A SUMMARY

EXPLANATION

OF THE PRINCIPLES OF

MR. PITT'S

INTENDED BILL

FOR

AMENDING THE REPRESENTATION

OF THE

PEOPLE

IN

PARLIAMENT.

By the Rev. CHRISTOPHER WYVILL.

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A SUMMARY EXPLANATION.

FROM Mr. Pitt's introductory ſpeech, on the 18th of April 1785, it appears, that his plan for reforming the repreſentation of the people conſiſts of two parts.

I. In the firſt of theſe a ſyſtematical addition of members to the counties and the metropolis is propoſed to be made, not by increaſing the preſent number of the Houſe of Commons, but by tranſferring the right of election to the larger diſtricts from ſuch

decayed or inconſiderable boroughs, not containing four hundred houſes, as may be induced, on the offer of a ſatisfactory compenſation, voluntarily to make that ſurrender.

The execution of this propoſal, if it ſhould be adopted in the next ſeſſion, would take place immediately after the expiration of the preſent Parliament. For the whole ſyſtem of additional repreſentatives to the larger diſtricts would be aſcertained finally, in that ſeſſion; and before the next general election a number of ſmall boroughs would probably agree to ſurrender their franchiſes, to an amount ſufficient to furniſh the intended augmentation of members to the metropolis and the counties, in a certain order, and in their due proportion, according to their preſent population;

tion; at leaſt, if the disfranchiſement of a ſufficient number of ſuch boroughs ſhould be thought not likely to take place during the exiſtence of this Parliament, as it is here ſuppoſed, yet, when the means for effecting this voluntary ſurrender ſhall be conſidered, it will be found highly probable, that the disfranchiſement during this Parliament would be great, and before the period of a ſecond general election would arrive, it could hardly fail to be complete. And ſurely this diſpatch in an operation of ſuch immenſe magnitude, to which the conſent and co-operation of ſo many individuals would be indiſpenſably requiſite, may well deſerve to be conſidered a ſufficiently ſpeedy execution of this part of his plan.

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The number of additional repreſentatives to the great diſtricts is propoſed to be ſeventy-two; for which the disfranchiſement of thirty-ſix ſmall boroughs would be wanted. The means by which ſo conſiderable a ſurrender of the right to return members to Parliament is expected to be obtained is certainly adequate to the end propoſed, and yet in the view, either of equity or of expedience, perfectly unexceptionable.

It is propoſed that a million of pounds ſterling be ſet apart, as a fund for compenſation to the boroughs which may be disfranchiſed; that this whole ſum be divided into thirty-ſix ſhares, of which, that each borough agreeing to ſurrender its elective right, and applying, by petition from two-thirds of its electors, to Parliament for that purpoſe, be entitled to one ſhare, to be diſtributed

buted in due proportion among the ſeveral perſons intereſted therein, according to their reſpective equitable claims, by a ſpecial Committee of the Houſe of Commons, to be appointed in the ſame manner as committees are appointed to try the merits of conteſted elections; by which, if any queſtion ſhould ariſe, touching the right of voting, or whether the petitioners are actually two thirds of the voters, ſuch queſtion ſhall be decided: that the intereſt of theſe thirty-ſix ſhares, or ſeveral principal ſums of money, be ſuffered to accumulate and be added to each principal ſum, until by the deciſion of ſuch Committee, each ſum, principal and intereſt included, ſhall be awarded to ſome ſmall borough on its voluntary application to be disfranchiſed. By this proviſion, the ſum appropriated, if not large

large enough at firſt to induce the decayed boroughs to ſurrender their obnoxious rights, would continually increaſe, and the temptation to reſign them would become ultimately irreſiſtible.

II. — By the other part of Mr. Pitt's ſyſtem of reformation, a ſubſequent improvement of the borough repreſentation would be aſcertained, and carried into execution on ſimilar terms: and, moreover, a principle of future and perpetual improvement in the repreſentation of towns to an indefinite extent would be eſtabliſhed.

When the repreſentation of the counties and the metropolis ſhall have been rectified, in the mode and to the extent already deſcribed, it is propoſed that a ſecond ſum be

be ſet apart to induce ſuch decayed or inconſiderable boroughs aforeſaid, as may ſtill remain, to make a farther ſurrender of the right of electing members of Parliament, in order that ſuch right may be transferred to the towns of Birmingham, Manchester, and other large unrepreſented places, whenever ſuch unrepreſented places ſhall reſpectively petition Parliament for the ſame — Alſo, that the elective franchiſe, excluſively enjoyed by a few inhabitants, members of the corporate body in certain towns, may be imparted to the inhabitants, houſeholders of ſuch towns, occupying houſes aſſeſſed to a certain ſmall amount, on the voluntary application of ſuch corporate bodies to Parliament to ſurrender their excluſive privileges.

