

SPEECH AT THE TAUNTON REFORM MEETING.*

MR. BAILIFF,—This is the greatest measure which has ever been before Parliament in my time, and the most pregnant with good or evil to the country; and though I seldom meddle with political meetings, I could not reconcile it to my conscience to be absent from this.

Every year for this half century the question of Reform has been pressing upon us, till it has swelled up at last into this great and awful combination; so that almost every City and every Borough in England are at this moment assembled for the same purpose, and are doing the same thing we are doing. It damps the ostentation of argument and mitigates the pain of doubt, to believe (as I believe) that the measure is inevitable; the consequences may be good or bad, but done it must be; I defy the most determined enemy of popular influence, either now, or a little time from now, to prevent a Reform in Parliament. Some years ago, by timely concession, it might have been prevented. If Members had been granted to Birmingham, Leeds, and Manchester, and other great towns as opportunities occurred, a spirit of conciliation would have been evinced, and the people might have been satisfied with a Reform, which though remote would have been gradual; but with the customary blindness and insolence of human beings, the day of adversity was forgotten, the rapid improvement of the people was not noticed; the object of a certain class of politicians was to please the Court and to gratify their own arrogance by treating every attempt to expand the representation, and to increase the popular influence, with every species of contempt and obloquy: the golden opportunity was lost; and now proud lips must swallow bitter potions.

The arguments and the practices (as I remember to have heard Mr. Huskisson say) which did very well twenty years ago, will not do now. The people read too much, think too much, see too many newspapers, hear too many speeches, have their eyes too intensely fixed upon political events. But if it was possible to put off Parliamentary Reform a week ago, is it possible now? When a Monarch (whose amiable and popular manners have, I verily believe, saved us from a Revolution) approves the measure—when a Minister of exalted character plans and fashions it—when a Cabinet of such varied talent and disposition protects it—when such a body of the Aristocracy vote for it—when the hundred-horse power of the Press is labouring for it—who does not know after this (whatever be the decision of the present Parliament) that the measure is virtually carried—and that all the struggle between such annunciation of such a plan, and its completion, is tumult, disorder, disaffection, and (it may be) political ruin?

An Honourable Member of the Honourable House much connected with this town, and once its representative, seems to be amazingly surprised, and equally dissatisfied, at this combination of King, Ministers, Nobles, and People, against his opinion:—like the gentleman who came home from serving on a jury very much disconcerted, and complaining he had met with eleven of the most obstinate people he had ever seen in his life, whom he found it absolutely impossible by the strongest arguments to bring over to his way of thinking.

They tell you, gentlemen, that you have grown rich and powerful with these rotten boroughs, and that it would be madness to part with them, or to alter a constitution which had produced such happy effects. There happens, gentlemen, to live near my parsonage a labouring man, of very superior character and understanding to his fellow-labourers; and who has made such good use of that superiority, that he has saved what is (for his station in life) a very considerable sum of money, and if his existence is extended to the common period, he will die rich. It happens, however, that he is (and long has been) troubled with violent stomachic pains, for which he has hitherto obtained no relief, and which really are the bane and torment of his life. Now, if my excellent labourer were to

send for a physician, and to consult him respecting this malady, would it not be very singular language if our doctor were to say to him, "My good friend, you surely will not be so rash as to attempt to get rid of these pains in your stomach. Have you not grown rich with these pains in your stomach? have not you risen under them from poverty to prosperity? has not your situation, since you were first attacked, been improving every year? You surely will not be so foolish and so indiscreet as to part with the pains in your stomach?"—Why, what would be the answer of the rustic to this nonsensical monition? "Monster of Rhubarb! (he would say) I am not rich in consequence of the pains in my stomach, but in spite of the pains in my stomach; and I should have been ten times richer, and fifty times happier, if I had never had any "pains in my stomach at all." Gentlemen, these rotten boroughs are your pains in the stomach—and you would have been much richer and greater people if you had never had them at all. Your wealth and your power have been owing, not to the debased and corrupted parts of the House of Commons, but to the many independent and honourable members, whom it has always contained within its walls. If there had been a few more of these valuable members for close boroughs, we should, I verily believe, have been by this time about as free as Denmark, or the Germanized states of Italy.

