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LETTER

ADDRESSED TO

JOHN CARTWRIGHT, ESQ.

CHAIRMAN OF THE
COMMITTEE AT THE CROWN AND ANCHOR;

ON THE SUBJECT OF

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM.

BY THE
EARL OF SELKIRK.

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A
LETTER
TO
JOHN CARTWRIGHT, Esq.

SIR, *Portland-Place, April 25, 1809.*

THE letter, in which you proposed to me to act as a Steward at the approaching meeting of the Friends of Parliamentary Reform, ought to have received an earlier answer: but I have not found it easy to command sufficient leisure to reply to it, in the manner which appeared to me due, both to the respectability of your character, and to the sentiments of esteem, which I know to have been entertained towards you by my father and brother.—Sensible that in many important points there is a coincidence of opinion between

us, while at the same time I feel it impossible to accede to your proposal, I wish to state at some length, the motives which influenced me in that determination.

To Parliamentary Reform my father and brother were, as you well know, zealous friends; and all my own early prepossessions were in favour of such a measure.—I saw with abhorrence the ascendancy, which unprincipled and worthless characters often acquired through the influence of corruption. I lamented the public advantages so often sacrificed to the interest of individuals. I was struck with the glaring manner, in which the practice of our Constitution appeared to deviate from its theory: and I flattered myself that if the representation of the people were put on a proper footing, these abuses would be eradicated;—that if the representation were equalized, the right of suffrage extended, the duration of Par-

liaments shortened, bribery could scarcely be applied with effect;—that the influence of corruption being thus removed, the real friends of the country would obtain the preference naturally due to worth and talents; and that, the House of Commons being so composed, every abuse would speedily be checked or thoroughly reformed.

Such, Sir, were the views upon which I was led to approve the proposal of a great and radical change in the constitution of the House of Commons. I believe, that through a similar train of reasoning, my father and brother had been led, as well as many other men of distinguished worth, to the same opinions. Of the correctness of this practical conclusion, I have since seen reason to doubt—not that my feelings of abhorrence and contempt for corruption and venality have undergone any change—in these sentiments I do not fall short of those honoured relatives with whose opinions you were well acquainted:

but I have had an opportunity, which they never had, of seeing the practical application of those principles from which we expected consequences so beneficial. With grief and mortification I perceived that no such advantages had resulted, as from theory I had been led to anticipate.

I allude to the observations which I had occasion to make in the United States of America, where a system of representation is established, approaching as nearly as perhaps is practicable, to the theoretical perfection at which you aim; and where that system is combined with a general diffusion of property, of itself calculated to check in a great degree the force of corruption. A very short acquaintance with the legislative proceedings of America may afford conviction, that universal suffrage and frequency of election prove no bar to the misconduct of representatives; and that a political adventurer, raised to power by popular

favour, is fully as likely to abuse that power, as is the purchaser of a rotten borough.

There is no ground for the idea, that in that country public affairs are managed with a higher regard to the public welfare, than in our own. The Parliament of England with all its corruptions, cannot be accused of proceedings approaching, in disgrace, to the infamous and bare-faced jobs, which have been transacted in many of the legislatures of America. It is evident to the most careless observation, that the state of public morals is there worse than in England—that political integrity is less respected—that corrupt motives have not the same degree of check from feelings of honour, as they have among Englishmen. To sum up all, there is no room for comparison between the two countries in that great test of a good government, the administration of justice.

When I consider that a country thus deficient in the most essential points of practical good government, has a Constitution framed upon the very principles, to which the advocates of Parliamentary Reform look, as the foundation of every prospect of amendment in our own, I cannot avoid the conclusion that these principles are fallacious. The reasonings which have occurred to me, as to the source of the fallacy, would lead me into too great length; but I think the observations to which I have already referred, sufficiently justify the opinion that Parliamentary Reform in England would not have the effects which its most sincere and zealous friends anticipate.

