

## CENTENARY OF THE CORN LAW REPEAL

ON JANUARY 27, 1846, Sir Robert Peel announced the policy of the Government on the Corn Laws. In three years they were to be repealed. From the passing of the Act and until February 1, 1849, the maximum duty was to be 10s., which could be levied when corn was under 48s. but should diminish by 1s. per quarter till the price reached 53s., when it should remain at 4s. The duties on barley and oats were to be proportionate, colonial corn to be free, and maize only at a nominal duty. The debate on this proposal lasted twelve nights, and the resolutions were carried on February 27 by 337 to 240. The Corn Importation Bill was passed in the House of Lords on June 23, 1846, without a division, and received the Royal Assent on June 26.

The systematic agitation for the repeal of the Corn Laws commenced with a meeting at King Street, Manchester, on December 20, 1838, the demand of the Anti-Corn Law League being expressed in the Petition to the House of Commons declaring as follows:

"Holding one of the principles of eternal justice to be the inalienable right of every man freely to exchange the result of his labour for the productions of other people, and maintaining the practice of protecting one part of the community at the expense of all other classes to be unsound and unjustifiable, your petitioners earnestly implore your honourable House to repeal all laws relating to the importation of foreign corn and other foreign articles of subsistence; and to carry out to the fullest extent, both as affects agriculture and manufactures, the true and peaceful principles of Free Trade by removing all existing obstacles to the unrestricted employment of industry and capital."

Richard Cobden was returned to Parliament for the first time in August, 1841, as Member for Stockport. John Bright joined him in 1843, and it was they and their colleague, Charles Villiers, who fought for the reform on the floor of the House. But it was by the vigilant, intense and brilliantly led campaign over the length and breadth of the country with no further talk of "petitioning" the House that the triumph was achieved, in eight short years, against the entrenched power of the landed interests—of the "Monopolists," as Cobden well called them. No doubt the reformers had their ally in the terrible distress of the times, and it was that which decided Sir Robert Peel upon the dramatic step he took after having been lately a pledged supporter of the corn laws. Among the names of the many who by their efforts and sacrifice contributed to the victory, there is one in particular who should not be forgotten—Colonel T. Perronet Thompson, the author of the *Catechism on the Corn Laws* and other works—to whom Cobden paid a special tribute when the League met (July 4, 1846) to suspend its organisation, its objects accomplished. The *Catechism* was a trenchant denunciation of landlordism, its polemics cast in conversational style with abundant wit. It was one of the most effective publications the League possessed.

We commemorate the Repeal of the Corn Laws by selecting some passages from Cobden's speeches, taken (with one exception) from the volume edited by John Bright and J. E. Thorold Rogers, and published by Macmillan in 1880. It is peculiar that the Derby speech in 1841 was not contained in that volume. It had been known to land reformers, and it was only after search made at the British Museum (as it happens by John Paul, the late editor of this paper) that its text was discovered and the "testament" it conveyed was handed to a later generation by those Free Traders who see more in Free Trade than the mere abolition of protection. It is well to invoke again the radical message of Richard Cobden and the Anti-Corn Law League, for there has been retrogression and reaction since. The world has gone back in these hundred years for reasons that need not be entered into here, but some of the responsibility does rest upon those who, presuming to speak in the name of Cobden, have kept their agitation for Free Trade within the narrow brackets of "tariffs for revenue only," approving of import duties if

they were balanced by excise, and failing to extend the principle of free trade to the freedom of production. Free Trade so ineptly and inadequately defended was an easier prey to the assaults of its enemies; and so, to-day, while we commemorate the repeal of those iniquitous Corn Laws we cannot make it a celebration, for the victory of Free Trade is not yet. To go back upon these speeches of Cobden's, it is astonishing to see how apposite they are to both the political and the economic conditions of the present day. There is an everlasting freshness in them which inspires his successors to new and more successful endeavours.

The remarkable insight which Cobden showed predicting the revenge of the landlords, will also be noted—that is, in what they would do to have local taxation taken off land and placed upon the shoulders of the general taxpayer. This was the "odious principle of compensation" and the "spoliation" he had warned against; but the landlords did succeed in securing compensation for the loss of the Corn Law, by steps and stages through the Agriculture Rates Acts, culminating in the Derating Act of 1929, that legislation of ill fame for which Mr. Winston Churchill was so largely responsible. Of him, as Cobden would have said, "better things were expected."

