

THE
S P E E C H
OF
THE HONOURABLE
G E O R G E K N O X,
REPRESENTATIVE IN PARLIAMENT FOR THE
UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN,
IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS,
FEBRUARY 17, 1800,
ON THE SUBJECT OF
An Incorporate Union
OF
GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND.

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1800.

Houses of the Oireachtas

S P E E C H,

&c.

I SHALL detain the House, Sir, but for a very few minutes. I address you on this question with the greatest reluctance, since I am sensible that it is one upon which it is easy to irritate, but difficult to instruct. For the truth of this assertion I refer you to the debates. They will but too clearly ascertain that this measure, such is its nature, can neither be supported nor opposed, but upon grounds equally hazardous to the peace of this country, and to the security of the empire. On one side it is contended, that, if our present connexion be
suffered

suffered to subsist, a separation must be the consequence; whilst, on the other side, it is with equal earnestness, and, in my opinion, with more justice, argued, that an Union of the legislatures will produce a severance of the countries. Now, what is the lesson which the people of Ireland must necessarily learn from the agitation of this question, but this, that, in either case, and in every event, a separation is to be expected? Such, Sir, are the predictions which the nature of the proposed measure must necessarily produce; but I am sorry also to add, that, from the strain of argument in which some Members on both sides have indulged, one might almost suppose that they wished to verify their own predictions.

By the Noble Lord on the other side, this kingdom has been represented as a colony; and with all the exaggeration of eloquence, and almost in the language at which two or
three

three years ago we shuddered, as it came from the lips of Nelson and O'Connor, has the connexion with Great Britain been pictured as a state of abject and humiliating dependance on that country. Yet, Sir, as the success of this project is still doubtful, and as we may yet have to live under this vilified connexion, whilst I object to the opinion as most erroneous, I must protest against its promulgation as most indiscreet. From one side of the House, and from its highest authority, are the people informed that they are dependant upon Great Britain; and how is that country on which they are so dependant described by some of the members of this? She is described as a ruthless tyrant and oppressor; and history has been ransacked in order to collect every instance which can confirm or aggravate that character. Against such sentiments and such conduct I must equally protest. They have told you, Sir, that the interests of the two countries are distinct,

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and that so they must continue. In answer to the rhetoricians on both sides, I will assert, first, that if this measure should unfortunately pass, I entertain no doubt that the united Parliament will consider the interests of every part of the united kingdoms as the same, and that, in proportion to its means of information, will its conduct be just and impartial to each. And next I will maintain, that we possess in our present connexion as happy and independent a constitution as human wisdom could invent, or human infirmity enjoy.

I have on every occasion, Mr. Speaker, opposed the consideration of this question, because I cannot bring myself to accede to a preliminary step to that consideration, namely, an acknowledgment that our present constitution is one which ought to be abandoned ; for it is idle, Sir, in any case to deliberate upon a remedy before you ascertain a disease. I know that our

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constitution,

constitution, partaking of the nature of all human institutions, is not free from imperfections ; but I know what its imperfections are ; I know that some may be repaired, others may be surmounted, and that the rest can without much difficulty be endured. I have had experience of the constitution ; it has undergone the severest of all tests ; it has been flung into the furnace of rebellion, and it has come forth unscorched. But I object to innovation in the abstract, because, whatever superficial advantages it may promise, no man can be wise enough to foresee all the latent evils with which it may be pregnant. The Noble Lord and I entered together into this House : in our conduct we have been both consistent. The Noble Lord set out an advocate for one species of innovation ; I opposed him : he now propounds a second ; I oppose him again. I pray to Heaven, Mr. Speaker, that he, and I, and all of us may not be the victims of a third.

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What

What was the cause of the late rebellion? It was jacobinism, which took advantage of the disproportion between the population and the property of the country, to raise its population against its property. But why was the property victorious?—It was because under our constitution power is annexed to wealth. The love of property alone is a mean, temporising, and timid feeling; but the sense of power is an honourable and dignified sentiment. What was the consequence? Each man felt that he had a post to defend; and he that was base enough to desert that post, knew that in so doing he betrayed his trust, abandoned his character, and forfeited his honour. But what, Sir, is to be the effect of the present measure? It withdraws the power from the property. Who then can contemplate without terror the consequences of a new rebellion? When the connexion was assailed, I was not among the last to draw my sword in its defence; and if the Union shall

shall pass into a law, I shall not be among the last to fight in its support; since, however I much disapprove of the measure itself, I am fully aware, that, of all the evils which can afflict a nation, anarchy is the most dreadful. But, Sir, I must at the same time confess, that I shall go into the field with very different sensations; I shall go into it, not as a victor, but as a sacrifice; I shall enter it, not flushed with hope, but armed with resignation.

I know, Sir, it will be said that this measure ought not to be called an innovation, since we shall still possess a constitution consisting of King, Lords, and Commons. It is not then, I will allow, an innovation upon words or names; but if there is such a thing as an innovation upon the spirit and substance of a constitution, I say that this measure is an innovation. Were this Parliament to be removed to Madras, it might be said to the people of

Ireland,

Ireland, "You cannot complain of innovation, for you have still your old constitution, consisting of King, Lords, and Commons." But I would answer on behalf of the people, that it is essential to the British constitution, that there should be a free, constant, and immediate communication between the legislature and the nation for which it legislates. If, again, any one of those beggarly reforms with which this country has been harassed for the last twenty years, had unfortunately been carried—as long as the King and Lords existed—that would not have been long—it might have been argued that we had suffered no innovation, since we had still a King, Lords, and Commons. But I should have denied that conclusion, since I apprehend that it is a fundamental principle of our constitution, that property should be so represented in the Legislature, as to be able to protect itself against the attempts of enterprising indigence.

