

THE BEST OF THE OLL #30

*Richard Cobden, "On the Total and Immediate Repeal of
the Corn Laws" (January 1846)*

“(We hold) one of the principles of eternal justice to be the inalienable right of every man freely to exchange the result of his labour for the productions of other people, and maintain (that) the practice of protecting one part of the community at the expense of all other classes to be unsound and unjustifiable.”



Richard Cobden (1804-1865)

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[April, 2013]

Editor's Introduction

Richard Cobden (1804-1865) was a cotton goods manufacturer, a member of the British Parliament and an advocate of free trade, a non-interventionist foreign policy, peace, and parliamentary reform. He is best remembered for his activity on behalf of the Anti-Corn Law League (founded in 1838) which helped to dramatically reduce British tariffs in 1846 which began a long period of virtual free trade in Britain which lasted into the early 20th century. He was the official British representative who negotiated and signed the Anglo-French trade agreement of 1860 with Michel Chevalier. Cobden's writings and agitation inspired other free traders in Europe, most notably Frédéric Bastiat in France. After the repeal of the Corn Laws Cobden devoted himself to the peace movement, opposing both British involvement in wars (such as the Crimean War against Russia 1854-56) and in efforts to set formal mechanisms for the arbitration of international disputes.

This extract comes from a speech Cobden gave in Manchester 12 days before PM Robert Peel announced the abolition of the protectionist Corn Laws, thus culminating nearly a decade of activism on behalf of the free trade movement. The third reading of the bill was passed in the House of Commons on 3 May and the House of Lords passed it on 25 June. Cobden had hoped for an immediate repeal but had to be satisfied with a gradual repeal which would end on 1 February, 1849. The Anti-Corn Law League was a single issue body and so when repeal was announced it decided to dissolve itself on 4 July, 1846.

Some of the most interesting parts of Cobden's speech concern the consistency of the League in opposing both agricultural and manufacturing tariffs and protection, the political tactics used by the League in opposing the protectionist interests, the radicalism of their demands for immediate and total repeal which was combined with a realism that this might not be the political outcome, Cobden's firm conviction that the repeal of the corn laws was a single issue movement and that therefore the Anti-Corn Law League should dissolve itself when it had achieved its goal, and the quite moving "I have dream" speech with which Cobden closes his address to Parliament.

“I have speculated, and probably dreamt, in the dim future—ay, a thousand years hence—I have speculated on what the effect of the triumph of this principle may be. I believe that the effect will be to change the face of the world, so as to introduce a system of government entirely distinct from that which now prevails. I believe that the desire and the motive for large and mighty empires; for gigantic armies and great navies—for those materials which are used for the destruction of life and the desolation of the rewards of labour—will die away; I believe that such things will cease to be necessary, or to be used, when man becomes one family, and freely exchanges the fruits of his labour with his brother man. I believe that, ... the speculative philosopher of a thousand years hence will date the greatest revolution that ever happened in the world's history from the triumph of the principle which we have met here to advocate.”

"On the Total and Immediate Repeal of the Corn Laws" (January 15, 1846)¹

"A resolution: That the merchants, manufacturers, and other members of the National Anti-Corn-law League claim no protection whatever for the manufactured products of this country, and desire to see obliterated for ever the few nominally protective duties against foreign manufactures, which still remain upon our statute books."

I shall begin the few remarks which I have to offer to this meeting by proposing, contrary to my usual custom, a resolution; and it is, 'That the merchants, manufacturers, and other members of the National Anti-Corn-law League claim no protection whatever for the manufactured products of this country, and desire to see obliterated for ever the few nominally protective duties against foreign manufactures, which still remain upon our statute books.' Gentlemen, if any of you have taken the pains to wade through the reports of the protectionist meetings, as they are called, which have been held lately, you would see that our opponents, at the end of seven years of our agitation, have found out their mistake, and are abandoning the Corn-laws; and now, like unskillful blunderers as they are, they want to take up a new position, just as we are going to achieve the victory. Then they have been telling something very like fibs, when they claimed the Corn-laws as compensation for peculiar burdens. They say now that they want merely protection in common with all other interests, and they now call themselves the advocates of protection to native industry in all its branches; and, by way of making the appeal to the less-informed portion of the community, they say that the Anti-Corn-law League are merely the advocates of free

trade in corn, but that we want to preserve a monopoly in manufactures.

