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FRIENDS OF THE PEOPLE.

Freemasons Tavern, 30th May, 1795.

AT A GENERAL MEETING OF THE SOCIETY OF THE FRIENDS OF THE PEOPLE, ASSOCIATED FOR THE PURPOSE OF OBTAINING A PARLIAMENTARY REFORM, HELD THIS DAY.

WILLIAM SMITH, Esq. M. P. in the Chair.

THE Society having duly considered the Principles and Plan of Parliamentary Reform contained in the following declaration:

RESOLVED,

That they do approve thereof, and recommend it to the consideration of the public.

AT the period when we resolved to suspend our proceedings, we saw this country not only involved in the calamities inseparable from a ruinous unsuccessful war, but exposed, as many of us thought, to a direct and imminent danger. In such circumstances, it was our duty to consider, whether the efforts of this Society in support of the cause of Parliamentary Reform, which in more favourable times and circumstances had failed of success, were likely to be attended with better effect, or even to be received with approbation; whether, in fact, we might not be instrumental in exciting discontent and promoting divisions among the people, in the face of an enemy, whose successes on the continent at that juncture had rendered them more formidable than ever; and whether, in prudence, we ought to take any step, by which we might incur the suspicion, so easy to be converted into accusation, of taking advantage of the public danger to weaken the hands of government, when the united strength of the kingdom might be wanted for its defence. To these considerations we yielded, as long as they appeared to carry any colour of reality, or to be capable of furnishing a pretence to discredit the character of this Society. In the immediate situation of the country, or in the impression it makes on the minds of the people, we see nothing, that ought to prevent us from resuming our proceedings and finishing the task we have undertaken.

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The abuse and grievance of the actual representation of the Commons in Parliament have been fully and repeatedly stated to the nation, and directly to the House of Commons. The facts are undisputed, the grievance is undervalued, and the abuse is defended. That we may not, however, leave any part of *our* duty unperformed, we shall now state, in one view, and in as narrow a compass as the subject will admit of, our object, our principles, and the remedial measures we recommend. Concerning the first, there will probably be no difference of opinion among any, who think a reform necessary. The second we shall endeavour briefly to explain and enforce. On the third, we solicit assistance, and are open to correction.

Our object is to obtain and secure to the Commons of Great Britain, a real representation in Parliament, freely chosen by themselves, independent of the nobility and of the crown, and amenable at short intervals to the judgment of their constituents. If it were possible to obtain and secure this object, by any means, in which the interests and powers, at present in possession of the elections, were likely to concur, and if it belonged to us to arbitrate between the right of the Commons at large, and the personal claims of purchase, possession, or prescription, we might be content to yield to measures of accommodation, and endeavour to compound, in the first instance, with the actual occupants of the common property, on reasonable terms of concession. But, since it is evidently impracticable at once to satisfy the interest and to remove the abuse, we shall not waste our thoughts in attempting to reconcile contradictions, but proceed to deliver the positive principles, on which we act, and the plan we have in view, without considering any difficulties but those, which belong to the operation in itself, and leave the compensations, which may be claimed by individuals, to be considered by the prudence and measured by the equity of a future independent House of Commons.

First, then, we conceive it to be indisputable, that in every society, in which industry is meant to be encouraged, and the acquisition of property permitted, that property is as well entitled to protection from the laws, and should be equally guarded by the institutions of the government, as the liberty or life of the proprietor. We do not say that the objects are of equal importance, but that they are equally entitled to protection. The medium we

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take will be found to answer every rational claim of protection to persons, as well as of security to property. For all the practical uses of representation, the poorest man in the kingdom will find himself as effectually represented by our plan of election, as if he voted in it himself. The true interests of the poor are intimately connected with the true interests of the wealthy, and inseparable from those of the ranks immediately above poverty. To some, we trust, the acquisition of the active vote will be a spur to industry, and a reward of conduct; nor can it be fairly said that any man is excluded, for whom a place is reserved, which he may occupy at any time on easy terms. Understood in this sense, and formed on these principles, the representation in Parliament would be really and substantially universal.

Admitting the general right of voting at elections to be common and personal, the exercise of it, on the principle we have stated, must be subject to a qualification; so moderate, however, that there may be no condition of life in which it may not be acquired, by labour, by industry, or by talents. If, in the end, it should furnish an election, as we believe it would do, for the whole united kingdom, by nearly a million and a half of heads of families, enough would be done to guard the rights of property on one side, and to satisfy the rational claims of personal representation on the other; and if a constituent power, so formed, so extended, and so limited, be not sufficient to create a free and independent House of Commons, the case is desperate; the object can never be obtained.

