

## SPEECH ON THE REFORM BILL

### SPEECH BY THE REV. SYDNEY SMITH

STICK to the Bill — it is your Magna Charta and your Runnymede. King John made a present to the Barons — King William has made a similar present to you. Never mind, common qualities in common times good in common times. If a man does not vote for the Bill, he is unclean — the plague-spot is upon him—push him into the lazaretto of the last century, with Wetherell and Sadler — Purify the air before you approach him — bathe your hands in Chloride of Lime, if you have been contaminated by his touch.

So far from its being a merely theoretical improvement, I put it to any man, who is himself embarked in a profession, or has sons in the same situation, if the unfair influence of Boroughmongers has not perpetually thwarted him in his lawful career of ambition and professional emolument? “I have been in three general engagements at sea,” said an old sailor — “have been twice wounded; —I commanded the boats when the French frigate, the ASTROLABE was cut out so gallantly.” “Then you are made a Post Captain?” “No. I was very near it; but —Lieutenant Thompson cut me out as I cut out the French frigate; his father is Town Clerk of the Borough for which Lord F\_\_\_ is Member, and my chance was finished.” In the same manner, all over England, you will find great scholars rotting on curacies —brave captains starving in garrets —profound lawyers decayed and mouldering in the Inns of Court, because the parsons, warriors, and advocates of Boroughmongers must be crammed to saturation, before there is a morsel of bread for the man who does not sell his votes, and put his country up to auction; and though this is of every day occurrence the Borough system, we are told, is no practical evil

Who can bear to walk through a slaughter-house? blood, garbage, stomachs, entrails, legs, tails, kidneys, horrors—I often walk a mile about to avoid it. What a scene of disgust and horror is an election—the base and infamous traffic of principles—a candidate of high character reduced to such means—the perjury and evasion of agents—the detestable rapacity of voters—the ten days' dominion of mammon, and Belial. The Bill lessens it—begins the destruction of such practices—affords some chance, and some means of turning public opinion against bribery, and of rendering it infamous.

But the thing I cannot, and will not bear, is this;—what right has this Lord, or that Marquis, to buy ten seats in Parliament, in the shape of Boroughs, and then to make laws to govern me? And how are these masses of power redistributed? The eldest son of my Lord is just come from Eton—he knows a good deal about Eneas and Dido, Apollo and Daphne—and that is all; and to this boy his father gives a six-hundredth part of the power of making laws, as he would give him a horse or a double-barrelled gun. Then Vellum, the steward, is put in—an admirable man:—he has raised the estates—watched the progress of the family Road and Canal Bills— and Vellum shall help to rule over the people of Israel. A neighbouring country gentleman, Mr. Plumpkin, hunts with my Lord— opens him a gate or two, while the hounds are running—dines with my Lord—agrees with my Lord—wishes he could rival the South Down sheep of my Lord—and upon Plumpkin is conferred a portion of the government. Then there is a distant relation of the same name, in the County Militia, with white teeth, who calls up the carriage at the Opera, and is always wishing O'Connell was hanged, drawn, and quartered—then a barrister, who has written an article in the Quarterly, and is very likely to speak, and refute M'Culloch; and these five people, in whose nomination I have no more agency than I have in the nomination of the toll-keepers of the Bosphorus, are to make laws for me and my family—to put their hands in my purse, and to sway the future destinies of this country; and when the neighbours step in, and beg permission to say a few words before these

persons are chosen, there is an universal cry of ruin, confusion, and destruction;—we have become a great people under Vellum and Plumpkin—under Vellum and Plumpkin our ships have covered the ocean—under Vellum and Plumpkin our armies have secured the strength of the Hills—to turn out Vellum and Plumpkin is not Reform, but Revolution.

Was there ever such a Ministry? Was there ever before a real Ministry of the people? Look at the condition of the country when it was placed in their hands: the state of the house when the incoming tenant took possession: windows broken, chimneys on fire, mobs round the house threatening to pull it down, roof tumbling, rain pouring in. It was courage to occupy it; it was a miracle to save it; it will be the glory of glories to enlarge and expand it, and to make it the eternal palace of wise and temperate freedom.