### COBDEN'S VISION AND FAITH

"I see in the Free Trade principle that which shall act on the moral world as the principle of gravitation in the universe—drawing men together, thrusting aside the antagonism of race and creed, and language, and uniting us in the bonds of eternal peace. I have looked even further. I have speculated and probably dreamt, in the dim future—ay, a thousand years hence—I have speculated on what the effect of the triumph of this principle may be. I believe that the effect will be to change the face of the world so as to introduce a system of government entirely distinct from that which now prevails. I believe that the desire and the motive for mighty empires; for gigantic armies and great navies—for those materials which are used for the destruction of life and the desolation of the rewards of labour—will die away; I believe that such things will cease to be necessary or to be used, when man becomes one family, and freely exchanges the fruits of his labour with his brother man. I believe that, if we could be allowed to reappear on this sublunary scene, we should see, at a far distant period, the governing system of this world revert to something like the municipal system; and I believe that the speculative philosopher of a thousand years hence will date the greatest revolution that ever happened in the world's history from the triumph of the principle which we have met here to advocate." *Manchester, January 15, 1846.*

### POLITICS AND PRINCIPLES

"This is not a party move to serve any political organisation. We care nothing for political parties. As they at present stand, there is very little indeed to choose between the two great parties. Let a statesman of established reputation, of whatever side in politics, take the step for the perfect freedom of trade, he shall have the support of the League . . . to carry such a measure whatever his other political opinions may be. The sole object of the League is to put an end to and extinguish at once and for ever the principle of maintaining taxes for the benefit of a particular class. . . . It is no fault of ours if with this agitation should be mixed up the question of rents and should mingle in a degree that would render it difficult to separate the rights of property from the claims of those who labour under the grievance of these intolerable exactions. . . . The fault lies with those who support monopoly, who are deaf to reason and injustice; a pedestal which is always liable to fall and always certain to bring down those who stand upon it." *London, September 28, 1843.*

"Do not let us be used, however we may be abused, by

any of the existing political parties. There never was a period in the history of England when an attempt was made to carry an opposition with a more intangible line of demarcation than that which separates Whig and Tory at the present moment. From the time of Charles I there never has been a period when there was such an attempt to keep up an opposition against a party in power without apparently one atom of principle on any one great public question to support an opposition. I ask you upon this occasion, whatever may happen in the party papers or be spoken against us as Free Traders, to apply but one test to us, namely, are we true to the principles we advocate? If we cling to that truth we have only to persevere as men have ever done in all great and good objects, and it will be found that being true to our principles we shall go on to an ultimate and not very distant triumph." *London*, July 3, 1844.

#### APPEAL TO MORALS AND UNDERSTANDING

"It would be very monstrous indeed, in the moral government of this world, if one class of the community could permanently benefit at the expense and misery of the rest. Although agriculturists may not benefit themselves ultimately, that is no reason why they should inflict great misery on us. You may strike a blow, and, although that blow may be mortal to another, its recoil may be mortal to yourselves. But it is no less a mortal blow to him you strike because you strike yourselves also." *Manchester*, October 19, 1843.

"The repeal of the Corn Laws will be carried when men understand it. And when you understand it, if you are honest men, you will feel it; if you feel it you will not be able to be quiet without doing something to put down this great injustice. I exhort you to spread abroad light on this subject. Knowledge is the power—knowledge alone—by which we shall bring this foul system to the dust." *London*, February 8, 1844.

#### PROTECTIONISM AND STATE CONTROLS

"How can protection, think you, add to the wealth of a country? You may, by legislation, in one evening, destroy the fruits and accumulations of a century of labour, but I defy you to show me how by the legislation of this House you can add one farthing to the wealth of the country. That springs from the industry and intelligence of the people of this country. You cannot guide that intelligence; you cannot do better than leave it to its own instincts. If you attempt by legislation to give any direction to trade or industry, it is a thousand to one that you are doing wrong; and if you happen to be right, it is a work of supererogation, for the parties for whom you legislate would go right without you, and better than with you." *House of Commons*, February 27, 1846.

