids only ten, and like them may be with UNIVERSAL benefit immediately abolished.

Before we enter further into the subject, let me satisfy you, by a brief reference to the condition of England under the operation of these and similar malevolent laws, that there is at present an urgent necessity for the public seriously to examine this question.

Our country presents as astonishing spectacle. The law is triumphant, it is universally enforced and obeyed. There is no sedition, no rebellion, no civil war in the land. We have been subjected to no great national calamities, such as sometimes devastate other countries. In our gentle vales, alpine torrents are unknown. If storms sweep over our hills, if shipwrecks happen off our coast, and some persons have to mourn the loss of relatives and friends, they seem only disastrous

enough to keep the public sympathy alive to calamity to which all are exposed, and excite to good works of charity, kindness, and love. Their effects on the national welfare are unimportant. Pestilence and earthquakes are unknown amongst us. We have managed latterly to keep out of very extensive foreign wars: yet all classes are in a state of suffering or alarm.

Pauperism and crime are rapidly increasing. In such agricultural districts and Sussex and Essex, the gaols, as at Lewes and Springfield, no longer suffice to hold the criminals; and at such places as Chelmsford, the able-bodied paupers have increased 25 per cent in the year 1842, though in 1841 the number was unusually large. These are specimens of what occurs in the most favoured districts, to say nothing of Paisley, Stockport, Leeds, and our other manufacturing towns involved in one great gulph of poverty, distress, and pauperism. The workhouses and gaols, in short, are everywhere crowded with the victims of poverty and punishment. The revenue is rapidly declining, particularly that branch of it which serves as an index to the enjoyments and comforts of the people; and to increase our disasters, we are now beginning to suffer in peace from a vexatious, unjust, and odious war-tax, the worst invention of a rapacious and sordid faction.

Those who personally feel not the pinching necessity of the times are filled with alarm. There is no party nor persons satisfied with things as they are: all praise of our glorious constitution has for ever ceased. "From head to foot," said a Conservative Journal, (*The Morning Herald*), no longer ago than Wednesday week, THE BODY POLITIC is FULL OF SORE DISEASES." The conservatives are struck aghast with a condition which defies their art, and mocks alike their attempts to soothe and coerce it. They cry out in ignorant despair for more churches; they pitifully propose to put down pews; they think there is some charm in the change of a priest's garment; they put forth plans for holidays when the people want employment, though when there was plenty of work and the people chose to take holidays for themselves, in 1819, Sir Robert, then Mr. Peel, complained of their doing so, and of their licentiousness; the Tories begin to bustle about draining and drilling—they want man to be created anew to answer their purposes, and they are as dissatisfied and discontented as the Chartists, and much more alarmed at the present condition of society. All parties admit the prevalence of great distress, causing great danger; and the only difference of opinion is as to the method by which it can be cured.

There is nothing, indeed, strictly speaking, very new in this condition, nor are the Corn-laws of yesterday's enactment, except that it is daily growing more frightful, and that the disease which was comparatively local or rather fitful and partial, has now become universal and permanent. Writing fourteen or fifteen years ago. Mr. Combe said:—"This island exhibits the spectacle of millions of men toiling to the extremity of human endurance, for a pittance scarcely sufficient to sustain life; weavers labouring for fourteen or sixteen hours a-day for eight-pence, and frequently unable to procure work even on these terms; other artisans, exhausted almost to death by laborious drudgery; master-traders and manufacturers anxiously labouring for wealth, now gay in the fond hope that all their expectations will be realized, then sunk in despair by the ploughshare of ruin having passed over them; landholders and tenants now reaping unmeasured returns from their properties, then pining in penury amidst an overflow of every species of produce. This much more resembles punishment for transgression, than reward for obedience to the Divine Laws.

"If every man in Britain will turn his attention inwards, and reckon the pangs of disappointment which he has felt at the subversion of his own most darling schemes by unexpected turns of public events, or the deep inroads on his happiness which such misfortunes, overtaking his dearest relations and friends, have occasioned to him; the numberless little enjoyments in do-

mestic life, which he is forced to deny himself, in consequence of the taxation with which they are loaded; the obstructions to the fair exercise of his industry and talents, presented by stamps, licences, excise laws, custom-house duties *et hoc genus omne*; he will discover the extent of responsibility attached by the Creator to national transgressions. Men have hitherto expected the punishment of their offences in the thunderbolt or the yawning earthquake, and have believed, that because the sea did not swallow them up, or the mountains fall upon them and crush them to atoms, heaven has taken no cognizance of their aims; while, in point of fact, an omnipotent, an all-just, and an all-wise GOD, had arranged, before they erred, an ample retribution in the very consequences of their transgressions. When men shall be instructed in the laws of creation, they will discriminate more accurately than heretofore between *natural* and *factitious* evils, and become less tolerant of the latter."

The condition then described by Mr. Combe still continues, but all its features are terribly aggravated. Our evils, at the same time, are all factitious. Our industrious people are richer in material knowledge and mechanical skill than any under the sun. The bowels of the earth and the depths of the sea, freely yield their treasures to the toil of our fearless miners, of our hardy courageous fishermen. To the labour of our husbandmen, the earth never denies a suitable, and very often it grants a rich reward. In skill and industry lie all the sources of wealth; and with these, Nature has bounteously endowed our people, while she has not exposed them to any great calamities.

To the energy and courage of our forefathers manfully resisting the PECULIAR OPPRESSIONS of THEIR RULERS and THEIR TIMES, we are indebted for a tolerable degree of political security. Our Government, thanks to their exertions, is not brutally tyrannical. Except in rare cases, and except by the regular process of law, men are not torn from their wives and families and condemned to waste their lives in dungeons till vigorous manhood drivels into helpless idiocy. Our personal freedom, our freedom of locomotion, is almost perfect. Conscience is not much tyrannized over—the Press and public opinion are tolerably free. Public affairs are quietly and smoothly administered, and ours is what is called *a well-ordered state*. Nevertheless some great and vital disease preys on its heart, wastes its frame, sucks its blood, and every now and then convulses it with mortal agony.