We are also told, Sir, of precedents. The only precedent, Mr. Speaker, that has occurred in my time, has been the union of Belgium to France.—Unite, said the French Commissioners, to the people of that country; hasten to unite yourselves with the richest, wisest, most populous, and most powerful nation on the globe; send us your representatives, and you will instantly be transformed into Frenchmen. Yet I doubt, Sir, if even to this hour, the Belgic conscript, deserting to his woods, can be persuaded that he is a French citizen; and I do most firmly believe, that France herself will rue the day when she preferred an incorporate union to the free and cordial connexion which she might have obtained with that country.

But this is too serious and awful a question to be wasted in an inquiry into precedents, or in a discussion upon words. I admit that the case is not without precedent,

cedent, and I allow that it is not an innovation on the constitution: but even its advocates support it on the ground of its being an important change. A great and important change it surely is: it is a change before which rashness should pause, and from which courage might honourably retreat.

We are first called upon to reduce our Legislature to one third of its present number. Now, Sir, however respectable for character and fortune the hundred Members of which the Commons are to be composed may be, it is no slight to them to say, that they will not be that description of persons best qualified by their habit or information to conduct all the complicated affairs of so rich, populous, and sensitive a nation as this is. In what, Mr. Speaker, consists the superiority of the practice of our constitution over its theory? It is in this—that, by our present representation,
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every variety of interest, property, talent, knowledge, wisdom, and energy, which exists in the country at large, finds itself represented in the national Councils; which are, as they ought to be, an epitome of the nation, in whose place they stand, and for which they must always act. But, Sir, it is obvious, that our diminished Commons will represent, after this arrangement, but one species of property, and but one description of men, and both of that class which is acknowledged to be the most inert.

Not satisfied, however, with reducing, in this unmasterly manner, the numbers of our Parliament, it is next to be removed, to another country I will not say, but to a distant situation—to a place of precarious, and frequently of difficult access; where all communication between the representative and the constituent will depend at all times upon the capricious favour of the elements; and

and where the most important laws may be passed—laws affecting essentially the general or local interests of this country, before any information on the subject can be transmitted from either country to the other. And lastly, Sir, this hundred Members, so selected, and so placed, are to unite their deliberations with five hundred and fifty or sixty English Gentlemen, totally unacquainted with, sometimes indeed ludicrously ignorant of, the state of this island, and the character of its inhabitants; themselves occupied almost unremittingly upon the affairs of one of the greatest empires, and one of the least simple governments upon earth.

On the subject of the proposed change I shall say no more. One word, however, Sir, before I sit down, upon the probable effect which it will have upon the future sentiments of this nation.—I say the future sentiments, in order to distinguish them from

from the present irritation, which is an effervescence that I have no doubt will soon subside. Looking upon that part of the question, it is natural that we should begin by inquiring what it is that makes a government strong. The answer is indisputable—The acquiescence of the governed ; but the question of most immediate importance to us is, How is that acquiescence to be obtained? A plausible reply will be, By a government which promotes the prosperity of the country. Now, Sir, that is a position which I utterly deny, and which the history of the world uniformly refutes. A philosopher or a christian may reflect upon his real or relative happiness, and sit down contented. But nations act, not from reason, but from sentiment. Attachment to ancient laws and usages ; affection for the family of the Sovereign ; religious veneration ; and, above all, a feeling of identity with the state : these, Sir, are the bonds which hold societies together.

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Why

Why do I expect that the British constitution will be immortal? It is because of the conviction which every man in that happy island feels, that, directly or indirectly, immediately or remotely, he possesses some influence over the government of his country. Now, I would ask, to which of these sentiments we are to look for the allegiance of our people? As to the latter, I think we may fairly acknowledge that, after this measure passes, not one man in Ireland, from Derry to Tralee, will ever dream that he possesses the slightest weight in the councils of the empire. Grant, then, that we shall be well governed, and that our wealth will consequently increase: I say, Sir, that the richer we grow, the more proud, ambitious, and discontented we shall become. And woe to that nation, Mr. Speaker, for whose pride, ambition, and discontent, there is no natural and constitutional issue! For my part, I cannot but believe, that when the fire of jacobinism is burnt

burnt out in France, it will revive and burst forth here ; and that this town, which lately exhibited an example of such generous loyalty, will become the seat and metropolis of the rankest democracy. And if what I augur from this measure should prove true, not this island alone, but the whole civilized world, may yet deplore its consequences.

I have now, Sir, traced a faint outline of my objections to this proposition. I am unwilling to fill up the picture, since, in the view which I have taken of it, the shadow must preponderate. In the course of what I have addressed to you, I have been compelled to speak things which could not have been palatable to several persons on each side of the House, and, in doing so, the charge of indiscretion may be retorted upon me ; but I have the consolation, Sir, to think that my indiscretions begin and terminate with myself ; they are indiscretions

tions which may be noxious to me, but which must be salutary to my country ; and I have the further consolation of believing that there is a loyal and candid majority on both sides of this House, who can distinguish between the disaffected man and the courtier, and him who stands aloof from both. To such men, Mr. Speaker, I have principally addressed myself ; and of them I feel this hope, that, regardless of the driving storms and fretful billows of democracy on the one side, and of the poison which steams from the stagnant pool of despotism on the other, with me they will yet take their stand upon the firm and lofty promontory of the Constitution.

FINIS.

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