Now, the resolution which I have to submit to you, and which we will put to this meeting to-night—the largest by far that I ever saw in this room, and comprising men of every class and of every calling in this district—let that resolution decide, once and for ever, whether our opponents can with truth lay that to our charge henceforth. There is nothing new in this proposition, for at the very beginning of this agitation—at the meeting of the Chamber of Commerce—when that faint voice was raised in that small room in King-street in December, 1838, for the total and immediate repeal of the Corn-laws—when that ball was set in motion which has been accumulating in strength and velocity ever since, why, the petition stated fairly that this community wanted no protection for its own industry. I will read the conclusion of that admirable petition; it is as follows:—

'Holding one of the principles of eternal justice to be the inalienable right of every man freely to exchange the result of his labour for the productions of other people, and maintaining the practice of protecting one part of the community at the expense of all other classes to be unsound and unjustifiable, your petitioners earnestly implore your honourable House to repeal all laws relating to the importation of foreign corn and other foreign articles of subsistence; and to carry out to the fullest extent, both as affects agriculture and manufactures, the true and peaceful principles of Free Trade, by removing all existing obstacles to the unrestricted employment of industry and capital.'

"One of the principles of eternal justice (is) the inalienable right of every man freely to exchange the result of his labour for the productions of other people."

¹ Richard Cobden, *Speeches on Questions of Public Policy by Richard Cobden, M.P.*, ed. by John Bright and J.E. Thorold Rogers with a Preface and Appreciation by J.E. Thorold Rogers and an Appreciation by Goldwin Smith (London: T.Fisher Unwin, 1908). 2 volumes in 1. Vol. 1 Free Trade and Finance. Chapter: Free Trade XX. Manchester, January 15, 1846. <oll.libertyfund.org/title/927/104884>.

We have passed similar resolutions at all our great aggregate meetings of delegates in London ever since that was issued.

I don't put this resolution as an argument or as an appeal to meet the appeals made in the protection societies' meetings. I believe that the men who now, in this seventh year of our discussion, can come forth before their country, and talk as those men have done—I believe that you might as well preach to the deaf adder. You cannot convince them. I doubt whether they have not been living in their shells, like oysters; I doubt whether they know that such a thing is in existence as a railroad, or a penny postage, or even as an heir to the throne. They are in profound ignorance of everything, and incapable of being taught. We don't appeal to them, but to a very large portion of this community, who don't take a very prominent part in this discussion—who may be considered as important lookers-on. Many have been misled by the reiterated assertions of our opponents; and it is at this eleventh hour to convince these men, and to give them an opportunity of joining our ranks, as they will do, that I offer this proof of disinterestedness and the fairness of our proposals. I don't intend to go into an argument to convince any man here that protection to all must be protection to none. If it takes from one man's pocket, and allows him to compensate himself by taking an equivalent from another man's pocket, and if that goes on in a circle through the whole community, it is only a clumsy process of robbing all to enrich none; and simply has this effect, that it ties up the hands of industry in all directions. I need not offer one word to convince you of that. The only motive that I have to say a word is, that what I say here may convince others elsewhere—the men who meet in protection societies. But the arguments I should adduce to an intelligent audience like this, would be spoken in vain to the Members of Parliament who are now the advocates of protection. I shall meet them in less than a week in London, and there I will teach the A B C of this protection. It is of no use trying to teach children words of five syllables, when they have not got out of the alphabet.

Well, what exhibitions these protectionists have been making of themselves! Judging from the length of their speeches, as you see them reported, you might fancy the whole community was in motion. Unfortunately for us, and for the reputation of our countrymen, the men who can utter the drivelling