Do not suppose, as some writers assert, that our imperfect freedom, with the partial relaxation of restrictions on trade, made within a few years, are the causes of our social misery. Our present condition is scarcely worse than the habitual condition of Italy, Spain, and France, in which trade, locomotion, and conscience, are much more restricted than with us. They have been for many years continually a prey to evils from which our commerce, as long as it was suffered to expand, protected us. But our present evils, arising in conjunction with comparative freedom, make some superficial though well-meaning persons conclude that the liberty with which the Almighty endows our race, and which tyrants would fain destroy, deserves to be destroyed as the parent of licentiousness. Such men worship freedom with only half a heart, and conspire with her opponents, first to calumniate her, and then to stifle her to death.

Gentlemen, we yet want one species of freedom—we have achieved personal freedom—we have nearly conquered freedom of conscience; the press is almost free, but we have yet to conquer freedom for industry. The want of that is a violation of the commands of nature and of the first duties of government, as I am about briefly to show, sufficient to account for all the miseries of our social condition.

I need not enter into any elaborate arguments referring to the great differences of soil and climate, and the impossibility of producing in each county many commodities which are not merely useful but almost indispensable in all, to show you the advantages of foreign trade; or that it was a part of the order of the universe. Cowper has said—

God working ever on a social plan,
By Various ties attaches man to man:
He made at first, though free and unconfined,
One man the common father of the kind;
That every tribe though placed as he sees best,
Where seas or deserts part them from the rest,
Differing in manners, language, or in face,
Might feel themselves allied to all the race.

And he adds,—

The band of commerce was designed
To associate all the branches of mankind;
And if a boundless plenty be the robe,
Trade is the golden girdle of the globe.
Wise to promote whatever end he means,
God opens fruitful nature's various scenes;
Each climate needs what other climes produce,
And offers something to the general use;
No land but listens to the common call,
And in return receives supply from all.
This genial intercourse and mutual aid,
Cheers what were else an universal shade;
Calls Nature from her ivy-mantled den,
And softens human rock-work into men.

England has surpassed other nations by the extent of her traffic and the rich variety of her manufacturing industry and ingenuity, to which she owes her greatness; and it would be at once disgraceful to us not to be deeply and intimately convinced of the value of trade, and almost impious to doubt whether such extensive individual happiness and national greatness, as have grown up from it amongst us, be consistent with the Divine government of the world. Until lately, when the land-owners have cast about to find scapegoats for their own iniquity, an admiration of trade glowed in every mind; and it was sufficient to mention the word to procure for it, at corporation dinners and public meetings of those who now pass it by in silence, an almost idolatrous worship.

As yet no man has ventured to impugn freedom of trade between the inhabitants of this our common country. Legislators, in fact, NOW content themselves with heaping restrictions on the interchange which is carried on, or prohibiting that which would be carried on, between the subjects of different governments; and they favour, in all countries, perfect freedom of trade between all their own subjects. But freedom of trade between individuals living under different governments, though fools or presumptuous madmen cramp and prohibit it, is as much a part of

the system of nature as trade between the subjects of the same government, which statesmen at length universally admit cannot be too unrestricted.

Look at the different trades which are connected one with another. It is admitted, that the labouring cotton spinner should be perfectly free to buy his bread, his cheese, and his groceries when and where he pleases; and because some masters have wished to infringe on this right, the legislature has made stringent laws against the truck system. No man denies to the baker and the grocer the right to go to the cheapest market, within our political society, for their flour and their sugar; and, indeed, they are stigmatized as imprudent tradesmen if they do not take that course. No man now ventures to say, that the working spinner ought not to be free to choose his master, and carry his labour to the best market within her Majesty's dominions. In like manner, every master spinner is quite free to sell his twist and buy his cotton, within the realm of England, when he likes and where he likes. If there were not this perfectly free trade between all these several parties, there would be dissatisfaction, discontent, and collision. Time and talent would be wasted in agitation and contests, which are now devoted to peaceful and honest industry; but directly this manufacturer, on whose successful operations depends his power to give wages to the spinner, and the spinner's power to buy of the baker and the grocer, wishes to deal with men who, are not subjects, slaves rather, let me say, of our state, the law-maker interferes and by restrictions cramps and prevents his operations. That which is considered a virtue in the retail trader is made a vice in the manufacturer, and he is forbidden, under penalties, to buy at the cheapest and the best market.

But if the prosperity of all the others I have quoted depends on the success of the manufacturer, is it not clear that his operations and their operations are all parts of the same series—connecting links of the same system of mutual interchange? and if it be wrong to interfere with him, when he is buying his cotton of a Liverpool broker or selling his twist to a Manchester weaver, it must also be equally wrong to interfere with him when he wishes to sell his twist to a Russian merchant and buy flour of an American trader. Just consider for a moment, how many home trades, far more than I can enumerate, such as the biscuit baker, the anchor smith, the sail maker, the provision merchant—and how much the prosperity of each depends on the success of the foreign trader, and you will be at once convinced, that if it be wholly indefensible to restrict them in any manner in their operations one with another, it must be equally indefensible to restrict him with whom they are so intimately connected, and on whose success the prosperity of all the rest depends. In fact, the whole series of home and foreign interchanges are all mutually and reciprocally parts of one and the same natural system, of which the foundations are the peculiarities and different faculties of individuals, and the different soils and climates of different countries. They have no relation to the separation of men into political communities, and there is as little reason to restrict the trade between Lancashire and New York, as to restrict it between Lancashire and London. Man is created free to buy and sell with whom, when, and where he likes, and legislators are bound to prove such freedom a great public injury, and that they are wiser than nature, before they venture in any case to restrain it.