Proper examples have been made among the unhappy and misguided disciples of Swing: a rope has been carried round O'Connell's legs, and a ring inserted in Cobbett's nose. Then the Game Laws!!! Was ever conduct so shabby as that of the two or three governments which preceded that of Lord Grey? The cruelties and enormities of this code had been thoroughly exposed; and a general conviction existed of the necessity of a change. Bills were brought in by various gentlemen, containing some trifling alteration in this abominable code, and even these were sacrificed to the tricks and manoeuvres of some noble Nimrod, who availed himself of the emptiness of the town in July, and flung out the Bill. Government never stirred a step. The fulness of the prisons, the wretchedness and demoralisation of the poor, never came across them. The humane and considerate Peel never once offered to extend his ægis over them. It had nothing to do with the state of party; and some of their double-barrelled voters might be offended. In the meantime, for every ten pheasants which fluttered in the wood, one English peasant was rotting in gaol. No sooner is Lord Althorp Chancellor of the Exchequer, than he turns out of the house a trumpery and (perhaps) an insidious Bill for the improvement of the Game Laws; and in an instant offers the assistance of Government for the abolition of the whole code.

Then look at the gigantic Brougham, sworn in at 12 o'clock, and before 6 has a bill on the table, abolishing the abuses of a Court which has been the curse of the people of England for centuries. For twenty-five long years did Lord Eldon sit in that Court, surrounded with misery and sorrow, which he never held up a finger to alleviate. The widow and the orphan cried to him as vainly as the town crier cries when he offers a small reward for a full purse; the bankrupt of the Court became the lunatic of the Court, estates moulded away, and mansions fell down; but the fees came in, and all was well. But in an instant the iron mace of Brougham shivered to atoms this house of fraud and of delay; and this is the man who will help to govern you; who bottoms his reputation on doing good to you; who knows, that to reform abuses is the safest basis of fame, and the surest instrument of power; who uses the highest gifts of reason, and the most splendid efforts of genius, to rectify those abuses, which all the genius and talent of the profession\* have hitherto been employed to justify, and to protect.

Look to Brougham, and turn you to that side where he waves his long and lean finger; and mark well that face which nature has marked so forcibly—which dissolves pensions—turns jobbers into honest men—scares away the plunderer of the public—and is a terror to him who doeth evil to the people. But, above all, look to the Northern Earl, victim, before this honest and manly reign, of the spitefulness of the Court. You may now, for the first time, learn to trust in the professions of a Minister; you are directed by a man who prefers character to place, and who has given such unequivocal proofs of honesty and patriotism, that his image ought to be amongst your household gods, and his name to be lisped by your children: two thousand years hence it will be a legend like the fable of Perseus and Andromeda: Britannia chained to a mountain—two hundred rotten animals menacing her destruction, till a tall Earl, armed with Schedule A., and followed by his page Russell, drives them into the deep, and delivers over Britannia in safety to crowds of ten-pound renters, who deafen the air with their

acclamations. Forthwith, Latin verses upon this—school exercises—boys whipt, and all the usual absurdities of education.

Don't part with the Administration composed of Lord Grey and Lord Brougham; and not only these, but look at them all—the mild wisdom of Lansdowne—the genius and extensive knowledge of Holland, in whose bold and honest life there is no varying nor shadow of change—the unexpected and exemplary activity of Lord Melbourne—and the rising parliamentary talents of Stanley. You are ignorant of your best interests, if every vote you can bestow is not given to such a ministry as this.

You will soon find an alteration of behaviour in the upper orders when elections become real. You will find that you are raised to the importance to which you ought to be raised. The merciless ejector, the rural tyrant, will be restrained within the limits of decency and humanity, and will improve their own characters, at the same time that they better your condition.

It is not the power of aristocracy that will be destroyed by these measures, but the unfair power. If the Duke of Newcastle is kind and obliging to his neighbours, he will probably lead his neighbours; if he is a man of sense, he will lead them more certainly, and to a better purpose. All this is as it should be; but the Duke of Newcastle, at present, by buying certain old houses, could govern his neighbours and legislate for them, even if he had not five grains of understanding, and if he were the most churlish and brutal man under heaven. The present state of things renders unnecessary all those important virtues, which rich and well-born men, under a better system, would exercise for the public good. The Duke of Newcastle (I mention him only as an instance), Lord Exeter will do as well, but either of those noblemen, depending not upon walls, riches, and abutments, for their power—but upon mercy, charity forbearance, indulgence, and example—would pay this price, and lead the people by their affections; one would be the God of Stamford, and the other of Newark. This union of the great with the many is the real healthy state of a country; such a country is strong to invincibility—and this strength the Borough system entirely destroys.

