

# BURDENS ON LAND.

HOUSE OF COMMONS, MARCH 15, 1849.

*From Hansard.*

[On March 8, 1849, Mr. Disraeli submitted a resolution to the effect that the whole of the local taxation of the country falls mainly, and presses with undue severity, on real property. He suggested that one-half of these local rates should be paid out of the Consolidated Fund. The debate was adjourned to March 15, when the resolution was negatived by 280 votes to 189.]

It seems to me that a great deal of misapprehension exists among hon. Gentlemen on the benches opposite with regard to the proposition of the hon. Member for Buckinghamshire. We were originally given to understand, if I mistake not, that the basis or groundwork of that proposition was the prevalence of great distress among all classes of the community connected with agriculture in this country. But the speech of the hon. Mover of the proposition described a case of a very different description, whilst the speech of the hon. Member for Somersetshire, who has just sat down, has apprised you that none of the distress resulting from the burdens on land complained of falls on that class whom the hon. Mover would induce you to relieve by adopting his proposition.

The hon. Member for Buckinghamshire, in his speech on introducing this question, quoted something which I am said to have stated on a former occasion, admitting the great distress prevailing among the agricultural classes. He misquoted what I then said; very unintentionally, I am quite sure, but very strangely. I never expressed myself to the effect—and, if I had done so, I should have betrayed great ignorance of that which must be within the cognisance or experience of almost every man—that, generally speaking, the distress of the times has been very severely felt by the agricultural community. I said that little had been said about the pressure of agricultural distress further northwards than Cambridge or Suffolk, and that in the south of England the cry of agricultural distress had scarcely been heard of. And I say further, that hardly anything has been ever asserted of late in the north as to the depression of agricultural prices.

Well, Sir, I can only assure the House that I met but a few days ago with some gentlemen who had lately come up from the southern counties of Scotland, and who told me that they had been selling their wheat in the markets there at from 47*s.* to 48*s.* per quarter on an average. They had a fair crop last year of good quality, and they are satisfied with the prices they have received. They must be subject to the same vicissitudes, for example, as men are in every other trade. Farmers, no more than any other traders, can expect to be always lucky. Just prior to the harvest of last year, the rain fell exactly at the critical moment for the farmers of the south, and just before the critical moment for the farmers of the north. What has been the consequence? The farmers of the northern counties have harvested their produce in good condition, and obtain good prices; those of the south have been less fortunate, and realise less encouraging returns. This is simply the reason why we have great complaints from the one, and few or none from the other class of tenant-farmers. If any of these parties, however, seek a ground

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upon which to found his appeal to Parliament for legislative relief, he must look for it in the speech of the hon. Member for Somersetshire, whose fortune it has been to make such an appeal in vain.

I shall not enter into those questions connected with the general condition of the trade and finances, and of the agricultural classes of this country, which have been already, in my opinion, disposed of by the speech of the right hon. Baronet the Chancellor of the Exchequer. But the hon. Gentleman who has just sat down made one statement upon which I must be allowed to offer a word or two. That hon. Member told us that he had lately been selling some wheat. He told us that his wheat was only of inferior quality, yet that he realised, I think, 42*s.* per quarter for it. Now, I think if he could get such prices for an inferior wheat, wheat of ordinary average goodness must be fetching very fair prices just now. There are other Gentlemen, Sir, in this House who are themselves manufacturers of other articles. I should like to ask the hon. Member for Somersetshire what he thinks is the scale of prices they obtain when they carry into the market that which they admit to be a damaged or an inferior article. They will obtain, of course, only the lowest scale of prices for such goods. They will not get after the rate of 42*s.*, which the hon. Member who complains of unremunerating prices can obtain for his inferior article—a wheat of inferior quality. But as for better wheats, I met with a gentleman a few days since who told me that Dantzic wheat was worth now, in London, from 53*s.* to 54*s.* per quarter. He added, that other foreign wheats of fair quality were obtaining, on an average, about 48*s.* per quarter. I tell the hon. Gentlemen opposite to me, that their home-grown wheat, of the same quality, will now fetch the same prices.

