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A FEW
WORDS
TO THE
AGRICULTURAL
COMMITTEE
OF EITHER HOUSE,
ON THE
PRESENT CRISIS.

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FEW WORDS, &c.

IN addressing the British Legislature, whoever gives birth to new principles, must expect them to be rigourously examined, as to their practical effect, if adopted; but, should he fail, by submitting to its consideration, positions that are untenable, he may console himself by reflecting that there is a candour and a liberality of thinking in men of enlightened minds, who compose the British Senate, that will always lead them to receive with indulgence, the efforts of any individual that are intended for the public good.

The want of a maximum on the price of bread, has, for a century or two past, produced much suffering and inconvenience to the internal concerns of the country, and equal disadvantage to its foreign trade.

Instead of the price of bread having been always kept so low as to form a small part only of the price of labour, and a standard to which the price of all other things should approxi-

mate—labour; from the want of such an assize, has formed a component part of the price of bread. Bread thus has kept pace with the fluctuation in price of articles of luxury, instead of remaining stationary, at a low price, as an article of the first necessity.

The great evil consequent upon this state of things, has been the high price both of bread and of labour, by which the utmost distress has frequently been experienced in our domestic affairs, and our competition in the foreign market for the sale of our home and colonial produce, has been constantly opposed and counteracted. This circumstance occasions the British merchant to be undersold on the continent, and a million and a half of money in bounties to be annually drawn from the pockets of the nation.

Although the public debt cannot be suddenly reduced, according to the exigency of the case, yet something might be done towards alleviating its effects, and much general benefit might result from the adoption of any measure that would enable the Government, through the aid of Parliament, to suspend or transfer, and raise from other sources, those taxes which bear directly upon the expence of agriculture, upon the price of the article of the first necessity, and upon the price of labour as affected by it. The reduction of the price of bread corn, the article of

daily consumption, by every individual in the community, would be felt and universally acknowledged, not only as a relief, but as an actual gain to every one; more especially to the lower classes of society, to whom bread makes so large a portion of their whole food. There is nothing incompatible in a low price of bread with a due profit to the farmer, if all his taxes were lessened to that end.

To accomplish, even on a small scale, so desirable an object as the reduction of the price of bread corn, by relieving the farmer from the taxes which enhance its price, and to replace to the Government the amount of the taxes thus suspended, let us suppose, as a temporary resource only, (for any expedient is better than none) that four millions of Treasury acceptances, or notes of five pounds each, should be issued, to be current for five years only, but renewable at the expiration of that period, upon the holder paying up the simple interest of 4 per cent. or 20s. upon each note for that time, the new note to have the interest thus paid added to the principal, making the new note to the holder 6l. instead of 5l.; and that Government should in five years more redeem them by a permanent tax, founded upon a general basis and eligible principle, as is hereinafter suggested. These notes could be conveniently introduced into the

payment of the Bank dividends, and would save the interest of the money usually borrowed for that purpose, as well as enable the Minister to meet any unforeseen exigency.

To carry the proposition into effect, after the issue of the notes, it would be necessary to appoint, or rather to select a committee of land owners and others from both Houses of Parliament, to determine on the instant application of the money thus raised, or a part of it, to the abatement of those taxes to the farmer, which would most effectually tend to the reduction of the price of bread corn. No man can calculate upon a return to peace prices, or that every thing will find its proper level so quickly and speedily as to avert the crisis impending the state of public affairs. Some decisive steps are necessary to lighten the general pressure, and to prevent any of the embarrassing consequences which otherwise might ultimately follow.

The first taxes to be suspended, and their amount raised from other sources, would be, it is submitted, the unredeemed portion of the land tax, the malt tax, and such or so much of the assessed taxes as bear directly upon the expence of agriculture. If the malt tax were to be raised by some other mode of taxation, so as to allow the lower classes of society to have the common beverage of porter or ale so cheap as to come more frequently within their purchase or reach, it is need-

less to comment on the spirit of content and satisfaction it would diffuse throughout the nation.

There is a false impression on the public mind, that any abatement of the malt tax, by lessening the price of beer, would lead to drinking and dissipation in the lowest orders; but that propensity in the very lowest orders, is at its climax already; yet were beer less in price there might be something left of their wages, from the public house, to take home to their wives and families. But it is to the class above the lowest order, who may be called the poor of the middling class, that the reduction of the price of beer would be a comfort and support.

During the operation of the measure, Government would have due time to consider in what way the redemption of those notes might be most conveniently effected, but more especially, how far the system of thus lowering the price of bread corn, and consequently of labour, by lessening the taxes on agriculture, might be extended and continued, by other taxes being substituted for those proposed to be withdrawn.