The extenſion of the right of ſuffrage to many ſubſtantial houſeholders in the metropolis, the unrepreſented towns, and thoſe towns where the right of repreſentation is at preſent excluſively enjoyed by a few inhabitants, would be the neceſſary conſequence of the ſeveral transfers, and communications of the elective right propoſed in the two parts of this ſyſtem. The admiſſion of copy-holders to the right of voting at county elections, would form a ſtill greater, and a perfectly unexceptionable, addition to the conſtituent body; for which, it is underſtood, that a ſeparate bill would be provided accordingly. Regulations alſo for multiplying the places of poll in the counties, for the better aſcertainment of the right of voting, for reducing expence, and preventing bribery at elections, would be included

included as ſubſidiary parts of the ſame ſyſtem.

It is not denied that the nation may, when it ſees cauſe, reſume a public truſt which has been exerciſed unfaithfully, or in a manner injurious to the common welfare. This is a principle which no friend to the Revolution and to the preſent government can heſitate to acknowledge. But where the grievance to be removed implies an offence puniſhable by law, but not proved, in that caſe it ſeems not unbecoming the lenient ſpirit of a free government inſtead of puniſhing without conviction, rather to deviſe ſome means by which the grievance in queſtion may be aboliſhed without hardſhip, if poſſible, to any individual. To conduct political reformation

 on

on theſe principles, is not only an equitable mode of proceeding, but when the abuſes complained of are interwoven with the intereſt of powerful men, and ſupported by the habits and prejudices of the age, it is, in fact, the only mode in which the correction of ſuch abuſes can be attained.

In the caſe before the public, corruption in many inſtances may be juſtly ſuſpected, but it has not been proved—Shall we then attempt a forcible abolition of the ſmaller boroughs, as an act of power, grounded on no proof of guilt or breach of their public truſt; or ſhall we prefer the voluntary ſurrender of that truſt, obtained by lenient means? Surely, if each mode of disfranchiſement were equally feaſible, compenſation in ſuch circumſtances would be preferable

ferable to compulſion, and better ſuited to the genius of the Britiſh nation. But if no miſuſage of their franchiſe, nor even a ſuſpicion of guilt could be alledged againſt the ſmaller boroughs, if the only ground of the forfeiture of their rights were ſtated to be the mere inequality or confeſſed impropriety, that a few inhabitants of the decayed boroughs, ſhould return members to Parliament when many populous places are unrepreſented; the compulſive deprivation of the boroughs on that ground would be ſtill more incompatible with the generous temper of our countrymen.

In the laſt century, before parliamentary corruption was ſuſpected to exiſt, or perhaps thought to be poſſible to any dangerous

gerous extent, a tranſient redreſs of the very grievance now ſtated, actually took place. At that time many of the inſignificant boroughs were forcibly cut off by the powerful arm of Cromwell; and the right of repreſentation was diſtributed afreſh to the counties and great towns on principles truly conſonant with the ſpirit of the Conſtitution. The beneficial tendency of this change in our ſyſtem of popular repreſentation has been admitted by the moſt judicious and impartial writers; but ſo violent was the diſguſt excited by the arbitrary manner in which the meaſure was introduced, that even the power of Cromwell could not permanently ſupport this great conſtitutional improvement.

And

And yet the milder treatment of the offenſive boroughs, recommended by Mr. Pitt, has not wholly eſcaped oppoſition. From a refinement that ſeems exceſſive, the offer of a compenſation for their ſurrendered rights has been cenſured, as *vicious* and *profligate*; whereas nothing ſeems more evident, than that a propoſal to purchaſe the ſurrender of an elective truſt, not juſtly forfeited by conviction of guilt, is *vicious* and *profligate* neither in *thoſe who propoſe*, nor in *thoſe who accept the terms*. — On the contrary, by removing the temptation to venality from both the upper and inferior claſſes of men, in numerous inſtances it would prevent the growth of *vice* and *profligacy*, and would tend, by innocent and lawful means, alike to meliorate the ſpirit of our govern-

government, and to improve the morals of the people. Breaches of the judicial truſt are nearly as criminal, nearly as dangerous to the community, as breaches of the truſt of parliamentary election: and yet, after the rebellion in Scotland, when government propoſed to aboliſh the juriſdiction of certain families in that country, and to allow a pecuniary compenſation for the loſs of thoſe hereditary powers, the meaſure was not thought to countenance judicial iniquity; its conſequence has rather been found to be to clear the adminiſtration of juſtice in Scotland from the moſt oppreſſive abuſes; and it may well be preſumed, that the purchaſe of a ſurrender of the rights of rotten boroughs, would be equally effectual in this country to purge the conſtituent and re-

preſentative

preſentative bodies from the groſſeſt impurity of corruption.

