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# CONSIDERATIONS

ON

# THE REFORM BILL,

BY A WESTMINSTER ELECTOR.

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MAY 1831.

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*The following Considerations may not be entirely useless to others. They are therefore printed, in small number, with full liberty to any one who pleases to reprint and circulate. The Writer's Name is withheld; partly, because it could add no weight to his views; and partly, from an unwillingness to differ publicly from many of his friends. The Considerations were, indeed, penned in self-defence. The writer sees, or thinks he sees, a fearful hazard in the proposed measure of Ministers. He is not so sanguine as to expect to convert one of those very rational Reformers who began by calling for the Bill—the whole Bill—and nothing but the Bill.*

# CONSIDERATIONS,

&c. &c.

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WE all know that Lord John Russell in bringing forward the Reform Bill introduced his statement of the grievance he meant to redress by supposing a *foreigner*, arriving in this country, to be taken to an old wall, or a mound of earth, and told that that wall or mound returned two members to Parliament.

This startling anomaly was plausibly urged as a reason for re-constructing our Representative System.

It is not so generally known that the same Lord J. Russell, writing in the calm retirement of his study, a work published in 1823, expressed himself in the following words:—

“ The question of Parliamentary Reform had slept for some time when the French Revolution, which disturbed every thing, woke it anew. ‘ The petition of the Friends of the People was an elaborate attempt to shew that a few individuals have the command of the House of Commons,’ &c. ‘ This celebrated petition ‘ admits of the following answer— You complain of the formation of the House of Commons such as it has existed from the Revolution to the present time. You *prove* that the frame of our government during that time has been a corrupt combination for private purposes. Now our fathers and grandfathers have told us that during that time they were very free and very happy. Their testimony is confirmed by the wisest lawyers, the greatest philosophers, the most enthusiastic poets of the times. Your *theory* goes to overthrow the testimony of Blackstone, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Thomson, and Cowper, and a hundred others, who have declared England to be in their time in the enjoyment of complete freedom. Now government is a matter of ex-

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PERIENCE and not of SPECULATION. We will therefore rest contented with things as they are." "Such an objection," continues Lord John Russell, "appears to me to be *sound*. For the complaint is made, not of a single or particular grievance; but of a majority of the governing body of the state, such as they had existed for a hundred years of liberty and glory."

Again, Lord J. Russell observes, (p. 356)—"The aristocracy of talent arrive at the House of Commons by means of the *close* boroughs, where they are nominated by Peers or Commoners who have the property of those boroughs in their hands. In this manner the *greatest part* of our *distinguished statesmen* have entered Parliament; and some of them perhaps would never have found admission by any other way. The use of such members to the House and to the *Country* is incalculable;—and the speech of one member for a *close* borough is *often* of more benefit to the cause of truth and justice than the votes of twenty silent members."\* At page 261 of the same work his Lordship thus writes—"In my mind the greatest objection of all to the adoption of any broad and general plan of reform is the *danger it would bring with it to every other institution*." And at page 266 it is declared, that "We ought to have as good, as strong, and as cogent reasons for disfranchising Old Sarum as existed for expelling King James."

I will not presume to decide between his Lordship's opinion in 1823 and that of 1831; but surely I am entitled to conclude that the *preponderance* of the argument *against* the close boroughs cannot be *very great* and *evident*.

It is notorious that *six months* ago, not one of his

\* It is fair to mention that Lord J. Russell, in the work referred to, does indeed arrive at the conclusion that the small boroughs have betrayed their trust, and therefore might without injustice be deprived of the privilege they possess; but he intimates considerable doubt whether it would be wise to do so, or whether the remedy might not be worse than the disease.

Majesty's ministers had declared against the EXISTENCE of close boroughs.

Two months ago they assured the House of Lords that their measure of reform would be *moderate* and *constitutional*.

On the 1st of March they surprised the House with a proposition for the utter extinction of sixty close boroughs and partially of forty others; and for the creation of a new and overwhelming constituency!

And in little more than *one month after*, they stood up and plainly intimated to a *deliberative Assembly of six hundred English gentlemen*, that they were to have the *Bill*—the *whole Bill*--and nothing *but the Bill*.

On the 22d they dissolve Parliament!

Those who take words for things will believe the Bill to be a Reform, because it *calls itself a Reform Bill*.

Those who care more for *Theory* than for *Fact* will of course declaim against the "rotten boroughs," and stop their ears against argument.