nonsense which we have had exhibited to the world lately, and the men who can listen to it, are very few in number. I doubt exceedingly whether all the men who have attended all the protection meetings, during the last month, might not very comfortably be put into this hall. But these protection societies have not only changed their principles, but it seems they have resolved to change their tactics. They have now, at the eleventh hour, again resolved that they will make their body political, and look after the registration. What simpletons they must have been to have thought that they could do any good without that! So they have resolved that their societies shall spend their money in precisely the same way that the League have been expending theirs. They have hitherto been telling us, in all their meetings and in all their newspapers, that the League is an unconstitutional body; that it is an infernal club which aims at corrupting, at vitiating, and at swamping the registrations: and now, forsooth, when no good can possibly come of it—when they most certainly should have wisely abstained from imitating it, since they cannot do any good, and have kept up the strain they formerly had, of calling the League an unconstitutional body, they resolve to rescind their resolution, and to follow his Grace the Duke of Richmond's advice, and fight us with our own weapons. Now, I presume, we are a constitutional body. It is a fortunate thing that we have not got great Dukes to lead us. But, now, of what force is this resolution? Like everything they do, it is farcical—it is unreal. The protection societies, from the beginning, have been nothing but phantoms. They are not realities; and what is their resolution—what does it amount to? They resolve that they will look after the registration. We all know that they have done their worst in that way already. We all know that these landlords may really make their acres a kind of electioneering property. We know right well that their land agents are their electioneering agents. We know that their rent-rolls have been made their muster-rolls for fighting the battle of protection. These poor drivelling people say that we buy qualifications, and present them to our friends; that we bind them down to vote as we please. We have never bought a vote, and we never intend to buy a vote or to give one. Should we not be blockheads to buy votes and give them, when we have ten thousand persons ready to buy them at our request?

But I suspect that our protectionist friends have a notion that there is some plan—some secret, sinister

plan—by which they can put fictitious votes on the register. Now I beg to tell them that the League is not more powerful to create votes than it is to detect the flaws in the bad votes of our opponents; and they may depend on it, if they attempt to put fictitious voters on the register, that we have our ferrets in every county, and that they will find out the flaws; and when the registration time comes, we'll have an objection registered against every one of their fictitious qualifications, and make them produce their title-deeds, and show that they have paid for them. Well, we have our protectionist opponents; but how we may congratulate ourselves on the position which they have given to this question by the discussion that has been raised everywhere during the last few months! We cannot enter a steamboat or a railway carriage—nay, we cannot even go into an omnibus, but the first thing that any man does, almost before he has deposited his umbrella, is to ask, 'Well, what is the last news about the Corn-laws?' Now, we, who remember how difficult it was, at the beginning of our agitation, to bring men's minds to the discussion of this question, when we think that every newspaper is now full of it—the same broad sheet containing, perhaps, a report of this meeting, and of the miserable drivelling of some hole-and-corner agricultural gathering—and when we think that the whole community is engaged in reading the discussion and pondering on the several arguments, we can desire no more. The League might close its doors to-morrow, and its work might be considered as done, the moment it compels or induces people to discuss the question.

But the feeling I have alluded to is spreading beyond our own country. I am glad to hear that in Ireland the question is attracting attention. You have probably heard that my friend Mr. Bright and I have received a requisition, signed by merchants and manufacturers of every grade and party in Belfast, soliciting us to go there and address them; and I deeply regret that we cannot put our feet on Irish ground to advocate this question. To-day I have received a copy of a requisition to the mayor of Drogheda, calling a meeting for next Monday, to petition for the total and immediate repeal of the Corn-laws, and I am glad to notice at the head of that requisition the name of the Catholic Primate, Dr. Croly, a man eminent for learning, piety, and moderation; and that it is also headed by the rest of the Catholic clergy of that borough. I hope that these examples will not be without their due effect in another quarter. We have, I

believe, the majority of every religious denomination with us—I mean the dissenting denominations; we have them almost en masse, both ministers and laymen; and I believe the only body, the only religious body, which we may not say we have with us as a body, are the members of the Church of England.

“We, who remember how difficult it was, at the beginning of our agitation, to bring men's minds to the discussion of this question, when we think that every newspaper is now full of it ... when we think that the whole community is engaged in reading the discussion and pondering on the several arguments, we can desire no more. The League might close its doors to-morrow, and its work might be considered as done, the moment it compels or induces people to discuss the question.”