One of the distinguishing features of our political society, as contrasted with the states of the continent, is the almost perfect freedom of trade which we enjoy with one another. While in Germany, each of the several little states into which that country is divided, till the *Zoll Verein* was established six or eight years ago, had its own Custom-house regulations preventing all free intercourse between the slaves of each, while in France, Spain, and Italy, no two provinces could freely communicate with one another, and every town had its own duties and its Custom-house,

the whole population of England and Scotland have for a century and a half been free to trade with each other. Adding Ireland, the trade with which was made a domestic trade in consequence of the Union, and the colonies of which the trade was chiefly restricted, as against other countries, Englishmen have had more free trade than any other people. They have not been plagued with passports, their locomotion and their internal traffic have been for many years quite free, and their freedom has conferred great prosperity on their native land.

In like manner, the bulk of the inhabitants of the United States enjoy perfect freedom of trade and locomotion. No two countries have made such rapid advances in national wealth and greatness, the fruits of freedom and commerce, as England and the United States. Taxes and debts are the offspring of wars and political ambition; we are indebted for the ability to bear our enormous burdens to the success of our industry. Those two modern examples suffice to prove, that the original condition of man—free to buy and sell as he lists—is at all times agreeable to nature; and they justify, by experience, the assertion that to place RESTRICTIONS ON TRADE and industry is to violate HER commands.

So impressed was Dr. Franklin with this important truth, that he declared, more than sixty years ago, that a legislature making laws for trade was the greatest fool on earth. “Most of the statutes or acts, edicts, arrests, and placarts of parliaments, princes, and states, for regulating, directing, or restraining trade, have been,” he also says, “either *political blunders* or JOBS obtained by artful men for private advantage under pretence of public good.”¹ *In like manner, Dr. Smith, nearly about the same period, said, “The statesman who should attempt to direct private people in what manner they ought to employ their capitals, (and every restriction on trade is such an attempt,) would not only load himself with a most unnecessary attention, but assume an authority which safely could be trusted, not only to no single person, but to no council or senate whatever, and which would be nowhere so dangerous as in the hands of a man who had folly and presumption enough to fancy himself fit to exercise it.*² Thus the freedom with which nature endows man, the various diversities of government, climate, and of individual capacities which she has created—the consequences of free trade where it has existed, as amongst the inhabitants of England and the United States—and the voice of philosophy, embodied in the writings I have just quoted, all authorise the conclusion I have already drawn. Restrictions on trade and industry constitute that general and systematic opposition to the Divine Government of the world, or, as others express it, to God’s glory, by doing his appointed work—the proofs of which, according to Mr. Combe, are manifested in the uneasiness, poverty, and distress of society.

These restrictions, gentlemen, are also violations of the first principles of government. Cicero, Locke, Bentham, every philosopher who has investigated the subject, has come to the conclusion that civil government is instituted for the protection of property. On that ground it claims, and on that ground alone, is it worthy of obedience. That is the foundation of allegiance, which is cast loose when government violates the property of its subjects. “Of all the species of property, says Mr. M’Culloch, which a man can possess, the faculties of his mind and the powers of his body are most particularly his own. He should, therefore, be permitted to enjoy, that is, use or exert these powers at his discretion. And hence, this right is as much infringed upon when a man is interdicted from engaging in a particular *branch of business*, as when he is deprived of the property he has produced or accumulated.”

According to Mr. M’Culloch, therefore, it is in principle as great a violation of the right of property to prevent Mr. Cobden importing corn, as it is to take away the Duke of Buckingham’s estate. As the legislature has no property of its own—nothing but what it levies as taxes—when

it gives bounties on some one trade, and restricts another, it not only limits the exercise of men's faculties, it takes away the property of some to confer it on others. All restrictions, therefore, on honest industry, all interdicts to engage in any kind of trade, are violations by the legislature of that right of property the legislature is constituted to protect. They are violations of its own highest and most sacred duties to perform which alone it exerts, as well as violations of the commands of nature.

This unnatural and unjust system of restrictions on traffic, is not of modern origin. It sprung up in times of ignorance and oppression; it had its birth in conquest, and began earlier than the 14th century. At least, in the year 1381, when Wat Tyler, who has been shamefully aspersed by Hume and other historians—for he was one of the chosen, and for a time successful leaders of the Saxon serfs in their efforts to reconquer freedom and justice, who was too much a man of ability when others were beguiled to be deluded by the deceitful promises of the King and his Barons, and who deserves to be held in honour as a champion of popular rights, which he lost his life to support;—when Wat Tyler, in the year 1381, met Richard II. in Smithfield, the first and the chief demand which he made for the people, according to the historian of the Norman Conquest, was “the RIGHT of BUYING and SELLING OPENLY and FREELY in the towns and out of the towns.” He was not successful, and he was put to death for making this demand. The Norman Barons were too well organized to permit the emancipation of the Saxon serfs, and from that time, at least, to this there has been a contest between the people struggling for open and free buying and selling, and the legislative authority intent on restricting them. However that may have been composed, and however it may have operated, it has always aimed at restraining buying and selling, and always endeavoured to turn the produce of the people's industry into the pockets of some favoured classes. Free trade with foreigners is only the extension of the free buying and selling our ancestors demanded; but peddling money dealers,—merchants, when their wealth enables them to buy an estate and recommends them to a peerage, and lawyers of whose servility nobility and land are the reward; the jumble of men who now inherit, with the possession of the land, some of the power acquired by the Norman sword, also adopt the opinion and prejudices of the conquerors, and persist in treating traders as serfs—in resisting free buying and selling, and in destroying trade without consulting either the laws of nature or the interests of the people.