Cant words creep in, and affect quarrels; the changes are rung between Revolution and Reform; but, first settle whether a wise government ought to attempt the measure—whether anything is wanted—whether less would do—and, having settled this, mere nomenclature becomes of very little consequence. But, after all, if it be Revolution, and not Reform, it will only induce me to receive an old political toast in a twofold meaning, and with two-fold pleasure. When King William and the great and glorious Revolution are given, I shall think not only of escape from bigotry, but exemption from corruption; and I shall thank Providence, which has given us a second King William for the destruction of vice, as the other of that name was given us for the conservation of freedom.

All former political changes, proposed by these very men, it is said, were mild and gentle, compared to this: true, but are you on Saturday night to seize your apothecary by the throat, and to say to him, "Subtle compounder, fraudulent posologist, did not you order me a drachm of this medicine on Monday morning, and now you declare, that nothing short of an ounce can do me any good?" "True enough," would he of the phials reply, "*but you did not take the drachm on Monday morning*—that makes all the difference, my dear Sir; if you had done as I advised you at first, the small quantity of medicine would have sufficed; and, instead of being in a night-gown and slippers upstairs, you would have been walking vigorously in Piccadilly. Do as you please—and die if you please; but don't blame me because you despised my advice, and by your own ignorance and obstinacy have entailed upon yourself tenfold rhubarb and unlimited infusion of senna."

Now see the consequences of having a manly Leader, and a manly Cabinet. Suppose they had come out with a little ill-fashioned seven months' reform; what would have been the consequence? The same opposition from the Tories—that would have been quite certain—and not a single Reformer in England satisfied with the measure. You have now a real Reform, and a fair share of power delegated to the people.

The Anti-Reformers cite the increased power of the press—this is the very reason why I want an increased power in the House of Commons. The Times, Herald, Advertiser, Globe, Sun, Courier, and Chronicle, are a heptarchy, which govern this country, and govern it because the people are so badly represented. I am perfectly satisfied, that with a fair and honest House of Commons the power of the press would diminish—and that the greatest authority would centre in the highest place.

Is it possible for a gentleman to get into Parliament, at present, without doing things he is utterly ashamed of—without mixing himself up with the lowest and basest of mankind? Hands, accustomed to the scented lubricity of soap, are defiled with pitch, and contaminated with filth. Is there not some inherent vice in a Government, which cannot be carried on but with such abominable wickedness, in which no gentleman can mingle without moral degradation, and the practice of crimes, the very imputation of which, on other occasions, he would repel at the hazard of his life?

What signifies a small majority in the House? The miracle is, that there should have been any majority at all; that there was not an immense majority on the other side. It was a very long period before the Courts of Justice in Jersey could put down smuggling; and why? The Judges, Counsel, Attorneys, Crier of the Court, Grand and Petty Jurymen, were all smugglers, and the High Sheriff and Constables were running goods every moonlight night.

How are you to do without a government? And what other government, if this Bill be ultimately lost, could possibly be found? How could any country defray the ruinous expense of protecting, with troops and constables, the Duke of Wellington and Sir Robert Peel, who literally would not be able to walk from the Horse Guards to Grosvenor Square, without two or three regiments of foot to screen them from the mob; and in these hollow squares the Hero of Waterloo would have to spend his political life? By the whole exercise of his splendid military talents, by strong batteries, at Beetle's and White's, he might, on nights of great debate, reach the House of Lords; but Sir Robert would probably be cut off, and nothing could save Twiss and Lewis.