On this point I will just offer this remark: The clergy of the Church of England have been placed in a most invidious, and, I think, an unfortunate position, by the mode in which their tithe commutation charge was fixed some years ago. My friend Colonel Thompson will recollect it, for he was in Parliament at the time, and protested against the way in which the tithe commutation rent-charge was fixed. He said, with the great foresight he had always shown in the struggle for the repeal of the Corn-laws, that it would make the clergy of the Church of England parties to the present Corn-law by fixing their tithe at a fixed quantity of corn, fluctuating according to the price of the last seven years. Let it be borne in mind, that every other class of the community may be directly compensated for the repeal of the Corn-laws—I mean every class connected with agriculture—except the clergy. The landlords may be compensated, if prices fall, by an

increased quantity of produce, so also may the farmer and the labourer; but the clergy of the Church of England receive a given number of quarters of wheat for their tithe, whatever the price may be. I think, however, we may draw a favourable conclusion, under all the circumstances, from the fact that I believe there has not been one clergyman of the Church of England at all eminent for rank, piety, or learning, who has come out, notwithstanding the strong temptation of personal interest, to advocate the existing Corn-law. I think that we may take this as a proof of the very strong appeal to justice which this question makes, and perhaps augur also that there is a very strong feeling amongst the great body of the members of the Church of England in favour of free trade in corn.

Well, there is one other quarter in which we have seen the progress of sound principles—I allude to America. We have received the American President's Message; we have had also the report of the Secretary of the Treasury, and both President Polk and Mr. Secretary Walker have been taking my friend Colonel Thompson's task out of his hands, and lecturing the people of America on the subject of Free Trade. I have never read a better digest of the arguments in favour of Free Trade than that put forth by Mr. Secretary Walker, and addressed to the Congress of that country. I augur from all these things that our question is making rapid progress throughout the world, and that we are coming to the consummation of our labours. We are verging now towards the session of Parliament, and I predict that the question will either receive its quietus, or that it will lead to the dissolution of this Parliament; and then the next will certainly relieve us from our burden.

Now, many people are found to speculate on what Sir Robert Peel may do in the approaching session of Parliament. It is a very hazardous thing, considering that in one week only you will be as wise as I shall, to venture to make a prediction on this subject. [A cry of 'We are very anxious.'] You are very anxious, no doubt. Well, let us see if we can speculate a little on futurity, and relieve our anxiety. There are three courses open to Sir Robert Peel. He may keep the law as it is; he may totally repeal it; or he may do something between the two by tinkering his scale again, or giving us a fixed duty. Now, I predict that Sir R. Peel will either keep the law as it is, or he will propose totally to abolish it. And I ground my prediction on this, because these are the only two things that anybody

in the country wants him to do. There are some who want to keep protection as it is; others want to get rid of it; but nobody wants anything between the two. He has his choice to make, and I have this opinion of his sagacity, that, if he changes at all, he will change for total repeal. But the question is, 'Will he propose total and immediate repeal?' Now, there, if you please, I will forbear to offer a prediction. But I will venture to give you a reason or two why I think he ought to take total and immediate repeal. I don't think that any class is so much interested in having the Corn-laws totally and immediately repealed as the farming class. I believe that it is of more importance to the farmers to have the repeal instantaneous, instead of gradual, than to any other class of the community. In fact, I observe, in the report of a recent Oxfordshire protection meeting, given in to-day's paper, that when Lord Norreys was alluding to the probability of Sir Robert Peel abolishing the Corn-laws gradually, a farmer of the name of Gillatt cried out, 'We had better be drowned outright than ducked to death.' Gentlemen, I used to employ another simile—a very humble one, I admit. I used to say that an old farmer had told me, that if he was going to cut off his sheep-dog's tail, it would be far more humane to cut it off all at once than a piece every day in the week. But now I think that the farmer's simile in Oxford is the newest and the best that we can use. Nothing could be more easy than to demonstrate that it is the true interest of the farmers, if the Corn-law is to be abolished, to have it abolished instantly. If the Corn-law were abolished to-morrow, my firm belief is, that instead of wheat falling, it would have a tendency to rise. That is my firm belief, because speculation has already anticipated Sir Robert Peel, and wheat has fallen in consequence of that apprehension. I believe that, owing to the scarcity everywhere—I mean in all parts of Europe—you could not, if you prayed for it, if you had your own wishing-cap on, and could make your own time and circumstances—I believe, I say, that you could never find such an opportunity for abolishing the Corn-laws totally and immediately as if it were done next week; for it so happens that the very countries from which, in ordinary times, we have been supplied, have been afflicted, like ourselves, with scarcity—that the countries of Europe are competing with us for the very small surplus existing in America. They have, in fact, anticipated us in that market, and they have left the world's markets so bare of corn, that, whatever your

necessities may be, I defy you to have other than high prices of corn during the next twelve months, though the Corn-law was abolished to-morrow.