Fully as I am impressed with the opinion that Parliamentary Reform is not the road to any practical public benefit, I am very far from thinking that there is nothing which requires reform in our government. I am well convinced, that there

are many corruptions of most pernicious tendency, which may and ought to be eradicated. But we have to consider, how that object is to be effected, without endangering benefits of still greater importance. The advocates of a radical and entire Reform, have not perhaps fairly considered the extreme difficulty of guarding every avenue to abuse, and how often the measures which are taken for repressing it in one quarter, serve only to open for it some new channel still more pernicious.— We have a government in which, with all its corruptions, there is much essentially good: though particular cases of hardships may undoubtedly be quoted, yet it would not be easy to find, either in the past or present state of the world, a parallel to the great mass of public happiness, which has grown up in England, under those institutions of which we complain.— The protection which our government affords to the personal liberty of the subject,

the purity of the distribution of justice, and the security in which every man may enjoy the fruit of his industry, are surpassed in no country in the world:—hardly can we find one that bears the least comparison to our own. Let the value of that which we possess be fairly appreciated; and then let us consider coolly, whether the blemishes of our government are of such magnitude, as to warrant the application of remedies, which, if they do not cure, may kill.

I shall not repeat the hacknied topics to which the French Revolution has given occasion; but I must entreat your attention to one view, which deserves the serious consideration of every genuine friend of liberty, as illustrating the hazard of grasping too hastily at political perfection. It is well known, that on the meeting of the *Etats Generaux* at Versailles, in the year 1789, the King offered the important concession, that no taxes should for the future

be levied, without the authority of that body, constituted according to its ancient form in Three Chambers.—There is no reason to doubt, that if this had been acceded to, the periodical meeting of the *Etats Generaux* would have been fully secured—that the arbitrary proceedings of the old Government could not have been renewed, and that by the same steps, through which of old the Commons of England rose into consequence, the *Tiers Etat* might have laid the foundation of a gradual improvement in the government of France. This slow progress, however, did not suit the ideas of the ardent friends of liberty. To obtain an immediate and complete regeneration, they insisted on the union of the three chambers. They obtained their object; but not till they had taught the mob to despise their old habits of obedience to established authority. From this fatal source, we have seen a train of consequences to arise, ending in the wreck of

every vestige of freedom, and the establishment of a ferocious despotism! Among all the genuine patriots, whose well-meaning, though mistaken zeal, contributed to the first excesses of popular enthusiasm in France, can we believe, that any one, if now surviving, would not look back with regret to the system of liberty, however imperfect, which France would have enjoyed under the old constitution of the *Etats Generaux*?—would they not lament the improvidence, which led them to despise every reform, short of complete regeneration; and in pursuit of a phantom of ideal perfection, to throw away the substantial good which was in their hands?

Though I do not suppose that the English Reformers would imitate the mad fury of the French Revolutionists, their principles have the same tendency, and their efforts may have in a great measure the same effect. Popular ferment is a two-edged weapon, which most frequently inflicts the

wound where it was not aimed. Often has it ruined the cause of liberty, and seldom contributed to improve the condition of mankind! Before we risk the infinite mischief, which may be dreaded from the use of such an engine, let us weigh well the value of the object. Setting aside the chance of failing in the contest,—(a contest which might leave the constitution impaired by changes of an opposite character,) let us consider the most favourable case. On the supposition that Parliamentary Reform were peaceably accomplished, what prospect would it afford, of an amelioration in our condition.

The disfranchisement of the rotten boroughs, and the substitution of a different set of electors in their place, would certainly occasion some change in the composition of the House of Commons; but it is not very clear, that this would introduce an additional portion of virtuous principle. The friends of Reform do not sufficiently

advert to the necessary tendency of elections purely democratical, to throw power into the hands of men, whose only merit consists in being masters of stage effect, and the tricks of popular delusion. Mr. Wilkes is not the only favourite representative, who professing in public an absolute deference to the *sense* of his constituents, has boasted in private, that he had full command of their *nonsense*.

From the history of all free governments, it appears that the defect, to which I now allude, on the one hand, and the undue influence of wealth on the other, form a Scylla and Charybdis; between which, the wisest legislators have found it no easy task to steer. In our government, chance has blended together these opposite vices, in such a manner as to correct each other's violence, and produce a compound, far indeed from perfect, but less noxious than if either of these principles had an unqualified predominance.

A large portion of influence is now in the hands of certain individuals, men of wealth and family-connections; while on the other hand, many of our elections are assuredly popular enough. The proportion is such, that men in power cannot venture to despise public opinion: at the same time, the House of Commons is not so entirely dependent on popular favour, that a momentary ferment can over-rule their deliberations, in the fatal manner which has often been experienced in more democratical governments.—This branch of the legislature is seldom, perhaps, entirely free of men who may deserve the title of demagogues. A few of that description, however, cannot gain a dangerous ascendancy in an assembly so constituted:—they may even be useful, and without being virtuous themselves, may form a check to the opposite vices of a different portion of the House. But though occasional benefit may be experienced from the efforts of such men, we ought not to forget

the danger which would arise, if there were no counterpoise to their influence.

