

SPEECH AT TAUNTON

MR. CHAIRMAN,—I am particularly happy to assist on this occasion, because I think that the accession of the present King is a marked and important era in English history. Another coronation has taken place since I have been in the world, but I never assisted at its celebration. I saw in it a change of masters, not a change of system. I did not understand the joy which it occasioned. I did not feel it, and I did not counterfeit what I did not feel.

I think very differently of the accession of his present Majesty. I believe I see in that accession a great probability of serious improvement, and a great increase of public happiness. The evils which have been long complained of by bold and intelligent men are now universally admitted. The public feeling, which has been so often appealed to, is now intensely excited. The remedies which have so often been called for are now at last, vigorously, wisely, and faithfully applied. I admire, gentlemen, in the present King, his love of peace—I admire in him his disposition to economy, and I admire in him above all, his faithful and honourable conduct to those who happen to be his ministers. He was, I believe, quite as faithful to the Duke of Wellington as to Lord Grey, and would, I have no doubt, be quite as faithful to the political enemies of Lord Grey (if he thought fit to employ them) as he is to Lord Grey himself. There is in this reign no secret influence, no double ministry—on whomsoever he confers the office, to him he gives that confidence without which the office cannot be holden with honour, nor executed with effect. He is not only a peaceful King, and an economical King, but he is an honest King. So far, I believe, every individual of this company will go with me. There is another topic of eulogium, on which, before I sit down, I should like to say a few words—I mean the willingness of our present King to investigate abuses, and to reform them. If this subject be not unpleasant, I will offer upon it a very few observations—a few, because the subject is exhausted, and because, if it were not, I have no right, from my standing or my situation in this county, to detain you long upon that or any other subject.

In criticising this great question of Reform, I think there is some injustice done to its authors. Men seem to suppose that a minister can sit down and make a plan of reform with as much ease and as much exactness, and with as complete a gratification of his own will, as an architect can do in building or altering a house. But a minister of state (it should be in justice observed) works in the midst of hatred, injustice, violence, and the worst of human passions—his works are not works of calm and unembarrassed wisdom—they are not the best that a dreamer of dreams can imagine. It is enough if they are the best plans which the passions, parties, and prejudices of the times in which he acts will permit. In passing a Reform Bill the minister overthrows the long and deep interest which powerful men have in existing abuses—he subjects himself to the deepest hatred, and encounters the bitterest opposition. Auxiliaries he must have, and auxiliaries he can only find among the people—not the mob—but the great mass of those who have opinions worth hearing, and property worth defending—a greater mass, I am happy to say, in this country than exists in any other country on the face of the earth. Now, before the middling orders will come forward with one great impulse, they must see that something is offered them worth the price of contention; they must see that the object is great and the gain serious. If you call them in at all, it must not be to displace one faction at the expense of another, but to put down all factions—to substitute purity and principle for corruption—to give to the many that political power which the few have unjustly taken to themselves—to get rid of evils so ancient and so vast that any other arm than the public arm would be lifted up against them in vain. This, then, I say, is one of the reasons why ministers have been compelled to make their measure a little more vigorous and decisive than a speculative philosopher, sitting in his closet, might approve of. They had a mass of opposition to contend with, which could be encountered only by a general exertion of public spirit—they had a long suffering

and an often deceived public to appeal to, who were determined to suffer no longer, and to be deceived no more. The alternative was to continue the ancient abuses, or to do what they have done—and most firmly do I believe that you and I, and the latest posterity of us all, will rejoice in the decision they have made Gradation has been called for in reform: we might, it is said, have taken thirty or forty years to have accomplished what we have done in one year. ‘It is not so much the magnitude of what you are doing we object to, as the suddenness.’ But was not gradation tendered? Was it not said by the friends of reform—‘Give us Birmingham and Manchester and we will be satisfied?’ and what was the answer? ‘No Manchester, no Birmingham, no reform in any degree—all abuses as they are—all perversions as we have found them—the corruptions which our fathers bequeathed us we will hand down unimpaired and unpurified to our children.’ But I would say to the graduate philosopher, —‘How often does a reforming minister occur?’ and if such are so common that you can command them when you please, how often does a reforming monarch occur? and how often does the conjunction of both occur? Are you sure that a people, bursting into new knowledge, and speculating on every public event, will wait for your protracted reform? Strike while the iron is hot—up with the arm and down with the hammer, and up again with the arm, and down again with the hammer. The iron is hot—the opportunity exists now—if you neglect it, it may not return for a hundred years to come.

There is an argument I have often heard, and that is this—Are we to be afraid?—is this measure to be carried by intimidation?—is the House of Lords to be overawed? But this style of argument proceeds from confounding together two sets of feelings which are entirely distinct—personal fear and political fear. If I am afraid of voting against this bill, because a mob may gather about the House of Lords—because stones may be flung at my head—because my house may be attacked by a mob, I am a poltroon, and unfit to meddle with public affairs; but I may rationally be afraid of producing great public agitation—I may be honourably afraid of flinging people into secret clubs and conspiracies—I may be wisely afraid of making the aristocracy hateful to the great body of the people. This surely has no more to do with fear than a loose identity of name; it is in fact prudence of the highest order; the deliberate reflection of a wise man, who does not like what he is going to do, but likes still less the consequences of not doing it, and who of two evils chooses the least.

