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AGRICULTURAL DEPRESSION.

SPEECH OF
LORD CARINGTON,

AT THE

AUDIT DINNER OF HIS TENANTS IN
SOUTH BUCKS,

*Held in Wellington Room, High Wycombe, on Tuesday,
October 28th, 1879.*

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AGRICULTURAL DEPRESSION.

At a dinner of his tenants in South Bucks, held in Wellington Room, High Wycombe, on Tuesday, October 28, after some local remarks Lord Carington said:—

We have heard the opinions of the political leaders, but perhaps it will be of advantage to see what owners of land have said on the subject.

The Duke of Rutland, a man conspicuous for his conscientiousness and consistency, in a very remarkable speech boldly advocates a five shilling duty on all wheat that comes from America, and one shilling or perhaps nothing at all on Canadian wheat. The Duke of Beaufort, lately returned from America, writes to Mr. Daniel Owen, "The result of my consideration of the subject is this—that climate, steam, and transport by sea and land, together with the labour question on both sides of the ocean, have made it out of the power of our agriculturists to compete with the growers of wheat on the American Continent, and that they must turn their attention to cheaper and better modes of growing beef and mutton." The Speaker of the House of Commons says, "I think we may fairly hope that with better seasons the depression may be only temporary—and a landowner with 3000 acres on his hands, *i.e.*, $4\frac{3}{4}$ square miles, which he is cultivating himself, thinks not a few country gentlemen will come down and that a social revolution is upon us."

Here we have, gentlemen, four different opinions of large landowners.

- 1st. Advice to return to protection.
- 2nd. Advice to lay down as much grass as possible and trust to stock.
- 3rd. We are told to hope for better seasons.
- 4th. A dread is expressed that many landowners will be ruined, and that a social revolution is imminent.

It is to the first and last of these opinions I shall call your attention this evening, and with your permission will say a few words on protection, and I shall ask you to consider whether, assuming that things are as bad as they are represented, by moderate and timely reforms we may not tide over the crisis, and so avoid hasty and extreme legislation which will be necessary if we remain too long blind to facts, and afraid to discuss questions temperately until the collapse has come, and reform is succeeded by revolution.

The Corn Law of 1815 was a copy of the Corn Law of 1670. It imposed a duty on the importation of foreign grain that practically amounted to prohibition. Wheat might be exported upon the payment of one shilling a quarter Customs duty; but importation was practically prohibited until the price of wheat had reached eighty shillings a quarter. This law was hurriedly passed through Parliament, and a great deal of disturbance followed. The military were called out, and five persons were hanged. After the Corn Law of 1815, there were sliding-scale Acts; according as the price of home produced wheat rose to a certain height, the duty on imported wheat sank in proportion. The highest monthly average during the ten years preceding the repeal of the Corn Laws was in January, 1839, when the price of British wheat was 79s. 8d. per quarter, and the average was 57s. 10½d. per quarter.

The year 1836 closed at a period of stagnant trade and general depression, which entailed actual suffering, and an anti-Corn Law agitation was started; in 1842 there were serious insurrections caused by scarcity of work, low wages, and food at high prices, which had to be put down by military force, and which caused Sir Robert Peel's Government the deepest anxiety; and in 1845 the Irish distress was so awful that Mr. Bright said "Famine itself, against which the Free Traders had warred, joined them;" and the next year the Corn Laws, described by Lord John Russell as the "blight of commerce and the bane of agriculture," which Sir Robert Peel had come in to maintain, were doomed and repealed by his Government. On May 15th, 1846, the third reading of the Bill passed the Commons by a majority of 98 votes, and on June 25th, the Bill was read for the third time in the House of Lords.