I say, then, that the pretences on which this motion has been brought forward have totally failed—that no ground has been laid for any change in the existing burdens upon.

the land, which can be justified, either by the present condition of the tenant-farmer, or by the prices of agricultural produce in our markets. I do not intend to enter into any elaborate array of figures in following the statements which have been made by the hon. Gentleman the Member for Buckinghamshire, in the speech with which he introduced his motion; because, all that could be said in reference to them was said, last night, by the right hon. Gentleman the Chancellor of the Exchequer, certainly in the best speech which I have ever heard from these benches since the accession of the right hon. Gentleman and of his Colleagues to power. But the right hon. Gentleman did not, as it appeared to me, notice some points in the case or plea on which the hon. Member for Buckinghamshire rested his case for our adoption of such a proposal as he has brought forward, or at least did not regard them in all the lights under which they might have been viewed.

The hon. Gentleman seems to adopt for his principle the notion that all classes of the community ought to bear, collectively, certain burdens which he assumes to be, at present, borne exclusively by the landed proprietary and real property of this country. Is this so? If such be really the proposition of the hon. Member for Buckinghamshire—and that it is, I must presume from the statement of the hon. Member for Somersetshire—how does the speech we have just heard support it? The hon. Member for Buckinghamshire admits that he is opposed to, and would not vote for, a national rate of this kind. And I think he is very wise in coming to this conclusion. The arguments against a national rate are, in my mind, of insuperable force. I am firmly persuaded that the various expenses connected with it would run up these rates, of which the burden is already said to be oppressive, at least five-fold within five years.

But I think the original objects and working of these local rates have been a good deal misunderstood. A Report of

the Poor Law Commissioners on Local Taxation was printed in 1843. I will read one remarkable passage from this Report; a passage which clearly defines the period at and the circumstances under which the practice of rating stock in trade for the relief of the poor was first resorted to in this country:—

'The practice of rating stock in trade never prevailed in the greater part of England and Wales. It was, with comparatively few exceptions, confined to the old clothing district of the south and west of England. It gained ground just as the stock of the woolstaplers and clothiers increased, so as to make it an object with the farmers and other ratepayers, who still constituted a majority in their parishes, to bring so considerable a property within the rate. They succeeded by degrees, and there followed upon their success a more improvident practice in giving relief than had ever prevailed before in England. It was in this district, and at this time, that relief by head-money had its origin, and produced its most conspicuous effects in deteriorating the habits and depreciating the wages of the agricultural labourer. When the practice of rating stock in trade was fully established in this district, the staple trade rapidly declined there, and withdrew itself still more rapidly into the northern clothing districts, where no such burden was ever cast upon the trade.'

Now, the hon. Gentleman appears to contend that these burdens should be imposed on all classes of the community, instead of one particular class, and that by such a redistribution a great good would be effected, so far as the landlord and tenant-farmer are concerned. But, unless he could devise some means for getting at the same principle of rating all property equally, he would accomplish nothing towards effecting his own purpose. I happen to be connected with the local administration of a township in which the proportion of local rating actually expended on the relief of the poor does not exceed, perhaps, 7*d*. in the pound. There are townships and districts in its immediate neighbourhood in which the rate for the same purpose is not less than 7*s*. or 8*s*. in the pound. Now, it is quite clear that any manufacturer or capitalist who is largely engaged in trade, and has built a mill or a factory in such a district, would be anxious, under a general rate, to come within such a township, and thus so much enhance the charge for the relief of the poor, under any pressure of trade that should throw labour largely out of employment, as to

drive away particular trades, as well as capitalists, from the locality. All rates would, under such a state of things, be enormously increased, and you would thus, by supporting the proposition before the House, be accessory to the ruin of both the landed and the commercial interests of the kingdom.