We have now to apply those everlasting principles to the Corn Laws which impede, restrict, and prevent the cotton manufacturers of Manchester, the cutlers of Sheffield the woollen-cloth maker of Leeds, from freely exchanging the produce of their industry for the wheat of Poland and the flour of the United States. They prohibit all the trade, and no man can tell to what extent it might run between those manufacturers, and some men living under other governments. They are a grievous restriction on the honest industry of all the manufacturers, all the merchants, and all the shipowners, engaged in foreign trade. They not only restrict that trade, they annihilate a great portion of it; and annihilating it, put an end to the thousand useful and profitable occupations, far more than I can enumerate, connected with it. They are direct violations of the liberty which is every man's natural right.

They take away, in the enhanced price of bread, the property of every consumer of bread. In the first instance, they give it to the farmer, who however is only the tax-gatherer for another, and he hands it over, together with his share of the tax, for he pays it—to the owners of rent. I do not say how much the law takes away from the consumers to transfer to the landlords, for that is a varying and unascertainable quantity. It is enough for me that it takes something; and on a

question of principle, I give up my right if I only object to a wrong on account of its amount. A robbery is not to be excused, because it has been exercised on a beggar, and the booty has been only a penny. Our very rich law-makers may have no sympathies except with those who lose millions or provinces, but to take a mite indirectly by law from a widow, or half a potatoe from a hand-loom weaver, is as great a crime as to confiscate, by law, Lord Ashburton's dividends or to seize his estate. The Corn Laws are neither more nor less than a great robbery solemnly decreed by the owners of rent, on all other classes, in which, like all other robberies, a vast deal more property is wasted and destroyed than is transferred and enjoyed. The people are impoverished and starved, but the landlords are not enriched. The system is unmitigated malevolence.

I need not refer to any authorities to prove that such legislation, depriving the labourer of his bread, is contrary to the laws of God. If HE had inflicted on men the penalties of hunger and idleness—if HE had tantalized them with the knowledge that HE had placed abundance of food in another land—if, in addition, HE had given them the power to obtain it; and had wooed them, as it were, to go for it by making the necessary exercise of skill and industry no inconsiderable pleasure—if HE had enabled them to produce quantities of clothing and other useful things which the owners of the food wanted as much as the owners of the clothing want food—if HE had made the mutual exchange a mutual benefit, all of which HE has done; and if HE had, at the same time, denied our people the right to make the exchange, threatening them with everlasting punishment if they disobeyed; what better would the GREAT CREATOR be in our estimation, than the landowing Parliament of England? Then, instead of being, on account of infinite benevolence, the object of unbounded reverence, and on account of unfathomable wisdom, the object of worship impossible to be too profound, He would be no more worthy of honour than our numerous and hardy political quacks who live on smiling, and remorseless in the midst of the mighty ruin they have caused. If such restrictions as the Corn Laws be not opposed to the laws of God—then is the Almighty, speaking it with all reverence, no juster than the landed aristocracy. But these laws are condemned by all the principles which the human heart venerates, and holds to be sacred and divine.

You will naturally suppose that a law which sets at defiance all principles of justice and of reason, had some excuse in a great and overwhelming state necessity—that it was passed to save the country from invasion or the state from rebellion—that like the Septennial Act, which had for its excuse the apprehension that a Jacobite Parliament might betray the liberties of the nation, it was founded on some conviction that nothing else could save the people from a tyranny both civil and religious; that a solemn investigation preceded the enactment, and that the bulk of the people repined not at it, but rather welcomed it as a safeguard against a greater danger, as a man submits to the amputation of limb to save his life. Now, let me not on my own authority, but on the authority of the Prime Minister of the day, place the facts before you.

I will read to you a passage of a speech delivered by the Earl of Liverpool in the House of Lords on May 26th, 1820. This nobleman, you will recollect, was Prime Minister, in 1815, when the worst Corn Law was then passed; he, in fact, passed it, and of that law he thus spoke on the day I have mentioned.

“I was one of those,” said the Earl of Liverpool, “who, in the year 1815, advocated the Corn Bill. In common with all the supporters of that measure, I believed that it was expedient to *grant an ADDITIONAL protection* (which means additional price) *to the agriculturist*. I thought that after the peculiar situation of this country during a war of twenty years enjoying a monopoly in some branches of trade, although excluded from others; *after the unlimited extent to which*