The repeal of the Corn Laws was followed by prosperity in the landed interest; the Tory prophets of evil, who foretold the ruin of the agricultural interest, were, as the racing papers would say, floored to a man. The price of wheat in 1846 was 57s. 6½d., and if you take the average of the next ten years you find it exactly the same sum, 57s. 6½d., and the highest quotation of wheat in that time was in May, 1847, when it stood 100s. 5d. per quarter. The Governments of Lord John Russell, Lord Palmerston, and Lord Aberdeen, got the credit of the good times as governments always do, and the extreme party of the Cobden school predicted better times for agriculturists than had ever been known.

But Free Trade, though an immense benefit to the nation at large, like all other reforms, affects individual interests. We all rejoice that the days are gone by for ever when the loaf smeared with blood, and veiled with crape, was carried round the streets; and though individually, I would as

soon see my Jamaica estate brought up to its former value by the return of slavery, as protection again the law of England, and the principle admitted that the food of the million grew first for the benefit of the grower, and that till he had been secured in a handsome profit, the public had no right to any reduction in its cost,—still it is useless to deny that Free Trade, however beneficial to the country at large, does make the profit of the farmer less than it was in the days of protection. Let us recognise this and the ground is cleared.

Cheap bread is of vital importance to the nation at large. Our ports are open to the world, and we buy our corn in the cheapest market. The loaf is cheap, and ought to be cheaper, and with our own yield, with America in the present and Canada in the future, England is assured of a plentiful supply of bread stuff at low prices. This immense advantage is one that will never be given up out of consideration to the agricultural interest, and the question is, what are the circumstances that hamper landlords and farmers in addition to Free Trade, and make it difficult, and in some cases impossible to farm with profit.

With regard to the dread of a social revolution, shall we for a moment or two consider the position of the ordinary landowner of the present time,—by that I mean a man who derives the whole of his income from land; tenant for life of an estate more or less encumbered with settlements and mortgages and other fixed charges? At the risk of being thought an egotist, I will take my own case. Following the advice of my best friends during my father's lifetime, being 22 years of age, I re-entailed the estate. The re-entail was drawn up by one of the first firms of solicitors in England, in the manner which they considered most advantageous to the estate and to me, the tenant for life. I inherited, 11 years ago, property in

Bucks, in Lincolnshire, and in Wales. I found property had been bought in this county, and to pay for that property the Welsh estate had to be sold, and the money re-invested in the land purchased in Bucks. The farm buildings were so bad on the Welsh property that it was calculated that the purchaser would have to spend one whole year's rental on them to put them in decent repair. Mind, I do not blame my father for this—far, very far from that, but I do blame, and I think justly, the strictness of the entail and the law which prevented him being able to put and keep the buildings in such a condition as to enable the tenants to do justice to themselves and the land by which they got their living. Time went on, and till the last year or two my tenants and I got on very well. There were few arrears, what there were were always paid up some time, and in nine years I only lost four tenants, two of whom retired having made their fortune. The rents were not raised, and though owing to the circumstances in which I had placed myself, I could not improve the property as I might have wished, yet the farmers knew I did what I could and were good-natured and more or less satisfied. The river Humber, it is true, washed away five acres of good land for several years at Winteringham, and formed an island in the bed of the river. A revenue cutter sailed round it and the Government took it, and the sea laid up several acres of land at Humberstone. As a tenant for life I couldn't afford to repel the attacks of the river, or to accept the gifts of the ocean, for I could not charge the estate for permanent improvements, nor could I sell a single acre of the 34 square miles which I inherited. Why, I fancy I hear some one say, you are contradicting yourself; you tell us in one breath that you can't sell, and just now you told us your trustees sold the Welsh

estate. Quite true, so they did, but for what purpose? to improve the estate? drain the land? repair the buildings, etc.? Not a bit of it; all they could do was to re-invest the money in more land, that left me in exactly the same state as regards extent in acreage, minus 6 per cent. charges on the estates bought and sold, *i.e.*, two years' rent. Still all went well; prices and harvests were good. Now what a change,—three bad years, and the fourth about the worst ever known all over England! The wheat crop has now decreased by nearly 1,000,000 acres, or a fourth of its area, since 1869. We hear of farms thrown up, banks refusing to lend more money, and the value of even the best farms deteriorating.