European countries are suffering as we are from the same evil. They are suffering from scarcity now, owing to their absurd legislation respecting the article of corn Europe altogether has been corrupted by the vicious example of England in her commercial legislation. There they are, throughout the continent of Europe, with a population increasing at the rate of four or five millions a year, yet they make it their business, like ourselves, to put barriers in the way of a sufficiency of food to meet the demand of an increasing population.

“I believe that if you abolish the Corn-law honestly, and adopt Free Trade in its simplicity, there will not be a tariff in Europe that will not be changed in less than five years to follow your example.”

I believe that if you abolish the Corn-law honestly, and adopt Free Trade in its simplicity, there will not be a tariff in Europe that will not be changed in less than five years to follow your example. Well, gentlemen, suppose the Corn-law be not abolished immediately, but that Sir Robert Peel brings in a measure giving you a duty of 5s., 6s., or 7s., and going down 1s. a-year for four or five years, till the whole duty is abolished, what would be the effect of that on foreign countries? They will then exaggerate the importance of this market when the duty is wholly off. They will go on raising supplies, calculating that, when the duty is wholly off, they will have a market for their produce, and high prices to remunerate them; and if, as is very likely and consistent with our experience, we should have a return to abundant seasons, these vast importations would be poured upon our markets, probably just at the time when our prices are low; and they would come here, because they would have no other market, to swamp our markets, and deprive the farmer of the sale of his produce at a remunerating price. But, on the contrary, let the Corn-law be abolished instantly; let foreigners see what the English market is in its natural state, and

then they will be able to judge from year to year and from season to season what will be the future demand from this country for foreign corn. There will be no extravagant estimate of what we want—no contingency of bad harvests to speculate upon. The supply will be regulated by the demand, and will reach that state which will be the best security against both gluts and famine. Therefore, for the farmers' sakes, I plead for the immediate abolition of this law. A farmer never can have a fair and equitable understanding or adjustment with his landlord, whether as respects rent, tenure, or game, until this law is wholly removed out of his way. Let the repeal be gradual, and the landlord will say to the farmer, through the land-agent, ‘Oh, the duty will be 7s. next year; you have not had more than twelve months’ experience of the working of the system yet;’ and the farmer goes away without any settlement having been come to. Another year passes over, and when the farmer presents himself, he is told, ‘Oh, the duty will be 5s. this year; I cannot yet tell what the effect will be; you must stop awhile.’ The next year the same thing is repeated, and the end is, that there is no adjustment of any kind between the landlord and tenant. But put it at once on a natural footing, abolish all restrictions, and the landlord and tenant will be brought to a prompt settlement; they will be placed precisely on the same footing as you are in your manufactures.

Well, I have now spoken on what may be done. I have told you, too, what I should advocate; but I must say, that whatever is proposed by Sir Robert Peel, we, as Free-traders, have but one course to pursue. If he proposes a total and immediate and unconditional repeal, we shall throw up our caps for Sir Robert Peel. If he proposes anything else, then Mr. Villiers will be ready, as he has been on former occasions—to move his amendment for a total and immediate repeal of the Corn-laws. We are not responsible for what Ministers may do; we are but responsible for the performance of our duty. We don't offer to do impossibilities; but we will do our utmost to carry out our principles. But, gentlemen, I tell you honestly, I think less of what this Parliament may do; I care less for their opinions, less for the intentions of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, than what may be the opinion of a meeting like this and of the people out of doors. This question will not be carried by Ministers or by the present Parliament; it will be carried, when it is carried, by the will of the nation. We will do nothing that can remove