It has been said that the proposition of the hon. Gentleman the Member for Buckinghamshire is enveloped in a great deal of mystery and confusion. I have endeavoured to penetrate the veil by which it is surrounded; and I will endeavour to explain the conclusions at which I have arrived upon it. It appears, then, to me that it is a proposition intended to withdraw burdens to the amount of some 6,000,000*l.* per annum from certain shoulders on which they are now saddled, and to impose them upon others—to relieve, in short, those who now carry them, by transferring them to those who hitherto have not borne them. The hon. Gentleman's scheme of redistribution would probably reimpose 3,000,000*l.* on those from whom he would take the present aggregate of 6,000,000*l.*, and apportion the other 3,000,000*l.* to other classes of the community. Well; but the 3,000,000*l.* that he would so withdraw from those who at present pay 6,000,000*l.*, would by no means represent the real proportion in which hon. Gentlemen opposite desire to relieve the land from its present liabilities, or of the enhanced value which their scheme would practically confer upon the land generally. Assuming the whole aggregate of land in this kingdom capable of cultivation to represent an increase equal to what it has been stated at by Gentlemen opposite, a rise in the value of the fee-simple of an acre, consequent on the remission of three millions of taxation on that aggregate, would be equivalent to 2 per cent., or 60,000,000*l.* sterling. An increased value of 2*l.* per cent. would represent 120,000,000*l.* as the increased value of the land, supposing it to be brought for sale into the market, or that the Legislature sanctioned such a proposition as that which is now before it.

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I, for one, do not think that these are times in which the Legislature could be brought to listen to any such proposition. It is not likely, I trust, to meet with much favour from this House. The hon. Member for Buckinghamshire and his friends seem altogether to forget the ultimate effect if Parliament entertains so exclusive a proposition as he has brought before it with a view of benefiting the landlord. If I am not mistaken, the whole cultivable lands of all England and Wales amount to more than twenty-five—perhaps, indeed, to thirty—millions of acres. Every acre you would thus relieve, I must repeat, would rise in value in the proportion of from 5*l.* to 10*l.* [‘No.’] Well, I will be content to say 5*l.* only. This increase would represent an extension of capital invested in the lands held by tenant-farmers and others of not less than 150,000,000*l.* sterling. Would not this be to perpetrate a great injustice to all other descriptions of property for the sake of an exclusive benefit to the land? I ask hon. Gentlemen opposite whether or not they themselves consider that this would be right or proper?

I do think, however, that the proposition now before the House is not less extraordinary than it is unjust. It has for its ostensible object to relieve the present pressure of that which I believe to be the temporary distress of the landed interest. But then the hon. Member for Buckinghamshire is so very discriminating in his views of that question, that the case of the agriculturists of Scotland did not elicit even a single word in his speech. And as for the agriculturists, or any other classes of the unhappy community of the sister island, he turned the cold shoulder to the Irish, and all his sympathy for them extended to that which is proverbially said to be the alms of those who have no money in their pockets wherewith to afford more substantial relief. He gave them—advice. Sir, the hon. Gentleman said that many schemes had been brought forward for the amelioration of the condition of Ireland, but that nothing effectual had

been done for her for some sessions past. And here his admission left her. I do not think that Ireland will derive any great benefit from the advocacy of the hon. Gentleman. She will have little to thank him for, if he is prepared to tender her no other consolation for her sufferings but—his advice.

It has been contended that the proposition of the hon. Member would, if carried into effect, remove a great cause of dissatisfaction among the tenant-farmers. But I am convinced that it would create very great discontent among the people. [Laughter.] I repeat this is my conviction—notwithstanding the laughter which it has occasioned. The hon. Member who spoke last has quoted largely from a paper well known to most of those who hear me—a print of great authority in all agricultural society, and of great respectability—I mean the *Mark Lane Express*. The article from which the hon. Gentleman read, indulges in stronger language, perhaps, than I should desire to employ: it stigmatises certain official documents, the authenticity of which it challenges, as the most deceiving statements ever concocted by the duplicity of man. It also expresses great dissatisfaction at the proposition of the hon. Member for Buckinghamshire. I really think that the proposition of the hon. Member for Buckinghamshire is founded on fallacies which are intended to beguile the House into its adoption, but which are amenable to a censure scarcely less severe. That proposition, indeed, reminds me of a story which many hon. Gentlemen have perhaps heard before, yet which I will venture to tell the House in very few words. It happened once, in a country town, and an agricultural district, that a company of strolling players proposed to get up a performance 'for the benefit of the poor' of the neighbourhood. It was calculated by those who announced this intention that the object of contributing towards the relief of the poor would certainly induce the gentry to come

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forward generously in supporting the performance; and the event proved the soundness of this anticipation. But when it came to a question as to how the proceeds were to be appropriated, the strolling company claimed them all for themselves, on the principle that they themselves were 'the poor' intended.