Under these circumstances, as was very well stated in a letter signed North Wilts, to the *Daily News*, what are the landlords to do? Are they to reduce the rents? In some instances no doubt advantage has been taken of the good times, and tenants have been squeezed, but I don't think on the whole rents are what the farmers complain of. On all sides we hear of reductions and returns to tenants who are unable to pay. These are duly chronicled in the papers with a certain grim humour as the liberality of a landlord. It keeps some tenants going, and saves the landlord having to cultivate the land, but 10 per cent. reduction is no real use, and doesn't solve the question at all.

Are the Game Laws to be abolished? Generally speaking, I don't think that in England any serious damage is done by game. Ten years ago there was a great outcry, but common sense came to the rescue, and the enormous quantity of ground game was got rid of. Rabbits are considered vermin and they might be with advantage destroyed, but all the iniquities of the old Game Laws are done away with. The absurdity of no man being allowed to carry a gun unless he owned 100 acres of land is a thing

of the past. The sale of game is legal. The Lord Mayor of London, who is not generally a landowner, can have game with every meal if he chooses to pay for it, and sympathy with the poacher is gradually dying out, and he is recognised as a low vagabond, who, too lazy to work, wires hares in hedges and steals pheasants' eggs—or he is a ruffian living in the manufacturing districts, who is a member of a gang, and is the terror of the neighbourhood.

I have yet to learn that the word farmer is synonymous with fool, and certainly no one but a fool would take a farm where game is preserved to an injurious extent.

Labourers' pay. Now, can you reduce that? Lord Beaconsfield told us at Aylesbury that the farm labourers know that within the last 40 years their wages have been raised 40 per cent. They knew very well that with these increased wages their purchasing power of all that was requisite for life was immensely increased. They knew very well that throughout England their habitations were greatly improved, in themselves a source not only of health, but of income. Thank God that it is so. But take the average wages of farm labourers—it is none too high—there can be no retrenchment in that quarter.

The last advice is that the landlords are to cut down their personal expenditure, and farm the land thrown on their hands. Very good. But what practical relief to tenants is that? I admit it shews praiseworthy self-denial, and prevents land from going entirely out of cultivation. But what about the tenants who have given up the land, from which they expected, and had a right to expect, a living—what about them? What are they to do? And so, supposing that a large number of farms were thrown on my hands, and that I sent away the servants, dismissed the keepers, gave up the hounds, sold the garden stuff, shut up the house, and lived only in that mysterious part of it

known as two rooms, what further security can I offer the tenants? How can I offer the land at a still lower rent to meet the hardness of the times, and still pay the unalterable charges and repairs of the estate?

Taxation, gentlemen, and the rates have a great deal to do with the crisis. The expenditure of the country is appalling and next year the bill will be a heavy one indeed.

As expenses increase so are fresh taxes put on the land. So long ago as 1849 Lord Brougham, in answer to an address to the Throne, said, "In the reign of William and Mary personal property paid 16 times as much as it did then," and there has been a steady and continuous reduction of the charges to which personal property is liable. Some gentlemen denied that the land paid the bulk of the poor rate, because they paid poor rates on their factories. What of that? They paid as landowners.

Suppose the rent of a factory to be £1000 a year, and the profits made on that factory £30,000 a year, which of the two sums formed the basis on which poor rates were calculated? Most assuredly £1000 a year.

I will not trouble you with figures, but call your attention to the alarming increase of the national expenditure. The total expenditure of 1872-73 was £70,714,000, that of 1878-79 was £85,407,789. This shews a steady increase of over two millions a year, or a total of fourteen millions increase in six years. Sir Stafford Northcote's estimate of the expenditure of the coming year is £81,153,573, but this does not include the Zulu war, the expense of which will be frightful. The English troops in South Africa were 22,000, as against 27,000, the fighting line which went to the Crimea. It is useless here to question who is to blame. The fact remains. The bill must be paid.