They tell you of the few men of name and character who have sat for boroughs; but nothing is said of those mean and menial men who are sent down every day by their aristocratic masters to continue unjust and unnecessary wars, to prevent inquiring into profligate expenditure, to take money out of your pockets, or to do any other bad and base thing which the minister of the day may require at their unclean hands. What mischief, it is asked, have the boroughs done? I believe that there is not a day of your lives in which you are not suffering in all the taxed commodities of life from the accumulation of bad votes of bad men. But Mr. Bailiff, if this *were otherwise*, if it really were a great political invention, that cities of 100,000 men should have no representatives, because those representatives were not wanted for political ditches, political walls, and political parks; that the people should be bought and sold like any other commodity; that a retired merchant should be able to go into the market and buy ten shares in the government of twenty millions of his fellow-subjects; yet, can such asseverations be made openly before the people? Wise men, conversant with human affairs, may whisper such theories to each other in retirement; but can the People ever be taught that it is right they should be bought and sold? Can the vehemence of eloquent democrats be met with such arguments and theories? The moment such a government is looked at by all the people it is lost. It is impossible to explain, defend, and recommend it to the mass of mankind. And true enough it is, that as often as misfortune threatens us at home, or imitation excites us from abroad, political Reform is clamoured for by the people—there it stands, and ever will stand, in the apprehension of the multitude—Reform, the cure of every evil—Corruption, the source of every misfortune—famine, defeat, decayed trade, depressed agriculture, will all lapse into the Question of Reform. Till that question is set at rest (and it may be set at rest) all will be disaffection, tumult, and perhaps (which God avert!) destruction.

But democrats and agitators (and democrats and agitators there are in the world) will not be contented with this Reform. Perhaps not, Sir; I never hope to content men whose game is never to be contented—but if they are not contented, I am sure their discontent will then comparatively be of little importance. I am afraid of them now; I have no arguments to answer them: but I shall not be afraid of them after this Bill, and would tell them boldly, in the middle of their mobs, that there was no longer cause for agitation and excitement, and that they were intending wickedly to the people. You may depend upon it such a measure would destroy their trade, as the repeal of duties would destroy the trade of the smuggler; their functions would be carried on faintly, and with little profit; you would soon feel that your position was stable, solid, and safe.

All would be well, it is urged, if they would but let the people alone. But what chance is there, I demand of these wise politicians, that the people will ever be let alone; that the orator will lay down his craft, and the demagogue forget his cunning? If many things were let alone which never will be let alone, the aspect of human affairs would be a little varied. If the winds would let the waves alone, there would be no storms. If gentlemen would let ladies alone, there would be no unhappy marriages, and deserted damsels. If persons who can reason no better than this, would leave speaking alone, the school of eloquence might be improved. I have little hopes, however, of witnessing any of these acts of forbearance, particularly the last and so we must (however foolish it may appear) proceed to make laws for a people who we are sure will not be let alone.

We might really imagine from the objections made to the plan of Reform, that the great mass of Englishmen were madmen, robbers, and murderers. The Kingly power is to be destroyed, the House of Lords are to be annihilated, the Church is to be ruined, estates are to be confiscated. I am quite at a loss to find in these perpetrators of crimes—in this mass of pillagers and lunatics—the steady and respectable tradesmen and farmers, who will have votes to confer, and the steady and respectable country gentlemen, who will probably have votes to receive;—it may be true of the tradesmen of Mauritania, it may be just of the country gentlemen of Fez—it is any thing but true of the English people. The English are a tranquil, phlegmatic, money-loving, money-getting people, who want to be quiet—and would be quiet if they were not surrounded by evils of such magnitude, that it would be baseness and pusillanimity not to oppose to them the strongest constitutional resistance.

Then it is said that there is to be a lack of talent in the new Parliament: it is to be composed of ordinary and inferior persons, who will bring the government of the country into contempt. But the best of all talents, gentlemen, is to conduct our affairs honestly, diligently, and economically — and this talent will I am sure abound as much in the new Parliament as in many previous Parliaments. Parliament is not a school for rhetoric and declamation, where a stranger would go to hear a speech, as he would go to the Opera to hear a song; but if it were otherwise—if eloquence be a necessary ornament of, and an indispensable adjunct to, popular assemblies—can it ever be absent from popular assemblies? I have always found that all things moral or physical grow in the soil best suited for them. Show me a deep and tenacious earth—and I am sure the oak will spring up in it. In a low and damp soil I am equally certain of the alder and the willow. Gentlemen, the free Parliament of a free People is the native soil of eloquence—and in that soil will it ever nourish and abound—there it will produce those intellectual effects which drive before them whole tribes and nations of the human race, and settle the destinies of man. And, gentlemen, if a few persons of a less elegant and aristocratic description were to become members of the House of Commons, where would be the evil? They would probably understand the common people a great deal better, and in this way the feelings and interests of all classes of people would be better represented. The House of Commons thus organised will express more faithfully the opinions of the people.

The people are sometimes, it is urged, grossly mistaken; but are Kings never mistaken? Are the higher orders never mistaken?—ever wilfully corrupted by their own interests? The people have at least this superiority, that they always intend to do what is right.