This is just the case with the proposal of the hon. Member, if you look at its real tendencies. He would procure this boon for the tenant-farmers—of relief from local rates; but he does not go—nor any of his hon. friends near him—for the repeal of the Malt-tax. 'We,' he says, 'do not ask for that at present. It is not the time to ask this relief for you; for we don't go for a revision of the whole scheme of existing taxation.' As to the Malt-tax, I am not altogether prepared to embrace all the views entertained by some of my hon. friends on that subject. I am not one of those who think that the people at large will be much the happier for being relieved from the Malt-tax. As little do I think you will make the people generally more satisfied by taxing malt; or that you will ever succeed in getting rid of drunkenness, or any other vice, simply by rendering its indulgence dear. But I do think that if by repealing the duty on malt, you leave more money in the poor man's pocket for the purchase of other articles of more profit, or value, or convenience to him than that into the cost of which this tax enters, you do well; and notwithstanding what an hon. Baronet has said in the course of this debate, I believe what has fallen from the hon. Member for Lincolnshire, that the Malt-tax is one injurious to agriculture, and oppressive upon the working labourer and consumer. I own that I am astonished at the conduct of hon. Gentlemen opposite on this question, after hearing them both in this House and at public meetings out of doors advocate the repeal of the Malt-tax. The same parties who on this side of the House were its most strenuous

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advocates, have ceased to mention it now that they have crossed to the benches opposite.

'Their lips are now forbid to speak  
That once familiar word.'

Not one voice now calls for that favourite act of justice, but we are told to wait till the proper time shall arrive.

The hon. Member for Buckinghamshire holds this language, but he has not indicated when the time will come. I wish the hon. Gentleman would look a little into the real state of the country; if he would consult the feelings of the people, he would find that nothing more displeases them than to have their representatives hold one language here, and another before their constituents. Sir, hon. Gentlemen know, that at meetings in the country, even tithes are permitted in their presence to be spoken of in the most violent and intemperate language. They encourage, by their own conduct, the people to expect remissions of burdens which must diminish the public revenues, and leave it to Parliament to provide the substitute as best it may. I am astonished at the conduct of hon. Gentlemen. If I were myself an owner of land, I should say this to my tenant-farmers: 'Men, you have got the land, and it must be your object to work it to the best of your ability with the capital you have. Parliament, like the landlord, must deal with those on whose behalf this proposition is said to be made, on the same principles on which it would deal with trades of all other descriptions. You must exert the same virtues of perseverance, industry, and frugality, which others possess, and in which you are not wanting; you must look to the exercise of these means for your profit and success, not to external aid or exclusive assistance, which can only be rendered at the cost of gross injustice to others.'

But the speech of the hon. Member for Buckinghamshire was so purely agricultural, that he did not enter into any such considerations. He recognised no such principle of

dealing with the interests of all classes, instead of addressing ourselves to the benefit of one only. He himself quoted from the *Standard*, a newspaper of high authority with his party, and so exclusively agricultural in its predilections, that in one of its leaders a few years ago it contended that if the whole of the manufactures of England were destroyed to-morrow, England would not be a less great country by one iota, or the English a less happy people. But the *Standard* now takes up different ground. It announced in a recent number that unions were now formed in most of the southern counties of England, the object of which was carefully to exclude all the products of the mills of the north, so that the cloths of Cheshire and Yorkshire would not be allowed to come into competition with the productions of Wiltshire. If this is to be the spirit in which hon. Gentlemen are disposed to make common cause against the manufacturing interest, I wonder they do not carry out their principle to its full extent, and, as their ancestors once wandered over the country clothed in skins and with their bodies painted, that they do not come down here in that way. They might come at last to clothe themselves in thatch, by which means I trust the farmers will obtain a remunerative price for their straw.