Taxation may, gentlemen, have something to do with the present agricultural crisis, but we must go deeper

into it still. It appears to me that now we must inquire into the system of Land Laws, the question of entail, and the difficulty of the transfer and sale of lands, and whether it is right that estates heavily mortgaged should be left tied up in such a manner that escape from the debt is rendered impossible. People say, take care how you introduce this subject, as you are sitting on a barrel of gunpowder. Is there no danger, gentlemen, at sea when a vessel has sprung a leak, if you sit with your hands folded and trust to a fair wind to blow you into port; is there no danger, I say, of the good ship settling down with her cargo and her crew in forty fathoms of blue water? With the question of simplifying the operation of transfer or mortgage of land, I do not propose this evening to deal; the principles of Lord Selborne's Bill are well-known and will be carefully discussed, nor need we argue whether the law which, if a landowner dies without giving any direction as to the disposal of his property, gives all the land, without diminution or charge, to the landowner's next heir, is just to the family, or beneficial to the country at large. The time has, however, come that the great question of entail should be calmly discussed, whether a man should have the right to re-entail property heavily mortgaged. Many consider that the laws which allow a landowner by his deed or by his will, to prevent his land being sold, seized, or lessened in size either during his own life or for many years after his death, are necessary for the very existence of the landed interest of England. May these laws not be a positive danger to the country and one of the reasons of the present agricultural distress?

It behoves every man who has interest in land in England to think deeply on this question, and to act with prudence and courage.

In no way do I wish to introduce a principle that a

living man may not do what he likes with his own—buy, sell, let, or farm as much as he chooses, leave it all to his eldest son, divide it amongst his children, or leave it entirely away. But though we properly respect the rights of the living, ought we not to curtail the power of the dead?

The largest landowner in England and Scotland has a total of 1,358,548 acres. I see no harm in that; there is no reason why he should not own two million acres; but what I do think wrong is that a landowner should either by his own act, or by the deed of his predecessors, be saddled with an enormous tract of country, of which it is impossible for him to get rid of a square yard, however necessary, however beneficial the sale of a small portion of it would be to the country, the estate, to his tenants, or to himself. I will try to shew what the consequence is. In the north of the county I have two strong clay farms on my hands; one I cannot get a bid for, nobody will cultivate it at any rent. I say to my agent, what am I to do? He answers—the buildings must be rebuilt, the worst land laid down in grass, the land drained, and cleansed, and in two years you may get a tenant. Very good, but all this ought to have been done years ago and the tenant would have been saved, and the land would never have got into so miserable a condition. But the same millstone is round my neck which hampered my father, which I must wear till my death, and my brothers as well if they succeed me, and the land is not free till after our deaths, or the twenty-first birthday of an unborn heir. As tenant for life, I hoped against hope, trusted to the good season of 1879 to put things right. That failed, the tenant is ruined and the land starved. It is a small matter, one farm in hand, you will say. But look round us. I hear of a proprietor with 4000 acres on his hands, a Berkshire landowner with 13 farms, and land thrown up in all directions. People would improve their properties if they could, but the majority cannot, as is shewn by the Committee of the House of Lords, consisting of the Duke of Richmond, Marquis of Salisbury, Earl