Such is the medium, by which we think that all the useful and effective purposes of a reform in the construction in the House of Commons, would be sufficiently answered. More perfect schemes or accurate theories may be formed on paper; but the perfection of such schemes is generally found to fail in practice. They, who hope to succeed in practical measures of general operation, must yield to circumstances which they cannot command, must apply their principles no further than they will go with safety, and be satisfied with general effects. That final issue between two contending interests, with which neither of them is thoroughly contented, is very likely to be the best for them both. At first sight it looks like bravery to run into extremes; but we are perfectly sure that to keep the middle path, and to be ready to encounter the violence of either side, or of both when they unite, as they very often

do, is the surest proof of political courage, as well as of prudence and virtue. If no qualification be required of the elector, for what reason, and on what consistent principle should it be demanded in the candidate? If property be at all a sign of independence, or a pledge for conduct, there can be no distinction, except in the degree, between the trust reposed by the constitution in him who chooses, and him who is chosen; they are both intrusted with a function and a duty, in the due performance of which, the community have an interest, and a right to be secured. You cannot, without a contradiction, demand a qualification in one without requiring it in the other. By not demanding it from either, that is, by leaving it open to the unqualified elector, to choose an unqualified candidate, it is true, the inconsistency would be saved; but then the possible consequence might be, that a majority of the House of Commons might consist of persons as ignorant, as incapable, and as venal as the lowest and most profligate part of the community. Is it a question to be debated among men, whose judgement has been formed by reflection, or improved by education, or corrected by experience, whether such a House of Commons would be competent to make laws for the community, or be fit to be trusted with the power of taxation?

It is undoubtedly desirable, for many reasons, that the collective body of qualified electors should be as numerous as possible; but principally because a great number of electors is of itself a better security against corruption than the severest laws against bribery, by making the individual vote of no venal value, and hardly worth solicitation. The security on the other side, against violence and faction, depends on the personal circumstances, character, and situation of the voters. To exclude the effect of influence and favour on human actions is impossible; but it may reasonably be expected that, when the elector has something to give, and nothing to sell, his inclination and his judgement will go together, and determine him in favour of the worthiest candidate. A House of Commons chosen on these principles, by the combined operation of property and population, will be free and independent, if any thing can make it so. To keep it free, and independent of any influence or interest, but that of their constituents, the choice of new representatives must frequently revert to the people.

This is the foundation of the plan we recommend. To

carry it into effect, a considerable alteration must be made in the present distribution of the elective power. To reach the numbers, by whom the power ought to be exercised, it must be distributed equally and impartially over the whole surface of the kingdom. To obtain that end, the most certain and the easiest course, undoubtedly, would be by a new division of the country, for the single purpose of electing a fair and equal representation, *and for no other*. We do not propose to change any thing, which can be left in its present shape and station, consistently with the accomplishment of the main purpose. To us it appears that a new division is indispensable, and that we should only cheat ourselves and deceive the nation, if, for the sake of a useless accommodation, we yielded to any project or concession, in which this condition were not included. What we want is a free House of Commons and a real representation. Any measure of reform, which does not really give and effectually secure that object, is more than unprofitable, and the efforts to obtain it worse than thrown away. For if any considerable move in this business should once be made without success, is it rational to expect, that the nation would ever be brought to make a second? The whole measure, therefore, must not only be equal to the whole of its purpose, but it must move together, and act at once with all its force. Gradual alterations, or progressive improvements, which some men recommend, would all be successively absorbed, and sink into the standing system. Partial remedies serve only to soften the symptoms, and to induce a habit of acquiescence, while they leave the root of the evil entire. If an effectual reform of the House of Commons is not to be had *now*, let us take care not to make it unattainable hereafter by any act of agreement or composition with the mischief itself, or with the interests that support it. Much may be expected from the progress of events in their present course. In better times, the measure may be carried by consent; in worse, by necessity.

On these principles we say,
1st. That every householder in Great Britain, *paying parish taxes*, except Peers, should have a vote in the election of one member of parliament.

The species of property, which constitutes this qualification, has the advantage of being open, ostensible, and incapable of being disputed. It indicates a real residence,

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and implies a stationary interest in the place, for which the vote is given and the representative chosen. But, besides the possession of a competent property, of which the occupation of a house paying taxes is a sufficient presumption, a householder has other qualities, which ought to recommend him to a favourable distinction, and particularly to the trust in question. He is necessarily the master, and probably the father of a family. In the first character, he has a personal credit and respect to maintain; in the second, he has given hostages to society. He is the natural guardian and virtual representative, not only of his family and servants, but of all those, who depend upon him for support, protection, or employment. Such a station deserves confidence, and should be made respectable, that all men may be prompted and encouraged to rise to it. The relations and duties, that belong to it, are antecedent to positive institutions, and constitute at once the basis and security of civil society.