speculation in agriculture had been for many years carried—(meaning the greedy purchasing of bad land by landowners at high prices)—and considering *the low comparative price* of agricultural produce in most of the countries of Europe; *the landed property of the country would be subjected to very considerable INCONVENIENCE* and distress, if some further legislative provision were not afforded to it. I thought the Corn Bill was advisable, with a view of preventing THAT CONVULSION IN LANDED PROPERTY which a change from such a war to such a peace might otherwise produce—(a momentary and temporary purpose);—on that ground, I supported the Corn Bill. During the discussion of that question, I recollect that *several PERSONS* were DESIROUS OF INSTITUTING A LONG PREVIOUS INQUIRY, (it was not, however, made,) and that others still more erroneously wished to wait for two or three years to see how things would turn out (no delay, however, was granted) before they meddled with the subject. At that time, I told those who maintained the latter opinion, that it appeared to me to be a most mistaken one. What I recommended was—to pass the Corn Bill (and thus to give a further, and, under the circumstances, I thought a proper protection to agriculture); but I delivered it as my opinion, that if it was not passed THEN IT OUGHT NOT TO BE PASSED AT ALL—and upon this ground, which, whether it be wise or not, it is at least intelligible—that I could conceive a case in which it might be expedient to give a further protection to the agriculturist; but that I was persuaded that the worst course which it was possible for the legislature to adopt, was to hang the question up in doubt and uncertainty, that THE CONSEQUENCE OF NOT LEGISLATING AT ALL WOULD BE, THAT RENTS WOULD FALL—THAT A COMPROMISE WOULD TAKE PLACE BETWEEN THE OWNERS AND OCCUPIERS OF LAND,—that the landlord and tenant would MAKE A NEW BARGAIN—and that if after all the distress incident to such changes, (that is, to rent falling and making new bargains,) had passed away, a new Corn Bill should be agreed to, IT WOULD BE MOST UNEQUAL AND UNJUST IN ITS OPERATION. I contended, that Parliament owed it to the interests of all—to the interests of the landlord, to the interests of the tenant—to the interests of the whole community—whether it decided to legislate on the subject or not, at least to decide;—to adopt a steady course, to attend to all the circumstances of that eventful period, and then to adhere with undeviating determination to whatever line of conduct its sense of public duty might prescribe. Such would have been my feeling had the Corn Bill been lost. In that case, I would never again have promoted it. Much more is it my feeling under existing circumstances, the Corn Bill having been adopted. Whatever may be the distress under which agriculture labours, I am convinced that there are no such certain means of aggravating that distress as perpetually to tamper with it by the adoption of new measures and new laws. Whatever may be the system adopted, LET IT BE ADHERED TO. Let the farmer and the tenant, let the buyer and the seller, know that it will be adhered to, and they will soon come to some arrangement for their mutual advantage.”

Thus then we have it distinctly proved that this law, which has such wide-spread influence on the community, which vitiates our currency—which cuts up trade by the roots—which has generated many hostile tariffs—which has severed the bounds of commercial amity with other nations—which has made England, by her convulsive demands for grain in other markets, a general nuisance, and which has through twenty-seven years contributed to starve her people, was passed to ward off a mere temporary exigency from the landed interest. The Minister was afraid that the rent-owners might be inconvenienced, that speculations in agriculture would fail, some noble Dukes and Hon. Members of Parliament having purchased at a high price great quantities of bad land, that if they did not make haste and pass this law, RENTS WOULD FALL,

compromises would be entered into, NEW BARGAINS would be made, and owners of rent would find, with the price of wheat, their NATURAL level in society. To prevent that, to arrest the course of nature, from such motives, and on such grounds, the owners of rent, caring nothing for society, in spite of reason and experience, and in defiance of the reclamations of almost all the town population, hastened to force on the people, at the point of the bayonet, an abominable law, which is the crowning example in our times of legislative injustice.

“Wretches hang,” it is said, with a bitter sneer—“wretches hang that jurymen may dine;” but what a trifle is hanging wretches that jurymen may dine, compared to starving a large portion of the nation, that landlords may not enter into a compromise with their tenants, and that prices may not fall to their NATURAL level. Lord Liverpool was reputed to be an honest, an amiable, and a considerate Minister; and yet he utterly overlooked and disregarded the fluctuations this law would cause in price, the trade it would annihilate, the foreign hostility it would engender, the bankruptcies it would produce, the poverty which was certain to follow in its train, the dearth it decreed, and the numerous painful deaths by starvation it would inflict. Though he recognized the injustice of its principles, regardless of its consequences, he passed it to save the landlords from the trouble of altering their leases. The description of a single lover ready to die rather than his mistress should suffer the least annoyance—

“God forbid my life should be weighed against ‘her least convenience’—

has been considered one of the grossest exaggerations of poetry; but this and every other poetic fiction fall, far before the reality of a great nation doomed for twenty-seven years to the miseries I have alluded to, arising from a want of food, in order to save a few rent-owners from arranging honestly and honourably with their creditors. A more monstrous thing is not to be found in the whole history of human folly, than thus to injure millions through a series of years for the sake of keeping up the rent-rolls of a few landlords, and retaining in their hands the estates they had mortgaged.

Lord Liverpool’s successors, I regret to say, have been neither wiser nor more considerate than Lord Liverpool. The most appalling pictures of distress have been laid before the legislature, and both Whigs and Tories have beheld them unmoved. It has been proved in Parliament, that hundreds and even thousands of industrious people are starving in garrets and cellars on less than 2d. a day each, surrounded with all that is inimical to health, comfort, and morality; it has been proved, that some have invented and many have applied a new art of sustaining life by moistening the mouth with water and placing the body in a recumbent posture; it has been proved, that many of them were reduced to that state which in olden times was inflicted as a punishment on a mighty monarch for his impiety, and were obliged, like Nebuchadnezzar, to feed on the green nettles they could gather from the fields and the hedges; and that some of them were reduced to a condition to which even the Israelites never condemned their enemies, and were obliged, like the most loath-some reptiles, to dig up and feed on the carion that had been buried to avoid contagion; but all these pictures of terrible, and I believe—at least in Europe—almost unheard-of woe have made no more impression on Lord Liverpool’s successors, than their non-existence in his time made on him. Nothing has been thought of or regarded by them but rent and the convenience of the rent-owners—and the most frightful miseries of the great multitude have been considered as the merest trifle compared to the probability—and even the possibility—that were the starvation laws totally repealed—some few gentlemen’s incomes, including the Bishops

and the rest of the Clergy, might fall fifteen or twenty per cent. Whether the conduct of our statesmen has been caused by ignorance or malignity, the public effects have been the same, and for the most trifling and even doubtful advantages to a few rent-owners, the happiness of the millions has been unscrupulously sacrificed.