It is not intended or presumed to dictate the appropriation of such a sum of money as has been mentioned, on behalf of the public; but if it were applied to reduce the taxes on agriculture so as to lower the price of bread and labour; if it were applied to reduce the duty on malt, so as to lower

the price of beer; if it were applied to reduce the duties on tea, so as to lower the price of that article, the reduction of the prices of these three articles of daily and universal consumption, by each individual in the community, would ground a strong and irresistible claim on the public to replace to Government, by some other mode of contribution, the amount of the taxes thus withdrawn. This would be a commutation on a broader base than has yet been proposed, and for which a return could not but be cheerfully made, if the new subject of taxation were sufficiently extensive, and so modified and adapted, as to bear in due proportion on all those who contributed towards it. This we apprehend might be effected by a stamp tax of low and trifling value, on the books of account of merchants, dealers, and others. The labouring poor would be exempt from paying any part of this tax, would obtain bread, beer, and tea, at an easier purchase, and thus be essentially bettered in their condition.

The levy of this tax might precede, or at least be commensurate in time, with the reduction of the land tax, the malt tax, the duty upon tea, and some of the assessed taxes, in order that any application of the money raised to lessen the several taxes mentioned, might not be greater than that which the proceeds of the new tax would permanently cover and replace to the revenue.

How far the appropriation of these proceeds might be extended to the reduction of the taxes in question would readily appear, and be ascertained by the collection and receipts of one or two quarters of a year of the new tax, and would be a guide and rule to Government in reducing the other taxes progressively, as might prove convenient to their means, from the source of the new tax; but it appears easily practicable for this tax to be raised *gradatim*, and cheerfully paid, until it produced to Government the amount of the land tax, the malt tax, the duties upon tea, and a great part, if not all, of the assessed taxes, which bear upon the lower classes of society. This object would be fully accomplished by the raising of about 10,000,000*l.* in the mode proposed.

The transfer of the amount of the several taxes stated, and placing them upon a new ground and subject of taxation, to which the poor would be exempt from making any contribution, is too interesting to the nation not to well warrant a trial of its expediency. The favourable result of such an experiment could not fail to be warmly anticipated, and would cheer the whole population of the country.

Mr. Ricardo suggested, that the monied men of the country should subscribe as much out of their capital as would reduce 20 millions of taxes, but were this proposition providentially and miracu-

lously carried into effect, unless those taxes which affect the price of food, or rather bread, were at the same time specially relieved and reduced, if not actually annihilated, the condition of the poor would not be bettered; the penury and distress of the labouring classes would not be abated, and the balance in the foreign market would still be against our manufactures and exports. This is one of the vital objects to which the whole energy and momentum of the Government ought to be directed.

There is no way of lowering the price of labour, but by lowering the price of food, or rather bread, for bread is the food of the multitude; and to every reflecting mind, it must be a subject of the utmost regret, that the unceasing pressure of public affairs, during the war, and the many eventful occurrences since the peace, have not left leisure time to some able statesman or legislator to propose some still less exceptionable mode than that now offered for the transfer of those taxes, which we now submit for the relief of the poor and middling classes of society, as well as the general welfare of the state.

Were the result of the measure we have suggested sufficient to reduce the price of bread, beer, and tea, but one fourth part of their present prices, which is no unreasonable expectancy, the saving thereby in five years, in the price of bread

alone, would more than enable every holder of a note, with ample ease and advantage to himself, to pay up the simple interest of 4 per cent. or 20s. upon each note; but more certainly so upon the condition of a new note being given to him, with the amount of the interest thus paid added to the principal, making the new bill to the holder 6% instead of 5%.

Allowing twelve millions to the population of the country, it may be estimated, that they consume daily four millions of loaves of bread, and allowing their price to be one shilling each, equal in value to 200,000*l.* a day, or 73,000,000*l.* a year.

If we take one-fourth part from this sum, it will leave upwards of eighteen millions of property to be otherwise freely disposed of by individuals in the employment of labour, in the purchase of necessaries or conveniencies of life.

The reduction of the price of bread to a low standard of value, which should regulate the price of labour, and of all other things in contra distinction to the price of labour, being the standard of value for every demand of the community, would, it is apprehended, be attended with incalculable advantage to the country; as from the natural tendency of every necessary of life, to come down to the standard price of bread, a fall would ensue in the general market,

which would increase the means and property, and strengthen the hands of the nation, enable it to meet the foreign market on favourable terms, lessen our bounties and drawbacks, and raise the value of silver and gold.