#### EXTORTION IN ANOTHER SHAPE

"We do not intend that they (the landlords) shall have one shilling more of protection. And something else we do not intend they shall have. There is another thing they are going to do—if we will let them—and which I always suspected they would do. They will try to extort it from us in another shape. Their plan is that the £12,000,000 of local taxes for poor rates, highway rates, church rates and the rest, shall be, half of them, if they cannot get the whole—they had rather put the whole upon your shoulders—shall be taken off the land and put upon the Consolidated Fund; that is, taken out of the taxes raised upon the necessities and comforts of the masses of the people . . . and mind you, I am afraid we shall have some people joining in this from whom I expected better things. Those burdens have been borne by the real property of the country from two to three centuries at the least. Poor rates have been nearly three centuries borne by the real property of the country, and the others are nearly as old as our Saxon institutions. The charges have been endorserd upon the title deeds and the property has been bought or inherited at so much less in consequence of those charges and therefore the present owner has no right

to exemption from those burdens, having bought the property knowing it to be subject to those burdens and having paid less in consequence. Another reason why this property should bear those local burdens is this—it is the only property which not only does not diminish in value but in a country growing in population and advancing in prosperity, it always increases in value and without any help from the owners." *Leeds*, December 18, 1849.

#### LANDLORD LAW—A BLACK RECORD

"Great as I consider the grievance of the protective system, mighty as I consider the fraud and injustice of the Corn Laws, I verily believe if you were to bring forward the history of taxation in this country for the last 150 years you will find as black a record against the landowners as even the Corn Law itself. I warn them against ripping up the subject of taxation. If they want another League at the death of this one then let them force the middle and industrious classes of England to understand how they have been cheated, robbed and bamboozled on the subject of taxation—how landowners 150 years ago deprived the sovereign of his feudal rights over them; how the aristocracy retained their feudal rights over the minor copyholders; how they made a bargain with the King to give them 4s. in the pound upon their landed rentals, as a quit charge for having dispensed with these rights of feudal service from them. How they afterwards passed a law to make the valuation of their rental final, the bargain originally being that they should pay 4s. in the £ of the yearly rateable value of the rental—that the land has gone on increasing tenfold in many parts of Scotland and fivefold in many parts of England, while the land tax has remained the same as it was 150 years ago . . . if they force these things to be understood, they will be making as rueful a bargain as they have already made by resisting the abolition of the Corn Law." *London*, December 17, 1845.

#### WHERE TAXATION SHOULD REST

In his speech at *Derby*, December 10, 1841, Cobden had referred to the same subject saying, "When I look into the land tax from its origin to the present time, I am bound to exclaim that it exhibits an instance of selfish legislation secondary only in audacity to the corn law and provision monopolies," and he continued:

"It is a war of the pockets that is being carried on; and I hope to see societies formed calling upon the legislature to revalue the land, and put a taxation upon it in proportion to that of other countries and in proportion to the wants of the State. I hope I shall see petitions calling upon them to revalue the land and that the agitation will go on collaterally with the agitation for the total and immediate repeal of the corn laws, and I shall contribute my mite for such a purpose. There must be a total abolition of all taxes upon food, and we should raise at least £20,000,000 a year upon the land and then the owners would be richer than any landed proprietary in the world."

Cobden thus perceived and pronounced the relationship between the Free Trade question and the Land Question. He realised the insufficiency of the abolition of the Corn Laws in removing poverty. The evils and the privileges of landlordism must also be combated, and there is something of a testament in the words he uttered in his last public speech, at *Rochdale*, on November 23, 1864. He was taking up the reference in the *Edinburgh Review* to the domestic reforms that awaited attention. "At home we have still to apply to land and to labour that freedom which has worked such marvels in the case of capital and commerce—I say 'Amen' to it," Cobden said. "If I were five-and-twenty, instead of unhappily twice that number of years, I would take Adam Smith in hand and I would have a League for free trade in land just as we had a league for free trade in corn; and if you can apply free trade to land and to labour too, then, I say, the men who will do that will have done for England probably more than we have been able to do by making free trade in corn."