There are some men much afraid of what is to happen: my lively hope of good is, I confess, mingled with very little apprehension; but of one thing I must be candid enough to say that I am much afraid, and that is of the opinion now increasing, that the people are become indifferent to reform; and of that opinion I am afraid, because I believe in an evil hour it may lead some misguided members of the Upper House of Parliament to vote against the bill. As for the opinion itself, I hold it in the utmost contempt. The people are waiting in virtuous patience for the completion of the bill, because they know it is in the hands of men who do not mean to deceive them. I do not believe they have given up one atom of reform—I do not believe that a great people were ever before so firmly bent upon any one measure. I put it to any man of common sense, whether he believes it possible, after the King and Parliament have acted as they have done, that the people will ever be content with much less than the present bill contains. If a contrary principle be acted upon, and the bill attempted to be got rid of altogether, I confess I tremble for the consequences, which I believe will be of the worst and most painful description; and this I say deliberately, after the most diligent and extensive inquiry. Upon that diligent inquiry I repeat again my firm conviction, that the desire of reform has increased, not diminished; that the present repose is not indifference, but the calmness of victory, and the tranquillity of success. When I see all the wishes and appetites of created beings changed, when I see an eagle, that, after long confinement, has escaped into the air come back to his cage and his chain—when I see the emancipated negro asking again for the hoe which has broken down his strength and the lash which has tortured his body, I will then, and not

till then, believe that the English people will return to their ancient degradation—that they will hold out their repentant hands for those manacles which at this moment lie broken into links at their feet.

SPEECH AT TAUNTON

(From the "Taunton Courier" of October 12th, 1831)

THE REVEREND SYDNEY SMITH rose and said: —Mr. Bailiff, I have spoken so often on this subject, that I am sure both you and the gentlemen here present will be obliged to me for saying but little, and that favour I am as willing to confer, as you can be to receive it. I feel most deeply the event which has taken place, because, by putting the two Houses of Parliament in collision with each other, it will impede the public business, and diminish the public prosperity. I feel it as a churchman, because I cannot but blush to see so many dignitaries of the Church arrayed against the wishes and happiness of the people. I feel it more than all, because I believe it will sow the seeds of deadly hatred between the aristocracy and the great mass of the people. The loss of the bill I do not feel, and for the best of all possible reasons — because I have not the slightest idea that it is lost. I have no more doubt, before the expiration of the winter, that this bill will pass, than I have that the annual tax bills will pass, and greater certainty than this no man can have, for Franklin tells us, there are but two things certain in this world — death and taxes. As for the possibility of the House of Lords preventing ere long a reform of Parliament, I hold it to be the most absurd notion that ever entered into human imagination. I do not mean to be disrespectful, but the attempt of the Lords to stop the progress of reform, reminds me very forcibly of the great storm of Sidmouth, and of the conduct of the excellent Mrs. Partington on that occasion. In the winter of 1824, there set in a great flood upon that town — the tide rose to an incredible height — the waves rushed in upon the houses, and everything was threatened with destruction. In the midst of this sublime and terrible storm, Dame Partington, who lived upon the beach, was seen at the door of her house with mop and pattens, trundling her mop, squeezing out the seawater, and vigorously pushing away the Atlantic Ocean. The Atlantic was roused. Mrs. Partington's spirit was up; but I need not tell you that the contest was unequal. The Atlantic Ocean beat Mrs. Partington. She was excellent at a slop, or a puddle, but she should not have meddled with a tempest. Gentlemen, be at your ease — be quiet and steady. You will beat Mrs. Partington.

They tell you, gentlemen, in the debates by which we have been lately occupied, that the bill is not justified by experience. I do not think this true; but if it were true, nations are sometimes compelled to act without experience for their guide, and to trust to their own sagacity for the anticipation of consequences. The instances where this country has been compelled thus to act have been so eminently successful, that I see no cause for fear, even if we were acting in the manner imputed to us by our enemies. What precedents and what experience were there at the Reformation, when the country, with one unanimous effort, pushed out the Pope, and his grasping and ambitious clergy?—What experience, when at the Revolution we drove away our ancient race of kings, and chose another family, more congenial to our free principles?—And yet to those two events, contrary to experience, and unguided by precedents, we owe all our domestic happiness, and civil and religious freedom—and having got rid of corrupt priests, and despotic kings, by our sense and our courage, are we now to be intimidated by the awful danger of extinguishing Boroughmongers, and shaking from our neck the ignominious yoke which their baseness has imposed upon it? Go on, they say, as you have done for these hundred years last past. I answer it is impossible: five hundred people now write and read, where one hundred wrote and read fifty years ago. The iniquities and enormities of the borough system are now known to the meanest of the people. You have a different sort of men to deal with—you must change because the beings whom you govern are changed. After all, and to be short, I must say that it has always appeared to me to be the most absolute nonsense that we cannot be a great, or a rich and happy nation, without suffering ourselves to be bought and sold every five years like a pack of

negro slaves. I hope I am not a very rash man, but I would launch boldly into this experiment without any fear of consequences, and I believe there is not a man here present who would not cheerfully embark with me. As to the enemies of the bill, who pretend to be reformers, I know them, I believe, better than you do, and I earnestly caution you against them. You will have no more of reform than they are compelled to grant—you will have no reform at all, if they can avoid it—you will be hurried into a war to turn your attention from reform. They do not understand you—they will not believe in the improvement you have made—they think the English of the present day are as the English of the times of Queen Anne or George the First. They know no more of the present state of their own country, than of the state of the Esquimaux Indians. Gentlemen, I view the ignorance of the present state of the country with the most serious concern, and I believe they will one day or another waken into conviction with horror and dismay. I will omit no means of rousing them to a sense of their danger;—for this object, I cheerfully sign the petition proposed by Dr. Kinglake, which I consider to be the wisest and most moderate of the two.