A LETTER

ON

THE CORN LAWS,

BY THE

RIGHT HON. W. HUSKISSON,

TO

ONE OF HIS CONSTITUENTS,

In 1814.

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A LETTER, &c.

Hertford Street, May 28, 1814.

MY DEAR SIR,

A REPORT has reached me from various quarters, that the part which I have taken in the House of Commons, on the Corn Laws, has given offence to some of my constituents.

I have heard this report with great concern; but, considering the misrepresentations which are industriously circulated throughout the country, without much suprise.

In opposing, as I did, the Scheme of Sir HENRY PARNELL, for laying a prohibitory duty on the importation of foreign wheat, up to 84*s*. per quarter, and that of Mr. FOSTER, for prohibiting it altogether up to 100*s*. I have incurred the displeasure of many, who think that the British grower will not be sufficiently protected by the much milder

system which I have substituted. On the other hand, there are many others who think that the scale by which I have proposed to regulate the import is too high. I will not pretend to say that the circumstance of some condemning my suggestion, as not doing enough, and others, as doing too much, is any proof (though I think it affords some presumption) that the middle course which I have steered between the supposed opposite interests of the grower and consumer, is fair to both. But of this I am quite sure, that the far stronger measures which were proposed in the House, would not have been rejected, if an attempt had been made simply to negative them, without substituting some other measure in their stead.

It is unnecessary for me to trouble you with my reasons for opposing the stronger measures of Sir Henry Parnell and Mr. Foster; because I apprehend that, whatever objections are felt at Chichester against my plan, they are founded on the supposition, not that it does not go far enough, but too far for the protection of the British grower, and that the effect of it will be to press hard upon the consumer and the poor.

If I were not fully convinced that the consumer in general, but more especially that class of consumers whose subsistence depends on their own industry, would be benefitted by the proposed alteration, it would not have had my support. My sole object is to prevent (as far as human means can prevent) bread corn from ever again reaching the late extravagant prices. Can any man have witnessed the scarcities and consequent privations of the people during six or seven different seasons of the last twenty years, without feeling anxious to guard the country against the return of such severe distress? But if we wish to cure an evil of this alarming magnitude, we must first trace it to its source. What is that source? Obviously this—that, until now, we did not, even in good years, grow corn enough for our own consumption. Habitually depending on foreign supply, that supply was interrupted by war, or by bad seasons abroad. The war, it is true, is now at an end: but peace is, at all times, too precarious not to induce us to guard against the repetition of similar calamities, whenever hostilities may be renewed. But

even in peace, the habitual dependence on foreign supply is dangerous. We place the subsistence of our own population, not only at the mercy of foreign powers, but also on their being able to spare as much corn as we may want to buy. Suppose, as it frequently happens, the harvest in the same year to be a short one, not only in this country, but in the foreign countries from which we are fed—what follows? The habitually exporting country, France for instance, stops the export of its corn, and feeds its people without any great pressure. The habitually importing country, England, which, even in a good season, has hitherto depended on the aid of foreign corn, deprived of that aid in a year of scarcity, is driven to distress bordering upon famine. There is, therefore, no effectual security, either in peace or war, against the frequent return of scarcity, approaching to starvation, such as of late years we have so frequently experienced, but in our maintaining ourselves, habitually, independent of foreign supply. Let the bread we eat be the produce of corn grown among ourselves, and I, for one, care not how cheap it is; the cheaper

the better. It is cheap now*, and I rejoice at it; because it is altogether owing to a sufficiency of corn of our own growth. But in order to ensure a continuance of that cheapness, and that sufficiency, we must ensure to our own growers that protection against foreign import which has produced these blessings, and by which alone they can be permanently maintained.

The history of the country, for the last one hundred and seventy years, clearly proves, on the one hand, that cheapness produced by foreign import is the sure forerunner of scarcity; and, on the other, that a steady home supply is the only safe foundation of steady and moderate prices.

During upwards of one hundred years, up to the year 1765, the import of foreign corn was restrained by very high duties. What was the state of the country during those one hundred years? That, in ordinary seasons, our own growth supplied a stock of corn fully ample for our consumption;—that, in abundant seasons, we had some to spare, which we *exported*; that, in bad

* 72*s*. per quarter.