I am not at all disposed to dispute the meritorious and industrious character of the tenant-farmers; on the contrary, I believe them well entitled to the praise of possessing those qualities in a high degree. But I protest against a proposition on their behalf which would certainly prejudice the interests of all other classes, for the doubtful benefit of one. I am opposed to all these partial experiments. I would willingly support any proposition which went to the reduction of those taxes on raw material which stand in the way of manufacturing labour and close the market on the industry of our artisans. This proposition was recommended to our sympathy on behalf of farmers who have small or no capital; but what would be said of any similar proposition

by which it should be proposed to mulct the manufacturers of the north for the benefit of manufacturers without capital in the south? You ought to endeavour to secure to your farms men who have capital and great spirit in agriculture. But you do not do this. If a farmer comes to you, and asks for a farm, wishing to make stipulations—which may be called stipulations of a commercial character—such as that he shall plough and grow as he likes, that he shall have every creature that lives upon the land, and that he must not have it infested with game; if such a man comes to you, you do not like him as a tenant: but it is the consequence of free trade that you must introduce such principles in your future arrangements between landlord and tenant. It is impossible that this great country, with its large and increasing interests, and its dense population, should stand still or rest under the baneful influence of protection to agriculture, simply because you are unwilling to adopt those principles with relation to your tenants which are adopted in every other branch of industry throughout this country.

Now our proposition is admitted on all hands, I believe, to be more distinct and intelligible than that of the hon. Member for Buckinghamshire. He has come forward as a Chancellor of the Exchequer—as the framer of a budget—but it is clear that he is only a novice in his new work, because he has not shown where he is going to obtain the money which he is wishing to remit in the shape of taxation. I suppose, judging from what slight hints fell from the hon. Gentleman, that he means to increase the income-tax; or the hon. Baronet the Member for Lincolnshire (Sir M. Cholmeley) says that a fixed duty upon corn will serve the purpose as well. But let hon. Gentlemen beware how they turn their attention to the question of the reimposition of the duties upon corn. If you do so, you are attempting that which, I believe, is as impossible as the repeal of any

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Act which has passed this House in former times. You might probably effect the repeal of the Reform Bill or the Catholic Emancipation Act in the same session as that in which you reimpose the duty upon corn. Take care what you are about. Hon. Gentlemen fancy that there is a lull in the public mind; that events abroad have frightened people at home. Bear in mind that in all the European capitals a system is being established which will have a strange effect upon the minds of people in this country, who are looking, and wisely looking, to great and permanent changes in the constitution of Parliament; and that whilst your conduct is encouraging such ideas, you are leading the farmers of England in the pursuit of that false and uncertain light which must land them hereafter in the midst of difficulties much greater than those which encompass them at present.

You talk of the experiment of Free Trade as though it had failed, or was but an experiment. I ask, have you not legislated, since the oldest amongst you first came here, in favour of Protection, and with the view of keeping up the price of corn; and do you not recollect that under protective laws in 1836 the whole average price of the year for good wheat—not sprouted wheat—was but 39s. 4d. per quarter? whilst now, as we are told, sprouted wheat is sold at 42s. a quarter. Because that system was abolished, you have wreaked your vengeance upon a Minister. You have scattered a powerful party—you have shown an anger which political parties in this country have scarcely ever exhibited, because through the power, and I will say the patriotism, of the Minister whom you discarded, the industry of this great and growing population has escaped from the pressure of that screw which, through the medium of the Corn-laws, you had laid upon the necessaries of life.

I fear that hon. Gentlemen opposite are not aware of what is passing in this country. Throughout the great towns, that

question of the reduction of expenditure which we have placed before you is exciting the intensest interest; whilst in every meeting of farmers the same cry is echoed. The men who thought us their greatest enemies, are now ready to shake hands with my hon. Friend the Member for the West Riding. They are anxious that the great justice which we advocate should be done to this country, and that you should force upon the Executive Government the greatest possible economy, compatible with the public exigencies. You say, tauntingly, that the Government is about to follow the advice of my hon. Friend. The fact is, that you will make my hon. Friend a most extraordinary man. The right hon. Gentleman the Member for Tamworth followed the advice of my hon. Friend; and now you say the present Government are about to do so too. And why is this? It is because we live amongst the people—because we have travelled in every county amongst them, and know their feelings and wishes—because we are identified with their desires, and have been returned to this House by great and free constituencies. It is on this account you find that the measures which my hon. Friend proposes have the sympathy of millions in this country; and I warn you that not many sessions will pass, before you, powerful as you are, will vote for the measure which he recommends.

— 1852 —

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