In America, we may see a legislature untainted by any mixture of borough-mongers: but what is the result? Are their legislators and magistrates always upright and wise men? Are their proceedings uniformly pure? Are they never led astray by popular violence and delusion?—On these points, let me refer you to one of the ablest and most zealous advocates of Reform. Ask Mr. Cobbett, whether, in the popular elections of America, the preference is more generally given to the man of solid judgment and tried integrity, or to the artful knave, who, free from the restraints of truth and honour, can exert all his dexterity in the arts of deception. If direct bribery be less frequent than in England, that advantage is fully counterbalanced by the greater influence of the blind and impetuous passions of the vulgar; an influence even more pernicious than

the ascendancy of wealth, and the practical effect of which fully verifies the observation of Burke, that, if courts be the scene of cabals, the people are the natural prey of mountebanks, and impostors.

Look, Sir, at the forcible and too accurate picture which is drawn by Peter Porcupine; and you will see what sort of men the most genuine popular elections may raise to pre-eminence. Those who are so fond of repeating that one ministry is no better than another, should recollect that a demagogue in power may be still worse. History does not abound in examples of men, who, after rising into power by flattering the passions of the multitude, have employed that power for the good of their country.

We are told, however, that a Reform in Parliament is a necessary preliminary to the redress of other grievances. The facts which I have already stated, may suffice to prove, that this notion is not only un-

founded, but the very reverse of the truth: and I consider it as a delusion peculiarly unfortunate at the present moment. The attention of the country has of late been roused, to a multitude of abuses, in the management of the public money, and in the distribution of public employments.— No candid mind can entertain a doubt of the importance of checking, and as far as possible eradicating such abuses. They have a direct tendency to waste the national resources, to aggravate the burdens of the people, and to damp their patriotic exertions, by exciting a general belief, that the nation is oppressed to serve the sinister purposes of individuals.

The measures which are necessary for removing these evils, may not be agreeable to those who profit by their continuance; and objections are urged, as objections always will be urged, against any innovation by which the interest of many individuals is to be affected. But Reforms of this description

do not necessarily involve any consequences dangerous to the country: on the contrary, the most serious perils are to be apprehended from neglecting them. To every just measure of oeconomic Reform, I am therefore a decided friend: but the constitution, as it now exists, has sufficient means for the correction of all these abuses; and if the attention of the public be not diverted from that great object, the management of the Revenue may and will be reformed.

The efforts hitherto made for that object, have had little success, because they have obtained from the public at large, but a feeble support. The importance of the object has not been sufficiently appreciated; but the nation is now alive to it. If a steady and persevering support be given to those who exert themselves in Parliament for the attainment of oeconomic Reform, the friends of that principle will multiply every day; and sooner or later, the ministry will

find it impossible to hold out against the public voice.

To defeat this great object, I know of no means more effectual than to divert the attention of the public from this solid interest, by connecting it with the plan of a Constitutional change in the elections of the House of Commons. A struggle for Parliamentary Reform would come at the present moment most seasonably to the aid of the Antijacobin hypocrites, who are trembling for their ill-gotten gains. They would hail it as a most convenient bubble to amuse the public, and would rejoice that, while the attention of the country was diverted from their malversations, their cause would again be linked with that of social order, and obtain the support of all, who are not prepared to try the portentous experiment, of throwing down the established land-marks of the constitution.

I would entreat the advocates of Parliamentary Reform, to reflect how many men there

are who, though prepared to support every substantial œconomical Reform, would tremble at the idea of Constitutional changes, to which they can see no termination. If the notions of a radical and entire change are pursued with violence, moderate men will again be forced to believe, that there is no alternative between measures of a Revolutionary tendency, and a resistance to every reformation whatever. Many sincere friends of œconomical Reform, may thus be driven to a co-operation with men, who have no principle but to support every established abuse.—Anxiously do I hope, that those who wish honestly to pursue the good of the country, may not again be forced to make their option between Jacobin and Antijacobin. I am no Alarmist; but as I firmly believe, that amidst violent changes, there is more probability of making our government worse than better, I deprecate the discussion to which you wish me to lend my name, as calculated to di-

vide the friends of substantial reformation, and to defeat every valuable, safe, and attainable improvement in the management of our public affairs.

Finis.

*Brettell and Co. Printers,
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