Again, from an anxiety to maintain the doctrine of abſolute forfeiture unimpaired, without the admiſſion of which the Revolution neither can be juſtified, nor could have been effected, the principle of compenſation to the boroughs has been objected to; though, fortunately, rather in the tone of apprehenſion, and cautious admonition, than that of diſlike and poſitive rejection. Undoubtedly, it never can be proper or expedient, to renounce the national right of reſumption; but the diſavowal of that right differs widely from a mere ſuſpenſion of its exerciſe. In almoſt every caſe, redreſs of grievances is more ſafely, more commodiouſly obtained by other means; and there-

fore,

fore, no wiſe nation will ever refort to that ultimate authority, but on the exigence of great and inevitable neceſſity.

If on this point opinions ſhould be agreed, the only queſtions to be aſked are theſe: Is it prudent now to inſiſt on the abſolute forfeiture of the ſmall boroughs? Is it wiſe to riſque the fate of the Conſtitution on that demand? To which the obvious anſwer ſeems to be, a moſt decided negative. For on the one hand, let it be conſidered, that by the offer of pecuniary ſatisfaction, the little venal boroughs themſelves may be induced to aid the cauſe of reformation, and inſtead of inſtructing their members to reſiſt, may probably petition Parliament to confirm the offer. And even the great proprietors of boroughs, hitherto moſt averſe from the refor-

reformation deſired, may perhaps relax their oppoſition, when they have reflected, that in purſuance of this lenient ſyſtem, if the tender of public money ſhould be to them no equivalent, they might ſtill retain the unmoleſted poſſeſſion of their invidious privilege, till a different ſentiment ſhould prevail.

On the other hand, let the advocates of a more vigorous meaſure, as they would term it, recollect the extenſive power of thoſe perſons who are intereſted in the preſervation of the ſmaller boroughs, the prevalence of various unconſtitutional prejudices, the utter averſion which has been teſtified by the nation to any harſh political operation, eſpecially to the reſumption of chartered rights; and above all, the ſtrenuous op-

position which every motion in Parliament tending, however moderately, to reform our ſyſtem of repreſentation, has hitherto received from a great majority of members; and it may be hoped, they will be fully convinced that an attempt to disfranchiſe the boroughs by force, would be attended now with difficulties not leſs inſuperable, than thoſe which formerly baffled Oliver Cromwell in a ſimilar purſuit.

Upon the whole, the method of optional compenſation ſuggeſted by Mr. Pitt, is equitable and expedient: it is certain to produce the ſurrender deſired; it is ſure to ſatisfy the perſons disfranchiſed; and it is calculated to produce that disfranchiſement on the moſt œconomical terms which would be accepted, or which could be deviſed without

without employing force, or poſtponing the meaſure to a period too diſtant to ſatisfy the hope of the public.

The whole debt incurred by the firſt operation would be diſcharged by the produce of the intended ſinking fund in a ſingle year; and thus the nation would have the happineſs to gain one ſubſtantial improvement of the conſtitution for an expence truly inconſiderable when compared with the magnitude of the benefit; which would be defrayed before the ſlighteſt perception of any national burden incurred by the purchaſe could be impreſſed on the public mind. A much ſmaller ſum would be fully ſufficient to accompliſh all the purpoſes of the ſubſequent part of the ſyſtem.

The

The principal advantages propoſed by the plan may be thus briefly recapitulated—By the firſt part of it, thirty-ſix of the ſmall and decayed boroughs would be aboliſhed, and their right of repreſentation would be transferred to the large diſtricts now inadequately repreſented. By the ſecond part, an additional number of the rotten boroughs would be disfranchiſed, and their right transferred to Birmingham, Manchreſter, Sheffield, and other large unrepreſented towns: the excluſive privileges of corporations in certain places, to return members to Parliament, would be thrown open to the ſubſtantial houſeholders in thoſe places; And laſtly, a principle of future improvement in the borough repreſentation, as new unrepreſented towns might ariſe, and ancient boroughs might decline in population, would

would be eſtabliſhed. By the ſeveral changes intended in the frame of our repreſentation, at leaſt one hundred members would be gained to the public; and by the extenſion of the right of ſuffrage to the copyholders, &c. nearly 100,000 electors would be added to the conſtituent body.