of Derby, and Lord Egerton of Tatton, who reported, in 1870, that of twenty million acres in this country requiring drainage, only three millions had been drained, and that taking into account also all other necessary improvements, only one-fifth of the land had been properly dealt with. Is not this a serious state of things? Farmers say it is not so much the low prices we complain of, but the yield is so bad. What else can you expect? We shall be told that these views are dangerous to the Constitution, to the Queen, to the House of Lords, and to the welfare of England generally. But, gentlemen, is it possible to deny how much good has been done by the gradual reforms that have been brought about in the present reign? Is it not better that questions of this importance should be properly and reasonably discussed on their merits, than that strong opposition should be offered to their very mention, that all the power of intellect, position, and wealth should be brought against the idea that such laws may be improved, until England wakes up suddenly to find the measure of such reforms brought forward by those who expressed themselves most hostile to them, and a Land Bill hastily passed through Parliament, with clauses that may take away from landowners the fee simple of their land? Think a little of the practical good which timely reforms have done to the country. Is it not a fact that the Queen, who succeeded to the throne in 1837, did not visit the great centres of England, Manchester and Liverpool, till 1851, on account of the disaffection that existed? Whenever she now appears in public the working classes, in their thousands and tens of thousands, roar out their welcome and loyalty which she so thoroughly deserves from her glorious reign and blameless life. Is the toast of the House of Lords less heartily received now than it was in the days when peers sent their proxies to a Minister, and, with their votes in the Commons, were able to offer a strong opposition to the Reform Bill, which if persisted in, would have terminated in a revolution? Of the House of

Lords it may be truly said they recognise the duties as well as the rights of property, and owning, as they do, one-third of the land in England and Wales, I would gladly see them the real proprietors of their property. We shall be told that these restraints are necessary, owing to the temptations to young men coming early into their estates. But as a rule, peers do not inherit before middle age; it is the exception, and many of the young ones recognise the responsibilities of property. Are we, for the sake of protecting a few, a very few, foolish men from the consequences of their own folly, to hamper the whole of the landed proprietors of England, and to make living men, anxious to improve their estates and benefit their tenants, feel the "dead man's grip," from which there is no escape?

Gentlemen, I have reminded you of the disturbed state of the country previous to the repeal of the Corn Laws. Think for a few moments of the events in 1848—of the Chartist riots. I was quite a child at the time, but such things are never forgotten. It comes before me now—bands of sullen determined men marching through the streets; the shops closed; cannon at Buckingham Palace, at the Bank, and on the bridges—the game-keepers, with their guns loaded, sitting in the hall of our house at Whitehall, and a troop of the 2nd Life Guards, under Captain Mountjoy Martin, in the stables, every respectable man sworn in as a special constable to keep the peace, London in a state of great alarm, and the Duke of Wellington determined to keep order at all hazards. The riots were put down with a strong hand, as was necessary and right—but think a little what it was the Chartists were asking for. The People's Charter, as O'Connell named it, had six points. They were these:—

- 1.—Manhood Suffrage.
- 2.—Annual Parliaments.
- 3.—Vote by Ballot.
- 4.—Abolition of the Property Qualification.
- 5.—Payment of Members.
- 6.—Division of the country into equal Electoral Districts.

Thirty-one years later what do we find? We find that common sense has triumphed where armed insurrection failed. We find the first point, Manhood Suffrage, almost given us by the Reform Bill of Mr. Disraeli, the great Conservative champion, in 1869. We find the Ballot given us by the Government of Mr. Gladstone, the great Liberal leader, in 1872. The Property Qualification for Members of Parliament died the shameful death it merited. Annual Parliaments are inconvenient, and Payment of Members is objectionable; but the last point, Division of Electoral Districts—is not redistribution of seats a feature in the programme of the Liberal party? And what is the result? In 1879 comes again a time of trial, and we have distress, but not disaffection—disappointment, but not despair.

Is it too much to hope that the Land Laws will also be calmly considered with a view to their improvement, that landlords and landowners will become the owners and lords of their land, and that by Free Trade in land the agricultural difficulty will be surmounted? The owners and cultivators of the land will weather the storm together; the landlords with their acreage, reduced perhaps, but with their properties in good order, free from crushing debts, a credit as well as a profit to themselves; and the farmers, with their balances at their bankers reduced, but still solvent, still able and willing to fight against bad seasons and low prices, till the good time comes, and come it will, when the Almighty shall send us the fruits of the earth in due season, and the country will hail the return of prosperity to the agricultural interests of Old England.

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