The great majority of persons returned by the new Boroughs would either be men of high reputation for talents, or persons of fortune known in the neighbourhood; they have property and character to lose. Why are they to plunge into mad revolutionary projects of pillaging the public creditor? It is not the interest of any such man to do it; he would lose more by the destruction of the public credit than he would gain by a remission of what he paid for the for the interest of the public debt. And if " is not the in the interest of any one to act in this manner , it is not in the I nterest of the mass.How many also, of these new Legislators would there be, who were not themselves creditors of the State? Is it the interest of such men to create a revolution, by destroying the constitutional power of the House of Lords, or of the King? Does there exist in persons of that class any disposition for such changes? Are not all their feelings. opinions, and prejudices, on the opposite side? The majority of new members will be landed gentlemen: their genius utterly distinct from the revolutionary tribe; they have Molar teeth; they are destitute of the carnivorous and incisive jaws of political adventurers.

There will be mistakes at first, as are are in all changes. All young Ladies will imagine (as soon as this Bill is carried) that they will be instantly married. Schoolboys believe that Gerunds and Supines will be abolished, and that Currant Tarts must ultimately come down m

price; the Corporal and Sergeant are sure of double pay; bad Poets will expect a demand for their Epics; Fools will be disappointed, as they always are; reasonable men who know what to expect will find that a very serious good has been obtained.

What good to the hewer of wood and the drawer of water? How is he benefited, if old Sarum is abolished and Birmingham members created? But if you ask this question of Reform, you must ask it of a great number of other measures? How is he benefited by Catholic Emancipation, by the repeal of the Corporation and Test Act, by the Revolution of 1688, by any great political change? by a good government? In the first place, if many are benefited, and the lower orders are not injured, this alone is enough reason for change. But the hewer of wood and the drawer of water *are* benefited by reform. Reform will produce economy and investigation; there will be fewer jobs, and a less lavish expenditure, wars will not be persevered in for years after the people are tired of them: taxes will be taken off the poor, and laid upon the rich; demotic habits will be more common in a country where the rich are forced to court the poor for political power; cruel and repressive punishments (such as those for night poaching) will be abolished. If you steal a pheasant you will be punished as you ought to be, but not sent away from your wife and children for seven years. Tobacco will be 2d. per lb. cheaper. Candles will fall in price. These last results of an improved government will be felt. We do not pretend to abolish poverty, or to prevent wretchedness; but if peace, economy, and justice, are the results of Reform, a number of small benefits, or rather of benefits which appear small to us, but not to them, will accrue to millions of the people; and the connection between the existence of John Russell, and the reduced price of bread and cheese, will be as clear as it has been the object of his honest, wise, and useful life to make it.

Don't be led away by such nonsense; all things are dearer under a bad government, and cheaper under a good one. The real question they ask you is, What difference can any change of government make to you? They want to keep the bees from buzzing and stinging, in order that they may rob the hive in peace.

Work well! How does it work well, when every human being indoors and out (with the exception of the Duke of Wellington) says it must be made to work better, or it will soon cease to work at all? It is little short of absolute nonsense to call a government good, which the great mass of Englishmen would, before twenty years were elapsed, if Reform were denied, rise up and destroy. Of what use have all the cruel laws been of Perceval, Eldon, and Castlereagh, to extinguish Reform? Lord John Russell, and his abettors, would have been committed to gaol twenty years ago for half only of his present Reform; and now relays of the people would drag them from London to Edinburgh; at which latter city we are told, by Mr. Dundas, that there is no eagerness for Reform. Five minutes before Moses struck the rock, this gentleman would have said that there was no eagerness for water.

There are two methods of making alterations: the one is to despise the applicants, to begin with refusing every concession, then to relax by making concessions which are always too late; by offering in 1831 what is then too late, but would have been cheerfully accepted in 1830—gradually to O'Connellise the country, till at last, after this process has gone on for some time, the alarm becomes too great, and everything is conceded in hurry and confusion. In the meantime fresh conspiracies have been hatched by the long delay, and no gratitude is expressed for what has been extorted by fear. In this way peace was concluded with America, and Emancipation granted to the Catholics; and in this way the war of complexion will be finished in the West Indies. The other method is, to see at a distance that the thing must be done, and to do it effectually, and at once; to take it out of the hands of the common people, and to carry the measure in a manly liberal manner, so as to satisfy the great majority. The merit of this belongs to the Administration of Lord Grey. He is the only Minister I know of who has begun a great measure in good time, conceded at the beginning of twenty years what would have been extorted at the end of it, and prevented that folly, violence, and ignorance,

which emanate from a long denial and extorted concession of justice to great masses of human beings. I believe the question of Reform, or any dangerous agitation of it, is set at rest for thirty or forty years; and this is an eternity in politics.