The regulations which would form the ſubſidiary parts of the ſyſtem, though leſs ſplendid in their operation, than the propoſed improvements in the frame of our repreſentation, would yet be found extremely beneficial, and indeed abſolutely neceſſary, either to invigorate the Conſtitution as much as may be poſſible in its preſent enfeebled ſtate, or to give its utmoſt effect and energy to the improved ſyſtem which has been propoſed. Expence, confuſion, and delay, are incon-

inconveniences to which even our beſt popular elections are in a certain degree liable. They are inconveniences, which, by diſcouraging the free exerciſe of the right of election in the larger communities, tend to aggravate the miſchiefs that reſult from the defective ſtate of the inferior boroughs. To remedy theſe evils, of expence, confuſion, and delay, which chiefly affect the larger communities, regulations to multiply the places of poll, to aſcertain more clearly the right of voting, and more effectually to reduce expence, would be eſtabliſhed; and to ſuppreſs bribery, to which the inconſiderable boroughs ſeem moſt expoſed, the laws againſt that pernicious practice would be reinforced.

It is indiſputable, that theſe changes would form a very ſubſtantial improvement of our popu-

popular repreſentation. The impartiality of the plan is alſo no ſmall recommendation of the meaſure. It is not propoſed that only the ſmall boroughs open to general venality ſhould be aboliſhed; nor that the burgage-tenure boroughs, or thoſe dependent on certain official Boards, ſhould be the ſole ſacrifices to public advantage; the meaſure propoſed is of a general nature, and would certainly be the means of leſſening the number of boroughs in every one of thoſe obnoxious claſſes. It is true, that the additional repreſentation would be chiefly allotted to the counties; but ſince many of the boroughs propoſed to be aboliſhed, are in the abſolute power of families, poſſeſſed of great landed property, whoſe repreſentatives may be conſidered as county members of the worſt deſcription, viz. landed

gentlemen, feeling and acknowledging no reſponſibility whatever; and ſince many members would be added to the metropolis, to the great unrepreſented towns, and to the trading inhabitants in many principal places, by the propoſed extenſion of the right of ſuffrage; the ſyſtem of Mr. Pitt ſeems to obſerve as ſtrict impartiality between the landed and commercial intereſts, as the nature of the caſe could poſſibly admit. Each of theſe deſcriptions of men would receive freſh ſecurity from the alteration propoſed. No community whatever could be injured by the adoption of this plan of reformation; and no individual, however high, or however low his ſtation may be, could juſtly apprehend any conſequence from it, which would be hoſtile to his preſent ſtate and condition in the country.

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It is a mild though efficacious meaſure; gradual in its operation, yet final in all appearance as a ſyſtematical change; and propoſing to work ſolely by conſent, it contains in it none of thoſe ſeeds of diſcontent and diſturbance, which too frequently diſgrace political alterations conducted on other principles.

In all theſe views, Mr. Pitt's propoſed plan for reforming our repreſentation, is unexceptionable. It is, indeed, ſo evidently ſafe and beneficial, that reaſon ſeems to warrant a ſanguine hope, that it will meet the full approbation and ſupport of the public; whoſe general ſenſe, conveyed to Parliament next winter, in decent and reſpectful petitions, can hardly fail to obtain, in a ſhort time, the concurrence and ſanction of the whole Legiſlature.

APPENDIX.

I.

ESTIMATE of the number of boroughs that would probably be disfranchised, and the consequent addition of members that would be made to the larger districts and to unrepresented towns; and also the number of large towns in which the exclusive right of the corporations to elect members would be imparted to the substantial inhabitants, householders of the same respectively; provided Mr. Pitt's whole plan should be adopted by Parliament.

By

Boroughs.

By the first part of his plan would be disfranchised on voluntary surrender, in order to reinforce the representation of the counties and the metropolis - - - 36

By the second part, to give representatives to certain large unrepresented towns, at least - - 4

It is impossible to estimate the whole future disfranchisement under this head. But there are at least four large unrepresented towns in immediate view, as fit to receive the right of representation; for which transfer, consequently, the disfranchisement of at least four boroughs would be wanted.

Total of disfranchised boroughs - 40

Cor-

Corporations of large towns that probably would ſurrender their exclusive right of repreſentation -	10
	Members.
Addition to the metropolis and the counties - -	72
To unrepreſented towns, -	8
Repreſentation thrown open in ten large towns - - -	20
Total addition of repreſentatives to the public - - -	100

II.

Eſtimate of the augmentation of the conſtituent body, that would be effected by the ſeveral extenſions of the right of ſuffrage propoſed by Mr. Pitt.

Houſeholders added in Marybone, Pancras, and other unrepreſented parts of the metropolis, about -	10,000

Unre-

Unrepreſented freeholders in the city of London - -	1000
Copyholders in Middleſex including the metropolis, - -	7000
Copyholders in other parts of the kingdom, - - - -	65,000
Houſeholders in Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, and Leeds, independent, of other unrepreſented towns, to whom the right of returning members to Parliament may be imparted, - - -	9000
Houſeholders in Scarborough, Bury, Bath, &c. - -	6500
Unrepreſented freeholders of Hullſhire, probably about -	500
Total addition, - -	99,000

THE END.