



LIKE SO many dangerous expedients, the Corn Laws were not, at first, visibly oppressive. In 1773, at a time when the price of corn oscillated around 44s. or so a quarter, an embargo was set on foreign corn until the price reached 48s; thereafter it would be let in at a more or less nominal duty.

Then came the French wars, which lasted with brief interruptions from 1793 to 1815. There was inflation, and food prices rose. So did the level at which corn imports were permitted – which became 66s. in 1804. As the war continued, trade with foreign corn producers practically stopped. Naturally, the general trend in food prices was still upwards. Meanwhile, there was a great spate of Enclosure Acts. Marginal land, which had not been arable since the Middle Ages or earlier, was set under corn.

So we have a situation with a strangely modern ring. War became the reason – or the excuse – for more and more arbitrary government action against the subject. Import controls. Inflation. Enclosures. So far as the government can manage it, the business of waging war is debited against the future. This is all so similar to 20th century wars!

What happens to the marginal producer once the war is over? In 1815, the price level at which corn imports were permitted was raised to 80s. Thus, high-cost production, brought into being to meet a wartime need, received permanent protection. As usually happens, the intended beneficiaries of privilege included a substantial proportion of necessitous people who had a real moral claim for favourable treatment; for the marginal farmers had played a vital part in wartime survival, and many of them were relatively poor men who would certainly be ruined if they were suddenly faced with full-scale foreign competition.

The Corn Laws themselves underwent changes in the ensuing years,

● **Brussels HQ of the EEC, which 'protects' farmers by forcing up food prices under the Common Agricultural Policy...**

Corn Law lessons for European Common Market

notably by the introduction of a "sliding scale." The general effect, however, was predictable. The rent of farmers cultivating the richer soil was able to rise. Cottagers who, before the enclosures, had had customary rights over common land, now had no access to land, and became hired labourers.

BY ROY DOUGLAS

Yet all who were involved in agriculture conceived that they had an interest in the preservation of Corn Laws, and of the high food prices that went with them. The farmer on marginal land would be ruined if food prices dropped. The farmer on good land feared that he would not be able to afford his rent. The landless labourers feared that in the cataclysm they would lose their jobs and starve. The landlords, of course, perceived that high corn prices meant high rents. No doubt there were a great many other people who thought that they had an indirect interest in the Corn Laws: shopkeepers in rural areas who feared that their customers would be impoverished; people who worked for those shopkeepers; clergy who relied on tithes; domestic servants of the landowners who would be

dismissed if their master lost his rents. Here again we have a modern phenomenon. Privilege creates interests far wider than the original class of intended beneficiaries, and those interests do not abate when the conditions which called it into being have changed.

THE MOVEMENT for abolition of the Corn Laws developed from the late 1830s onwards. Like most political movements, it combined a direct appeal to interest with an appeal to idealism and ideology. Do you want the "little loaf" made with dear corn or the "big loaf" made with cheap corn? This was an argument with an obvious appeal to the growing urban population, in whose family budget the price of bread was a major item.

To those whose personal circumstances removed them from obvious dependence on the price of corn, it was easy to point out that the higher purchasing power of the poor which would follow repeal would lead to general prosperity. The idealism which accompanied the appeal to interests had a strong religious flavour – Biblical texts, and not least the Lord's Prayer, figured largely. The ideology was the whole panoply of free trade, sometimes with overtones of land reform as well.

As often happens, it took a disaster to bring the issue from the realms of intellectual argument to political practicality. In the autumn of 1845 came the first rumblings of the Irish famine. At the same time the English corn crop was badly affected. The debate dragged on for months; but on 25 June 1846 the Corn Laws were at last repealed.

Repeal did not take full effect immediately, and much learned argument has ensued as to the direct consequences of that repeal. Yet once the Corn Laws had been repealed not only was their reintroduction unthinkable, but the other barriers on external trade were doomed, and by around 1860 Britain was about as complete a free trade country as any land had been. So far from agriculture being ruined, the farmers were hard put to supply enough food to meet the demands of a rising and increasingly affluent population; and within a few years a period of unparalleled prosperity began, which affected all classes and lasted until the late 1870s.

Need one rub in the current moral?