The argument of fear is very easily disposed of: he who is afraid of a knock on the head or a cut on the cheek is a coward; he who is afraid of entailing greater evils on the country by refusing the remedy than by applying it, and who acts in pursuance of that conviction, is a wise and prudent man—nothing can be more different than personal and political fear; it is the artifice of our opponents to confound them together.

The right of disfranchisement, gentlemen, must exist somewhere, and where but in Parliament? If not, how was the Scotch Union, how was the Irish Union, effected? The Duke of Wellington's Administration disfranchised at one blow 200,000 Irish voters—for no fault of theirs, and for no other reason than the best of all reasons, that public expediency required it. These very same politicians are now looking in an agony of terror at the disfranchisement of Corporations containing twenty or thirty persons, sold to their representatives, who are themselves perhaps sold to the Government: and to put an end to these enormous abuses is called Corporation robbery, and there are some persons wild enough to talk of compensation. This principle of compensation you will consider perhaps in the following instance to have been carried as far as sound discretion permits. When I was a young man, the place in England I remember as most notorious for highwaymen and their exploits was Finchley Common, near the metropolis; but Finchley Common, gentlemen, in the progress of improvement, came to be enclosed, and the highwaymen lost by these means the opportunity of exercising their gallant vocation. I remember a friend of mine proposed to draw up for them a petition to the House of Commons for compensation, which ran in this manner —“We, your loyal highwaymen of Finchley Common and its neighbourhood, having, at great expense, laid in a stock of blunderbusses, pistols, and other instruments for plundering the public, and finding ourselves impeded in the exercise of our calling by the said enclosure of the said Common of Finchley, humbly petition your Honourable House will be pleased to assign to us such compensation as your Honourable House in its wisdom and justice may think fit.”— Gentlemen, I must leave the application to you.

An Honourable Baronet says, if Parliament is dissolved, I will go to my Borough with the bill in my hand, and will say, “I know of no crime you have committed, I found nothing proved against you: I voted against the bill, and am come to fling myself upon your kindness, with the hope that my conduct will be approved, and that you will return me again to Parliament.” That Honourable Baronet may, perhaps, receive from his Borough an answer he little expects—“We are above being bribed by such a childish and unworthy artifice; we do not choose to consult our own interest at the expense of the general peace and happiness of the country; we are thoroughly convinced a Reform ought to take place? we are very willing to sacrifice a privilege we ought never to have possessed to the good of the community, and we will return no one to Parliament who is not deeply impressed with the same feeling.” This I hope is the answer that gentlemen will receive, and this, I hope, will be the noble and generous feeling of every Borough in England.

The greater part of human improvements, gentlemen, I am sorry to say, are made after war, tumult, bloodshed, and civil commotion: mankind seem to object to every species of gratuitous happiness, and to consider every advantage as too cheap, which is not purchased by some calamity. I shall esteem it as a singular act of God's providence, if this great nation, guided by these warnings of history, not waiting till tumult for Reform, nor trusting Reform to the rude hands of the lowest of the people, shall amend their decayed institutions at a period when they are ruled by a popular Monarch guided by an upright Minister, and blest with profound peace.

*Sydney's footnote:

I was a sincere friend to Reform; I am so still. It was a great deal too violent—but the only justification is, that you cannot reform as you wish by degrees; you must avail yourself of the few opportunities that present themselves. The reform carried, it became the business of every honest man to turn it to good, and to see that the people (drunk with their new power) did not ruin our ancient institutions. We have been in considerable danger, and that danger is not over. What alarms me most is the large price paid by both parties for popular favour. The yeomanry were put down:

nothing could be more grossly absurd—the people were rising up against the poor laws, and such an excellent and permanent force was abolished because they were not deemed a proper force to deal with popular insurrections. You may just as well object to put out a fire with pond water because pump water is better for the purpose: I say, put out the fire with the first water you can get;—but the truth is, Radicals don't like armed yeomen: they have an ugly homicide appearance. Again,—a million of revenue is given up in the nonsensical penny-post scheme, to please my old, excellent, and universally dissentient friend, Noah Warburton. I admire the Whig Ministry, and think they have done more good things than all the ministries since the Revolution; but these concessions are sad and unworthy marks of weakness, and fill reasonable men with just alarm. All this folly has taken place since they have become ministers upon principles of chivalry and gallantry; and the Tories too, for fear of the people, have been much too quiet. There is only one principle of public conduct. Do what you think right, and take place and power as an accident. Upon any other plan, office is shabbiness, labour, and sorrow.

This Speech was delivered in Taunton on 9th March 1831.