us a hair's breadth from that rock which we have stood upon with so much safety for the last seven years. All other parties have been on a quicksand, and floated about by every wave, by every tide, and by every wind—some floating to us, others, like fragments scattered over the ocean, without rudder or compass; whilst we are upon solid ground, and no temptation, whether of parties or of Ministers, shall ever make us swerve a hair's breadth. I am anxious to hear now, at the last meeting before we go to Parliament—before we enter that arena to which all men's minds will be turned during the next week—I am anxious, not merely that we should all of us understand each other on this question, but that we should be considered as occupying as independent and isolated a position as we did at the first moment of the formation of this League. We have nothing to do with Whigs or Tories; we are stronger than either of them; and if we stick to our principles, we can, if necessary, beat both. And I hope we perfectly understand now, that we have not, in the advocacy of this great question, a single object in view but that which we have honestly avowed from the beginning. Our opponents may charge us with designs to do other things. No, gentlemen, I have never encouraged that. Some of my friends have said, 'When this work is done, you will have some influence in the country; you must do so and so.' I said then, as I say now, 'Every new political principle must have its special advocates, just as every new faith has its martyrs.' It is a mistake to suppose that this organisation can be turned to other purposes. It is a mistake to suppose that men, prominent in the advocacy of the principle of Free Trade, can with the same force and effect identify themselves with any other principle hereafter. It will be enough if the League accomplishes the triumph of the principle we have before us. I have never taken a limited view of the object or scope of this great principle. I have never advocated this question very much as a trader.

“I look farther; I see in the Free-trade principle that which shall act on the moral world as the principle of gravitation in the universe,—drawing men together, thrusting aside the antagonism of race, and creed, and

language, and uniting us in the bonds of eternal peace. I have looked even farther. I have speculated, and probably dreamt, in the dim future—ay, a thousand years hence—I have speculated on what the effect of the triumph of this principle may be. I believe that the effect will be to change the face of the world, so as to introduce a system of government entirely distinct from that which now prevails.”

But I have been accused of looking too much to material interests. Nevertheless I can say that I have taken as large and great a view of the effects of this mighty principle as ever did any man who dreamt over it in his own study. I believe that the physical gain will be the smallest gain to humanity from the success of this principle. I look farther; I see in the Free-trade principle that which shall act on the moral world as the principle of gravitation in the universe,—drawing men together, thrusting aside the antagonism of race, and creed, and language, and uniting us in the bonds of eternal peace. I have looked even farther. I have speculated, and probably dreamt, in the dim future—ay, a thousand years hence—I have speculated on what the effect of the triumph of this principle may be. I believe that the effect will be to change the face of the world, so as to introduce a system of government entirely distinct from that which now prevails. I believe that the desire and the motive for large and mighty empires; for gigantic armies and great navies—for those materials which are used for the destruction of life and the desolation of the rewards of labour—will die away; I believe that such things will cease to be necessary, or to be used, when man becomes one family, and freely exchanges the fruits of his labour with his brother man. I believe that, if we could be allowed to reappear on this sublunary scene, we should see, at a far distant period, the governing system of this world revert to something like the municipal system; and I believe that the speculative philosopher of a

thousand years hence will date the greatest revolution that ever happened in the world's history from the triumph of the principle which we have met here to advocate. I believe these things: but, whatever may have been my dreams and speculations, I have never obtruded them upon others. I have never acted upon personal or interested motives in this question; I seek no alliance with parties or favour from parties, and I will take none—but, having the feeling I have of the sacredness of the principle, I say that I can never agree to tamper with it. I, at least, will never be suspected of doing otherwise than pursuing it disinterestedly, honestly, and resolutely.

“Whatever may have been my dreams and speculations, I have never obtruded them upon others. I have never acted upon personal or interested motives in this question; I seek no alliance with parties or favour from parties, and I will take none—but, having the feeling I have of the sacredness of the principle, I say that I can never agree to tamper with it. I, at least, will never be suspected of doing otherwise than pursuing it disinterestedly, honestly, and resolutely.”

Further Information

SOURCE

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“The distinctive principle of Western social philosophy is individualism. It aims at the creation of a sphere in which the individual is free to think, to choose, and to act without being restrained by the interference of the social apparatus of coercion and oppression, the State.”
[Ludwig von Mises, “Liberty and Property” (1958)]



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