Now Common Sense requires that a measure of real reform should be visibly adapted to the *effect* of reformation.

But who will venture to affirm that under the proposed bill a numerous and poor constituency will not be bribed; or that their representatives will not be corrupt?

A thoroughly uncorrupt House of Commons should consist of that *unfashionable ingredient*—religious and moral men;—of independent fortune, not likely basely to bend to the seductions of a minister or of a Court;—nor yet, *with equal baseness*, to flatter the prejudices and passions of the multitude.

It is admitted on all sides that the means of corrupt influence on the part of a minister of the Crown, is in our time far less than it has been at any other time within these hundred years; and that it is every day diminishing.—Lord Althorp tells us that government can no longer be carried on by *patronage*.

In some mountainous countries the traveller may have observed the practiced driver stop, and attach to his wheel a log of wood that chance seems to throw in his way. Suppose the traveller arrived safe from accident at the foot of the mountain, will he inquire if there was any *rotteness* in that log?

The words "rotten borough," then, shall not cheat me of my sober judgment. I prefer to consider the nature and operation of the close boroughs, and how far they tend to the constitution of a *proper* House of Commons.

A "rotten borough" is commonly under the influence, or become the property of some man of wealth, a *peer* or a *commoner*. Sometimes the proprietor sits for his own borough; at other times he nominates a relative, or some gentleman whose opinions on politics coincide with his own, and whose talents may do him credit.

You exclaim immediately, such a member represents only the boroughmonger. Now let the *whole truth* be known, and that *boroughmonger*, as you incorrectly term him, is an Englishman, a man of wealth, interested in the weal of his own class of interests—but far more deeply interested in the preservation of that civil liberty, which his children will, together with his wealth, inherit. In all probability he is a man of intelligence and honourable ambition; and partaking, to the full, in the progress of information out of doors.

It is of the utmost importance that we should obtain (if possible from an impartial quarter) an *analysis* of the votes of the House of Commons, on such decisions as experience shews to have been *pernicious*, and the *opinion of all parties* regards as *corrupt*. We might thus arrive at a knowledge of the degree in which the *close boroughs* have contributed to such decisions. A simple principle of justice would require that we should set over against this, every beneficent and just decision, every triumph of humane and free principles, to which a *majority of the close boroughs have contributed*; and every proposi-

tion of *now acknowledged rash* or *factionous* tendency which they have rejected. Such an analysis might, I think, be obtained, and would be of the utmost value in forming a just opinion of the general operation of the close boroughs. I am at present strongly inclined to think the inference thence deduced would *not* be in favour of a diminution of their number.

In ordinary times, and on minor questions, we know that the votes of borough members are *divided*, and often neutralized. But what we want relates to *trying occasions*. Such an occasion was the Revolution of 1688, and the Act of Settlement which established the House of Brunswick on the throne of these realms. The *County Members* were *two to one* against that measure; but “sixty-five of what are called *rotten boroughs* voted in favour of it, and only forty-three in favour of tyranny and arbitrary power as sanctioned by the Stuarts!” “And this at a period when the bulk of the nation was ready to admit the doctrine of passive obedience.” This fact was stated by Mr. Sadler in a speech which Lord Althorp declared to be “replete with historical knowledge.”

You will ask, Is it not absurd and inconsistent that twenty persons should elect a member of Parliament? or that the proprietor of a borough should place his nominee in a House that calls itself the Representatives of the People?

Certainly it is both absurd and inconsistent *on your principles*; but, as to its *inconsistent* or *anomalous* character, I refer you to Lord J. Russell;—and as to the meaning of the general term *representatives of the people*, I call on you to prove, what you never can prove, that those who settled our constitution intended to constitute a system of pure representation, bottomed on theoretic proportions to population, or the will of the majority.—I think I could prove that they intended a system of *check and counterpoise*, and gave members on the principle of what is called *virtual representation* to large masses

of property and close boroughs. Why else did they give two members to an inconsiderable population surrounded by a wall?

In the dawn of revolutions in other states, the constitution of England has been generally taken as a model for imitation. WHY? Because the acclaim of all nations, and the contentment of our own people, in ordinary times, attested the fact that a high degree of real liberty had been experienced under it in company with good order and stability. Regenerated nations therefore copied our constitution; but, falling into the common error that regards our anomalies as blemishes, they did not, perhaps could not, *copy them*. They would have no *close boroughs*! They hastily recognised the will of the majority of certain *influential* but EXCITABLE classes; and gave to them an overwhelming preponderance, with no counterpoise to steady and moderate their action. Theirs was PURE *representation*—their wheel went round,—took fire,—and perished.