Latterly, both Whigs and Tories have begun to pay something like attention to the question; but the reason for the alteration in their conduct is by no means creditable to them, nor does it invite our confidence. They did not take it up till the tax-bearing power of the people began to diminish. When the revenue fell off, and when rents began to come down, then they began to find out that possibly it might not be advantageous to the Treasury and to the Aristocracy to ruin trade and starve the people. Lord Liverpool, I repeat, was an honest and amiable man, and a favourable sample of the whole lot of statesmen; and his careless and ignorant dooming of the nation, without inquiry, to all the horrors which have resulted from his Corn Law, however reprehensible and disgusting, was not half so bad as the conduct of his successors, who have continued the laws in opposition to the prayers of the people, after their ruinous effects had been made palpable. His conduct, too, was almost infinitely praiseworthy compared to the conduct of that statesman at the head of the monopolists, who broke up the late administration, and consigned the people to a longer period of suffering, in order to prevent a trifling improvement in these atrocious laws. Now that the revenue is falling rapidly, now that rent is coming and must come down, the question will be again taken up with some view to consider all its bearings; but if the revenue, and if rent had flourished, the people, I feel warranted in asserting, might have perished uncared for by the legislature, and might have been extinguished by the direst misery and the most painful deaths.

It is, indeed, said, that these who passed the Corn Laws, alarmed at the increase of a town population, deliberately limited the supply of food, that they might, in direct contravention both of the revealed and discovered laws of God, prevent the multiplication of the people. Knowing not that population carries with it its own laws, extending civilization and improving morality as it increases—they were afraid of God's creatures, and they secretly attempted to starve them down to a manageable number. We must be slow to believe that such diabolical intentions were ever entertained by those who ask and obtain the confidence of the people in order to protect them. No such motive was avowed in 1815; but when we recollect their regardlessness of the lives of the people, such an intention is not very foreign to their habits. When we now find, too, that one organ of the landlords says the country could dispense with its manufactures; and another implies that it would be a benefit were half the metropolis and other towns razed, and when we find that all the writers of the aristocracy and IDLE classes are continually pouring forth vehement abuse of our industrious, ingenious, and starving people, we are forced, however reluctantly, to admit that the Corn Laws are retained because some of the aristocracy hate and dread the free and independent population of the towns.

This great system of cruel injustice is only defended by shallow and scarcely plausible sophistry. Men rack their imaginations to find reasons why doing right in legislation must be doing evil. Never yet was a gross wrong committed by a tyrant, but fools and flatterers invented pretexts for praising it. If it were necessary to refute such sophistry, it has been amply done. In the press, I have in common with other persons continually examined, and helped daily to expose, though with some shame, the flimsy justification which is put forth of legislative plunder and starvation. There is no reason, except an unworthy deference to those who make laws—as if they were gods rather than weak and foolish men like ourselves—why we should not spurn with

indignation the shallow defence of such crimes, as we spurn with indignation all apologies for the similarly detestable, though in their consequences infinitely less important crimes of a Good or Greenacre. It is full of danger to give a sanction to criminality in the masquerade of solemn enactments deliberately disguised by such words as protection and independence, to impose on the public understanding. The many hideous crimes we deplore in individuals are made feasible and encouraged by the legislative crimes which the public are thus betrayed into permitting and applauding.

I need not dwell on the effects of these laws, they are already burnt into the heart by that sad and sorrowful condition of our intelligent and powerful community which I have brought before you. Here, to account for it, we have a great system of legislation founded on barefaced injustice, the palpable effects of which are wholesale robbery and lingering starvation. I may, however, remark, that almost all the moral and physical phenomena of society may be traced to the relation between population and food; when abundance prevails, men are affectionate and kindly, and prone to love every thing around them. A satiated tiger may be played with as securely as a lady's cat; but woe to the individual who comes within his spring when he is ravenous. Serious and violent crimes are generally committed by individuals who belong to the classes habitually a prey to destitution. There is no modern example of a well-fed Alderman or a well-fed Bishop committing a murder. Men can only be kindly affectionate, and moral when they are reasonably well fed.

The want or deficiency of food is obviously at the bottom of all the distress, misery, discontent, and crime, which are the real curses of society. When food is deficient for any length of time, there must of necessity be a deficiency of clothing, because men will part with everything to get food. There must, for the same reason, be a deficiency of furniture, a want of all kinds of conveniences and luxuries, and an absence of all comfort from the dwellings of the poor. Hence our population are now wretchedly clothed and lodged—as is set forth by the doleful, and to our rulers disgraceful, report of the Commissioners for inquiry into the sanatory condition of the people.

Their uncleanly persons, their squalid habitations, their neglect of decency—spreading by example their own vices, and by contagion the diseases to which they are a prey, through society, are all the consequences of a scarcity of food. Starving men cannot cultivate the social affections, the fine arts, or attend to science. All attempts, therefore, to improve the morality and the minds of the millions, even by Lord Wharncliffe's singing classes, while there is a deficiency of food in the land, must all be hopeless and vain.

