

Boston Evening Transcript

1904-08-04 Remember Richard Cobden

American Free Traders Observe Great Englishman's Centennial and Speak Against Protection at Home

The centennial anniversary of the birth of Richard Cobden, the great English free trader, and its own twentieth birthday were celebrated by the American Free Trade League gathered at dinner at the Vendome last evening. The dinner was synchronous with the Cobden dinner in London, and cablegrams of greeting were exchanged during the evening. Hon. Harvey N. Shepard, chairman of the executive committee, presided, and the speakers were Hon. Charles Francis Adams, the first president of the association, Edward Atkinson and Louis R. Erlich of New York. Letters regretting their inability to attend were received from John De Witt Warner, president of the League; John Bigelow, Charles Eliot Norton and Goldwin Smith.

In beginning the speechmaking, Mr. Shepard said that protection must always be unjust, partial, wrong; and there can never be any compromise with it. "Nor is the issue for a moment in doubt. When this question goes before the country untrammelled by other issues, the citadel of the enemy is sure to fall. And we shall never be content until every vestige of the protective tariff -- of unfair advantage and partial law -- is swept away forever."

Charles Francis Adams recalled how Cobden, Bright and Forster were potent influences, though a minority, in keeping England's hands off the struggle between the North and South. Paying his respects to the protectionist fear of "dumping," which he understood to mean the sale by one community to another of commodities at a less price than it cost the maker and seller thereof to produce them, he said this is on a large scale a department-store clearance sale. As a general rule, mankind -- and womenkind even more than mankind -- consider it rather an advantage than otherwise. Nevertheless, the protectionist tells us that, however it may be with the individual, for the community ruin that way lies! But the laws of trade operate between states as between nations, and Massachusetts on a very considerable scale has been the dumping ground of her sister States for a century, and has thriven under the process.

Edward Atkinson briefly reviewed the life work of Cobden, the delivery of his country from the perversion of the power of taxation to increase the wealth of the privileged classes at the cost of the Commonwealth. He denied that Great Britain was enabled to adopt free trade through having fully attained the purpose of protection. The fact is plain, he said, that the prosperity and progress of this country have been due to the continental system of free trade among the States under an organic law insuring freedom of commerce to a greater number of civilized people, occupying a wider area than have ever before enjoyed it.

Louis R. Ehrich denounced protection as legalized graft. Favored beneficiaries are permitted to pick the pockets of the community while the Government holds the victim down and prevents rescue from the outside. Protection is unfair and dishonest. It raises revenue by a tax on what men eat, and drink, and wear, rather than on what they possess; and, as the wage-earners, relatively to their incomes or their possessions, spend far more for the necessities of life than the richer classes, the disproportionate burden of taxation is thrown on the shoulders of the poor. Protection directly robs the wage-earner. By obstructing foreign trade it diminishes the extent and the steadiness of the demand for his services, and it pays those services, just as free silver would indirectly have done, with a clipped dollar -- that is, a dollar which buys about one-half of what it ought to buy. Protection destroys self-reliance and undermines manhood. It teaches men to lean on the Government. It inevitably develops Socialism. It thrives on public extravagance. It breeds corruption. He declared that free men should not have taxes which are indirect, sneaking and sugar-coated. Taxation should be direct, as naked and exposed as possible. Wastefulness is one of the curses of indirect taxation.