seasons, we felt no want, and were under no apprehension;—that the price of corn seldom varied more than a few shillings per quarter;—that we had no years of inordinate gain to the farmer, and of starvation to the consumer;—that prices, instead of rising from year to year, were gradually diminishing, so that at the end of this long period of a century, during which we never imported foreign corn, they were actually one-fifth lower than at the beginning of it. Would to God that we had continued this salutary system! But, in 1765, it was most unfortunately abandoned. What has been the result? Precisely the reverse of the former system. Instead of a steady supply, afforded at steady and moderate prices, we have witnessed frequent and alarming scarcities. Every year our dependence on foreign supply was increasing, till the war came, and, by interrupting that supply, greatly aggravated all our evils; for a country which depends on enemies or rivals for the food of its people, is never safe in war. In the first eighteen years of this war, we were forced to pay sixty millions of money (to nations, every one of whom has,

in the course of it, been our enemy) for a scanty and inadequate supply of foreign corn; and when, for this purpose, we had parted with all our gold, and even our silver currency, combined Europe shut its ports against us, and America, co-operating, first laid an embargo, and then went to war. This combination was formed with the vain hope to break our spirit by starving our bodies. We struggled hard, both at home and abroad, but by the struggle we have gained much. Abroad, we have subdued our enemies—at home, we come out of the war with our agriculture so extended and improved, as to make us at this moment independent of foreign supply. We are so at this moment; and shall I, who, to the entire conviction of my own judgment, have traced the long sufferings of the people to a contrary state of things, be deterred from using my honest endeavours in Parliament to prevent the recurrence of such sufferings? For that purpose we must go back to the principles of our forefathers; and, by reverting as much as possible to their system, we shall secure to ourselves and our posterity all the benefits which they derived from it.

I admit, that if unlimited foreign import, which the war had suspended, were now again allowed, bread might be a little, though a very little, cheaper than it now is, for a year or two. But what would follow? The small farmers would be ruined,—improvements would every where stand still—inferior lands now producing corn, would be given up, and return to a state of waste. The home consumption and brisk demand for all the various articles of the retail trader, which has so much contributed, even during the pressure of the war, to the prosperity of our towns (and especially of those which are not connected with manufactures or foreign commerce), would rapidly decline; farming servants, and all the trades which depend on agriculture for employment, would be thrown out of work; and the necessary result of the want of work would be, that wages would fall, even more rapidly than the price of bread. Then comes some interruption to the foreign import, coinciding with the decay of agriculture at home, and corn is suddenly forced up again to a famine price. Such, I conceive, would be the inevitable consequence

of again placing ourselves in a state of habitual and increasing dependence on foreign supply. Who, upon the long run, would profit by such a state of things? Certainly not the consumer, but precisely those who have profited too much already from a similar state of things—namely, the overgrown farmers with large capitals; they will be enabled, for two or three years, to bear up against the foreign import, and whenever that import is interrupted, the extravagant prices they will then be enabled to command, will more than repay the temporary losses which their poorer but not less industrious neighbour had not the means to withstand. Every acre thus forced out of cultivation, will ensure to them an ultimate increase of profit, and in proportion to that profit, will inflict an increased pressure on the consumer. To protect the small farmer, therefore, at this moment, is ultimately to protect the people. This is my sole object; and, whatever may be the fate of the Bill now in the House of Commons, I can most conscientiously declare is, in my opinion, the sole tendency of the plan which that Bill is calculated to carry into effect.

I have troubled you already at great length; but the subject is far too extensive to be properly discussed in any hasty communication, which my numerous avocations here will afford me leisure to hold with any of my constituents. For years it has occupied my attention; and for years, I can truly say, I have foreseen the necessity of adopting the principles on which the House of Commons is now acting.

If my constituents, upon mature consideration, should differ from those principles, I shall deeply regret that I cannot concur in their opinions. To them I owe every respect; and to their wishes it must be my first wish to show every possible deference. But on an occasion in which, after the most anxious reflection, my own conscientious judgment is satisfied, that the course which I have pursued is calculated to promote the best interests of the country, and to place the subsistence of the people upon a footing more stable and secure, more conducive to regular industry and individual comfort, I should hold myself unworthy of the trust which has been confided to me, and should indeed feel that I had betrayed it, if I were

to put even the risk of losing the goodwill of a part of my constituents (a momentary loss, I should trust) in competition with the discharge of a sacred public duty. They know and value their own independence, but in proportion as it is dear to them, they ought to respect mine. I must frankly say, if I cannot be their unfettered representative I cannot to any useful purpose represent them at all. To their services, which is that of the public, my time and attention in Parliament are steadily and cheerfully devoted. The only reward I look for is the kindness and confidence of those who have sent me there; but that reward, however valued, I can neither consent to purchase at the expense of truth, nor to retain by flattering the people to their ruin. If, unfortunately, this be the price which a Member for Chichester is expected to pay for that seat, which I deem it the proudest honour to owe to their free choice, it is a price which neither duty nor honour will permit me to pay; for I should then hold that seat by a tenure not less injurious to their interests, than degrading to the character of their representative.

These feelings you are at liberty to make known in any quarter you may think proper. I have thought that the occasion called for them—I have stated them without reserve, but with an undiminished sense of gratitude for the many favours and friendly offices for which I am indebted personally to you and many others, and generally to all my constituents.

Believe me, my dear SIR,

Very faithfully yours,

WILLIAM HUSKISSON.

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