"In the moral system, it is a part of the wise arrangements of Providence, that no member shall suffer alone—that, if the lower classes are involved in wretchedness and beggary, the more elevated shall not enjoy their prosperity unimpaired. That constitution of society is radically unsound, of which the inferior order is vicious and miserable; a wretched and degraded populace is a rent in the foundation, or (if we may be allowed to change the figure) a taint of rottenness at the root of society, which will infallibly wither and decay its remotest—I will add, also, its loftiest—branches be they ever so high. Alarming as the present aspect of affairs unquestionably is, the most appalling feature of the times is the prevailing discontent of the lower orders—discontent arising, not so much from the infusion of speculative principles, as from the impression of actual distress. Alleviate their distress,—convince them at least of your solicitude to do it,—and you extirpate the seeds of disaffection far more effectually than by all the arts of intimidation; but, if an insensibility to their sufferings in the higher orders goads them to despair, nourishes an appetite

for change, and prepares them to lend themselves to the sophistry of artful demagogues and unprincipled empirics, what will be the consequence, but a divided and distracted empire, where, instead of uniting to consolidate the sources of national prosperity, the necessity of employing one part of the nation in the coercion or punishment of the other dissipates its efforts, and cripples its energy? We have the highest authority for asserting, that 'a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand,' and surely no schism in the body politic can be more fatal than that which alienates the hands from the head—the physical strength of society from its presiding intellect."³

Hunger and anger are closely allied in meaning and derivation; and there is no crime to which the former may not prompt; even polished gentle women, when exposed to famine, have shared the cannibal meal which their companions have begun by murder, and similar effect is produced by the hunger to which the law dooms the people. They are made savage by semi-starvation; daily do we hear of crimes at which men put up their hands, call them unenglish, and wonder who could do them. Hungry men, is the answer; or if not men actually hungry—men of robust nature, in whom the prevalent emotions of the distressed class become intense and active—for there is a kind of fashion in human sympathies as well as in dress, and kindled emotions spread through all—men whose minds are modeled by the general savageness caused by hunger, are the great criminals of society. To continue the community exposed to a want of food, is to doom it by law to crime and barbarianism.

Our Corn Laws, thwarting the exertions of all the industrious classes and of all the inventions of ingenuity, which have as their main and ultimate object to procure first plenty of food, and then only conveniences and luxuries,—thwarting all the strivings of the human race at all times, for even the object of plunderers is first to get plenty of food,—thwarting, therefore, the whole course of man's best and noblest aspirations—for genius must be fed—the Corn Laws were passed and are maintained, depriving industry, exertion, and ingenuity of the reward which Providence bestows on them; the Corn Laws were passed to keep down and cut short the supply of food; and when we find that the people want food, and wanting food, want clothing, want cleanliness, want comfortable habitations, want decency, want kindness, and want morality, why should we seek beyond these laws for the cause of our immense and our intolerable woes? The people want food because the *paternal* legislature has ordained a dearth! They want employment because their protectors have placed fetters on their industry. I cannot foresee the course of events. I put my trust in human nature, not in landlords' nature, and I say, let us break these fetters,—let us put an end to the law *ordained famine*,—let us give the people fair play, and allow them to get as much food as possible by their own honest labour, and under the guidance of Him who is in "the void waste as in the city full," they will soon outgrow, or diligently remedy, all other social disorders.

There is hope, gentlemen. Inquiries are making, and indications are given, that if the people will only reverence the ministers and the aristocracy, and will continue to trust and worship them, in spite of experience, something will be done. Be ye not deceived, however, by such lures. Never did the multitude get any legislative improvement from the ruling few, as Mr. Bentham has said, but by making them uneasy. If Sir Robert Peel, a deserter from every principle he has expounded, be inclined, now that he sees the revenue going rapidly to decay, to put down the laws he built up a party and took office to support—inflicting eighteen months' unnecessary misery on the people,—if he be now inclined to betray his trusting com-rogues, we will not oppose him, though we must at the same time give him, and all other men in his situation, distinctly to understand that we will put up with no modification of the sliding-scale,—that we will tolerate a fixed duty,

nor a duty to slide away half-a-dozen years hence,—that we never will sanction half a felony, nor be contented with a promise hereafter to take the fetters off our industry, and then allow us to eat our own bread. We are sure of our foundations, we know that our demands are built on eternal justice, and whoever, as the representative of the landlords, may have the disgraceful task of putting into a legislative form the acknowledgment of their iniquity or their ignorance—of giving what Mr. Burke called “a technical dress” to a free trade in food—we never will be contented as long as a remnant of these laws, the latest offset of feudal tyranny, and the latest proof of the slavery of industry to idleness, shall remain on the statute-book. We repudiate them entirely and totally, both for themselves and the system of which they are the sign and a part, both because they are a sin and an oppression, an impious opposition to nature, and an insult to every free man. Through the whole of this century, under the influence of public opinion, warranted by philosophy and experience, with the exception of these laws, the course of our commercial policy has been uniformly favourable to the removal of restrictions on industry. They are as contrary, therefore, to the progress of civilization as to all moral principles, and having been some of the last bad laws enacted ought to be amongst the first to be immediately, wholly, and for ever destroyed.

We know, from dire experience, the character of these laws—we know the deep distress they have caused—we know that our legislators have, year after year, turned a deaf ear to our petitions and our prayers, and knowing these things, it now behoves us to consider seriously what we have to do. Heaven helps them who help themselves, and to deserve its favour we must put our own shoulders to the wheel. As a last resource, we are required, by a united and firm declaration, to uniform rent-owners and law-makers, explicitly and without any disguise, that we are thoroughly aware of the motives and the disastrous effects of their legislation, and we most solemnly warn them, being ourselves deeply interested in the preservation of the public peace, that they must not and cannot count on the continued respect and obedience of the people—because that is contrary to human nature—if they persist in their unrighteous course. The time has come when we must clearly tell the law-makers that their decrees cannot convert wrong into right; and that for us to obey them on this point would be to set at defiance the far higher authority by obeying which we live and move and have our being.