Boroughs are not the power proceeding from wealth. Many men who have no Boroughs are infinitely richer than those who have—but it is the artifice of wealth in seizing hold of certain localities. The Boroughmonger is like rheumatism, which owes its power not so much to the intensity of the pain as to its peculiar position; a little higher up, or a little lower down, the same pain would be trifling; but it fixes in the joints, and gets into the headquarters of motion and activity. The Boroughmonger knows the importance of arthritic positions; he disdains muscle, gets into the joints, and lords it over the whole machine by felicity of place. Other men are as rich—but those riches are not fixed in the critical spot.

I live a good deal with all ranks and descriptions of people; I am thoroughly convinced that the party of Democrats and Republicans is very small and contemptible; that the English love their institutions—that they love not only this King, (who would not love him?) but the kingly office—that they have no hatred to the Aristocracy. I am not afraid of trusting English happiness to English Gentlemen. I believe that the half million of new voters will choose much better for the public, than the twenty or thirty Peers, to whose usurped power they succeed. If any man doubt of the power of Reform, let him take these two memorable proofs of its omnipotence. First, but for the declaration against it, I believe the Duke of Wellington might this day have been in office; and, secondly, in the whole course of the debates at County Meetings and in Parliament, there are not twenty men who have declared against Reform. Some advance an inch, some a foot, some a yard—but nobody stands still—nobody says, We ought to remain just where we were—everybody discovers that he is a Reformer, and has long been so—and appears infinitely delighted with this new view of himself. Nobody appears without the cockade—bigger or less—but always the cockade.

An exact and elaborate census is called for—vast information should have been laid upon the table of the House—great time should have been given for deliberation. All these objections, being turned into English, simply mean, that the chances of another year should have been given for defeating the Bill. In that time the Poles may be crushed, the Belgians organised, Louis Philippe dethroned; war may rage all over Europe—the popular spirit may be diverted to other objects. It is certainly provoking that the Ministry foresaw all these possibilities and determined to model the iron while it was red and glowing.

It is not enough that a political institution works well practically: it must be defensible; it must be such as will bear discussion and not excite ridicule and contempt. It might work well for aught I know if, like the savages of Onelashka, we sent out to catch a king: but who could defend a coronation by chase? who can defend the payment of 40,000*l.* for the three-hundredth part of the power of Parliament, and the resale of this power to Government for places to the Lord Williams and Lord Charles's, and others of the Anglophagi? Teach a million of the common people to read—and such a government (work it ever so well) must perish in twenty years. It is impossible to persuade the mass of mankind that there are not other and better methods of governing a country. It is so complicated, so wicked, such envy and hatred accumulate against the gentlemen who have fixed themselves on the joints, that it cannot fail to perish, and to be driven, as it is driven, from the country by a general burst of hatred and detestation. I meant gentlemen, to have spoken for another half hour, but I am old and tired. Thank me for ending—but, gentlemen, bear with me for another moment; one word before I end. I am old, but I thank God I have lived to see more than my observations on human nature taught me I had any right to expect. I have lived to see an honest King in whose word his Ministers can trust; who disdains to deceive those men whom he has called to the public service, but makes common cause with them for the common good; and exercises the highest powers of a ruler for the dearest interests of the State. I have lived to see a King with a good heart, who, surrounded by Nobles, thinks of common men; who loves the great mass of

English people, and wishes to be loved by them; who knows that his real power, as he feels that his happiness, is founded on their affection. I have lived to see a King, who, without pretending to the pomp of superior intellect, has the wisdom to see, that the decayed institutions of human policy require amendment; and who, in spite of clamour, interest, prejudice, and fear, has the manliness to carry these wise changes into immediate execution. Gentlemen, farewell: shout for the King.

Sydney's footnote

\*Lord Lyndhurst is an exception; I firmly believe he had no wish to perpetuate the abuses of the Court of Chancery.