The great anxiety and cry of the farmers is for prohibitions against the importation of foreign grain, and they call for protecting duties to prevent it; they would raise the price of corn, flour, and bread, until they made cent. per cent. of their produce, until they impoverished the whole community by their exactions, and made it impossible for the poor to live, or the rich to pay them for their labour when they employed them. But this false dread of importation is but a pretence to keep up the price of grain in favour of the landed interest. Corn laws, founded upon this view, arise from a gross mistake in legislation. Whoever buys cheap from his neighbour, and sells to him dear, their traffic together will be very short-lived. His neighbour will soon try to undermine him as his worst enemy. The true interest of the farmers can only be supported by the general welfare of the community—live and let live. That welfare depends on plenty of provisions; that plenty can only be regulated and maintained by the low price of bread. Relieve the farmer, therefore, from his taxes, until the price of corn, flour, and bread, is so low,

that no foreigner will venture into the British market with these commodities—then agriculture, manufactures, and commerce, will mutually prosper.

As a permanent ground of taxation (if no better can be found) to raise 10,000,000*l.* sterling, more or less, annually, by way of substitution for the land, malt, tea or other taxes proposed to be withdrawn, it is submitted, that a stamp tax, of very trifling value, be laid on every page of merchants, tradesmen, or dealers' books of account, or the tax may be laid aggregately on each book, for the whole book, instead of a stamp on each page, including every book in which a record is made of any contract, transaction, or dealing between individuals, civil or ecclesiastical.

The great and obvious distinction between the traders of this country, is that of wholesale and retail traders. It will be in the recollection of every one, that when the shop tax was laid on in Mr. Pitt's administration, it pressed upon the small traders, and suffered the wholesale dealers to escape. The tax now proposed would reverse the principle of the shop tax, it would press lightly on the small dealers, and bear duly on the wholesale dealers, and upon all, still in equal proportion to the extent of their dealings, it being evident that the wholesale merchant should bear a greater proportion of the tax than the retail trader.

This distinction being attended to, would afford a powerful recommendation of the tax, as it would introduce that equalizing principle into this tax, which was found wanting in the property tax, and be the very measure in desire by the community for regulating what every one ought to subscribe to—the necessities of the state. No receipt or voucher of a payment can be admitted as evidence in a court of law, unless it is upon stamped paper; this circumstance alone is a reason why every page of a merchant's book of account should be stamped, and would shew, that the tax now proposed, has broad grounds to support it; and it is to be observed, that the number of books, as well as the pages of these books of account, are greatly regulated by the measure and extent of every merchant's dealings, forming thereby an impartial basis of taxation for all.

All books of account must be bound before they are stamped. The books of account of merchants and traders, therefore, which are already in use, would produce no inconvenience or loss to them, as they could all be stamped, commencing the stamp from the date of the tax.

Allowing this tax to be laid, after being duly modified, and from a fair and just contribution, to raise ten millions, this sum would cover and replace to Government the amount of the land tax, the malt tax, the duties on tea, and about one half of

the assessed taxes. And it seems difficult to imagine a more grateful relief could be afforded to the public, than the reduction of the price of the three articles of the most general consumption; namely, bread, beer, and tea.

The merchants, and dealers of every denomination, would find the tax thus laid upon them, in great part repaid by the smaller price they would have to pay for the three articles of daily consumption now mentioned. But should any of the great dealers, from the number of their concerns and books, feel the tax press heavy upon them, an additional farthing a yard, or a farthing on the pound weight more, on any article of their trade, would return the excess they paid.

Adverting to the reduction which would ensue in the price of labour, and the approximation in price of every other article to the price of bread, when lowered as suggested, a fairer prospect of restoring to the country at large, a portion, even small, of its comfort and independence, can hardly be presented; and when bread should have declined to that price which would remove from the farmer all fear of foreign importation, it would then, perhaps, become time to move the legislature to consider the policy, as well as the humanity, of enacting, that the price of labour should always contain so many multiples of the price of bread, as would enable the labourer to

do something more with his wages than merely maintaining himself and family. Something ought to be left, to be saved by him for sickness, for contingencies, and old age. Were this principle to be acted upon, we should, in the first instance, pay to the labourer to reward and prevent him from ever becoming chargeable or burdensome to the Public, what we ultimately give to the poor rates. Thus the world is penny wise—by postponing the evil we think we shall escape it. But the law might as well direct it to be done in the first instance as in the last—in the form of wages, as well as in the form of poor rates.

FINIS.