If a more effectual or a more convenient scheme than our's could be contrived to put the persons, so qualified, in possession of their vote, we should be ready to accede to it. We consider the means only, as they may best insure the end. To us it appears, that supposing the whole number of parishes in England and Wales to be 9,913, and the whole number of houses paying taxes to be 1,231,200; this last number, divided by the number of persons to be chosen, ought to exhibit the number of householders entitled to return one member to parliament, viz. 2,400; that then the whole number of parishes should also be distributed into 513 divisions, each division to consist of so many parishes as may together contain the number of houses required, or nearly so, without regard to fractions, and lie contiguous to one another; and, if possible, round the principal parish of the division, which should be the center of the election, and at which the returns from the other parishes should be received and made up, and the election declared. By dividing the country into single districts, the absurdity and inconvenience of choosing two persons, very often of opposite principles, to represent the same place, would be avoided. Such agents, instead of uniting to serve their principals, can only be employed in counteracting each other, if they act at all, and finally leave their constituents without an effective voice in Parliament. Few of those, who now possess a vote, would be deprived of it by this plan. If it should

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appear, however, that the number of freeholders and copyholders, of the yearly value of forty shillings, who might not be householders, should be sufficient to deserve consideration, there could be no objection to the admission of persons, so qualified, to vote in the parish, and for the division, where their property lay. The vital principle of the plan is to embrace the greatest possible number of electors, consistently with a reasonable and moderate qualification.

2d. The election of the whole representation of the kingdom should be made at the same hour, and on the same day.

3d. The same principles and proceedings, which are proposed for England, to be followed in Scotland, and every solemnity observed in the conduct of the elections, in both kingdoms, which can tend to make it grave, serious, and respectable.

4th. That wages should be paid to members serving in Parliament, and not holding offices under the Crown, not by the particular division for which they are elected, but out of the revenue of the public, for the general interest of which the constitution intends them to serve.

5th. Supposing all the preceding measures to be adopted, and not otherwise, we then are of opinion, that a general election for the whole kingdom might be conducted without tumult or expence, and completed in a few hours; that every fair and honest objection to shortening the duration of Parliaments would be removed, and that in future the elections might be triennial, biennial, or even annual as they were in former times. Members of Parliament, who acted faithfully, would generally be re-chosen; but it is neither safe nor constitutional to leave any representative very long out of the reach of his constituents.

We do not enter now, because this is not the time for it, into the detail of subsidiary acts and provisions, which belong to the execution of the plan, and would be necessary to ensure the full effect of it. But we have sufficiently considered the subject in all its parts to be able to affirm, not that, in the course of so great an operation, there are no difficulties to be encountered, or no inconveniences to be incurred, but that either they are not of a nature to be regarded in comparison with the object, or that they may be easily removed by skill and contrivance.

The only material doubt which this distribution of the elective power suggests, is whether, in favour of the less

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populous parts of the kingdom, it might not be necessary or adviseable to make a distinction between those parts and some of the great cities and populous towns; that is, whether, in the latter, the choice of each member should not require a greater number of electors than in the former. If this, after due consideration, should be thought a serious difficulty, we have no doubt that measures may be found to qualify or remove it. When once the individual vote is made to be of no saleable value whatever, as by the operation of this plan it must be, other difficulties will vanish or subside, because no other interest or value, attached to the vote, will be much insisted on, or regarded.

After long deliberation, we have fixed on a specific plan, and declared it without reserve. We ask the friends of reform in general, whether it be possible to create and secure a free and independent House of Commons by any measure less vigorous, or by any operation less extensive than that, which we propose? There is no œconomy in stinting the expense, if the object is not to be accomplished without it; nor is the remedy compleat, that does not effectually guard against relapse.

Without a general concurrence of the country, we know how vain it is to oppose the honest zeal of a few individuals to the active interests, powers, and combinations, by which every attempt to reinstate the people in the possession of their constitution has been and will be resisted. We cannot serve the nation without their active approbation. But events may come in aid of argument, and create an opportunity, for which we ought to be prepared. It is not possible that the period can be very remote, when the distresses heaped on the surviving industry and perishing resources of the country; when the insatiable demands of government, not only exhausting the returns but invading the very sources of production; when the insupportable accumulation of debts and taxes, and the direct calamities of the war will have taught the people of Great Britain this salutary lesson, that, with a House of Commons reformed as it ought to be, such mischiefs might have been avoided, and may be prevented hereafter.

In name and by order of the Society.

(Signed) WILLIAM SMITH, Chairman.

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