In these critical and alarming circumstances the Anti-Corn Law League proposes a plan of association for your adoption, and asks for your support. That League is no knot of theorists, proposing some Frenchified police as the means of promoting security, or borrowing from that and other despotic lands a centralized system of providing for the people, of which bastiles and the shortest possible allowance of food are the outworks; nor does it propose some Prussian scheme of drilling mankind into order, as if they were made only for royal discipline or some nice adjustment of punishment to human endurance, by which country gentlemen, by summary conviction, may torture some thirty or forty thousand persons per year without actually putting them to death, though that sometimes occurs;—the League proposes no great untried and coercive scheme of making men better than God has made them; it is no squad of heated enthusiasts; it pretends to no occult means of making men happy; it is no band of Mormonites, headed by a cunning prophet; nor does it, like many of those who revile it, seek wealth and dominion here by threats of punishment elsewhere. The League is a union of practical manufacturers and merchants, who seek only freedom for buying and selling, and who have been driven by the direful effects of the Corn Laws from their peaceful industrious occupations into a great scheme of political agitation. They feel the pinching shoe. They see the multitude perishing around them

without the power to help or save them. Every day they are practically convinced that if they were at liberty to buy food of all kinds when they like and where they like, they could sell cutlery, cottons, woollens, and earthenware; they could employ the thousands of unemployed hands around them at good wages, and relieve some of the misery which weighs heavily on every part of the community. It is, at the same time, true that they would thereby benefit themselves. They neither conceal nor deny this. They make it the ground of their appeal to the nation—justifying in the strongest manner the course they adopt, by proving that it would benefit the public and would benefit themselves. Plain practical men, feeling a great grievance, they ask, showing good cause for that demand, all their fellow-subjects to aid them in procuring redress. They do not go to the legislature to demand cheapness or even abundance, though both, they believe, will be the consequence of the repeal. They ask no favour, they barely demand justice, they require only that the landlords' yoke be broken, and that the people be allowed to feed themselves, and they trust that abundance and cheapness would then gladden the land, giving prosperity to all classes at home and ensuring peace abroad.

Some persons reproach the League with violence and impracticability, for demanding that the Corn Laws be immediately and totally repealed. If I made any charge against the League, it would be that it does not go far and fast enough, and does not carry out the principles it advocates to their proper conclusions, and therefore, perhaps, it has not received all the support it deserves. Having demonstrated that the legislature has committed the enormous crime of violating the property of the people, and starving some of them out of existence, what more natural than to demand that the great criminal should expiate its enormous guilt by forfeiting its own social existence? The crimes committed against the community by Charles I. were innocence itself compared to the crime of stopping the supply of food. But the League, far from seeking to destroy the legislature, or even to remodel it on any Chartist principle, humbly and respectfully solicits it merely to remove its bowstring from the neck of the national industry. It asks, indeed, that this should be done immediately, it asks that it should be done entirely, and that no little end of the lash may be left wound round, impeding the flow of blood, if it be not tight enough to strangle. Surely there is no intemperance in humbly and modestly, yet determinedly, requesting a plunderer to take at once his hand out of your pocket and his pistol from your throat. The Corn Laws constitute the coping-stone of a huge system of injustice, all of which must be removed, and the League shows its moderation and its wisdom by beginning to remove that which binds the whole together, so as to enable us hereafter gradually and safely to take it entirely down.

Do not be frightened by the assertion that our whole system is so artificial and complicated that we cannot safely alter it. Those who defend it by such arguments imply that wrong must be eternal. We are bound, according to them, to continue for ever the vicious and unholy system which ignorant and selfish men have imposed on us. "The fact," says Mr. Culloch, a gentleman not favourable to our agitation, "of a departure having been made on one or more occasions from the sound principles of the freedom of industry can never be alleged as a sufficient reason for obstinately persevering in a line of policy which has been ascertained to be most inimical to the public interest, or for refusing to embrace the earliest opportunity of reverting to a better system. To act on such a principle would be to perpetuate the worst errors and absurdities, and would be a proceeding utterly inconsistent with all the ENDS AND OBJECTS OF GOVERNMENT." Let us not, then, be daunted or checked by any such idle assertions that to put an end to scandalous wrong will be fatal to the public prosperity. That would be to deny the moral government of the world, to lose all faith in Providence, and submissively to worship the demon of evil.

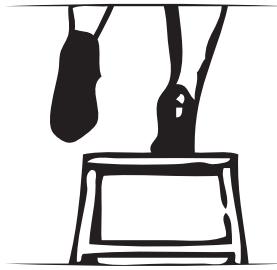
Gentlemen, the cause of the League is the cause of truth and justice—the cause of trade and honest industry. If you live by the sweat of your brow or the toil of your minds, it is your cause. It is the cause of every industrious man, and every man who wishes for freedom. Hasten, therefore, to secure its success. By your power is monopoly maintained. In Britain public opinion gives the law to Parliament, and yours will be, as it now is, the punishment; for the people are the victims of bad laws, and yours will henceforth be the blame, should the Corn Laws be continued.

I am not sure that to repeal them will or can now save the nation from decay; but I am sure that as long as they last it cannot flourish. Nor do I assert that our task will be done when they are abolished. There are other laws to be amended or abolished, but our first object—which is indeed the main object of all human exertions—must be to get plenty of food. Our only chance of restoring our beloved country to prosperity, of healing those bitter dissensions which spread far and wide through the land, of giving adequate wages to the working classes, security to the middle and upper classes, and confidence to all, is to repeal at once and for ever these desolating laws.

The time will come, I believe it is not far off, when reason, truth, and justice will prevail, and when even the landlords will help us to abolish these laws. Then there will be no man living who will not be ashamed, should this great and holy cause have been made to triumph without his cordial assistance. None of you, I trust, will place yourselves in so humiliating a position; you will all, on the contrary, each in his sphere, and each according to his gifts and means, exert yourselves to rescue our country, and even human nature, from this horrible legislation. I take my leave of you, by earnestly praying that our united efforts may be followed by free and complete success.

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Thomas Hodgskin
A Lecture on Free Trade

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