It is admitted that the *close boroughs* do not reflect the will of any considerable mass of the people. It is for that very reason we desire to retain them. We think your charge *against* them supplies an abundant justification of them;—and shews that they will continue to be of the utmost value, *until the period shall arrive* when the *majority* of the electors shall have completed their education, and be competent to direct their representatives as to the settlement of CORN LAWS—DEBT—CURRENCY—FREE TRADE—EAST and WEST INDIA INTERESTS:—on every one of which subjects the people will, I think, be appealed to and excited.

As we now stand,—if the spirit of party raises an irrational clamour,—if popular delusion prevails,—if the Press conspires to bear down calm deliberation, by artifice and intimidation,—if electors exact *pledges* and send their delegates, bound hand and foot,\* into

\* A Correspondent writing to the *Times*, from a certain ancient

Parliament, to hear arguments that must not sway their votes,—we have some counterpoise. At such a time the proprietor of a borough, or the gentleman by him nominated for the conformity of his views, must be the most truly independent member of the Commons' House. He is there to represent the suffering *intelligence* of the country striving, perhaps in vain, against *pure* representation.\*

In defending what I imagine to be the *general* and *wholesome effect* of the close boroughs, on the great work of legislation, I am not bound by consistency to resist an EXPERIMENT for the GRADUAL diminution of them. Boroughs known to be *venal* might be gradually reduced, and their places supplied by members elected by learned bodies.† The words “*gradual*” and “*gradually*” occur many times in Lord Grey's speech (in 1810) on Reform. To do things *gradually* used to be considered prudent. The quick march of Intellect despises and insults it, as a *bit-by-bit reform!* While Intellect strides onward, I would sit down and consider the way by which we advanced thus far; and hence it is that I am led to raise my humble voice against the sweeping destruction of the close boroughs, before the wit of man has provided a something that shall have the same effect in *resisting*, *delaying*, or *modifying* what you call the will of the people.

There is reason to think that the wholesome influence of the small boroughs was foreseen and esti-

city in Kent, thus expresses himself,—“Our two representatives were unanimously returned on Monday last, tied *hand and foot* to the Bill.”

\* Much has been said of the private interests served by borough members. Now *great* private interests are generally allied to great public interests.—It is obvious to remark that such questions must be rare.

† *Gradually*, too, three or four great towns might have the privilege of electing members conceded to them;—though it would, I suspect, be rather difficult to shew how they would be better off than at present with their parliamentary Agent corresponding with a Member of the House.

mated by the great lawyers of the Revolution. But whether intended or not, we possess it; and cannot spare it. Look round the horizon, to France, Belgium and elsewhere, wherever the clouds are most threatening to the peace and improvement of society; is there not what may be termed a down-hill tendency, a loosening of the bands of society, almost a dissolving of it into its elements? and would you, in such times, have a government that cannot govern for two years in opposition to clamour? And how will you moderate the most pernicious delusions of the people, when you have left no avenues into Parliament for such as will not stoop to flatter the popular feeling? Will you reply that the House of Lords is, at such times, to resist and moderate the Commons? Can you believe they will have the strength to do so?

Let the friends of equal liberty look around them. Can we fear for liberty from any King? Is our Peerage more overbearing and tyrannous than in earlier periods of our history? When did we read of a House of Peers lording it over the Commons' House? *Never!*—though our own history records that the House of Commons once rode over the Peers.

A real Reformer should, in my opinion, fix his eyes steadily on the *balance* of our Constitution. When that balance inclines against the democratic scale, I would hasten to place myself in it. Admitting that certain peers, proprietors of boroughs do, by means of them, influence the composition of the House of Commons in a way not avowedly recognized by the maxims of our Constitution, I ask; Has such influence prevailed to such an extent as to cause the balance to incline very decidedly in favour of the Aristocracy? Is there nothing that has been growing up in the opposite scale?—no increase of general wealth, and popular influence?—no liberty of the press?—no practice of reporting the debates?—no calling up and judging peers of Parliament at our breakfast tables?

The truth is, that vast changes have been going

on in society outside of parliament, and some have taken place within. The real Reformer will look to the *balance*, and the *effect*. He will mistrust theory. "*Government is a matter of experience.*"

We are all interested in REAL reforms. I never knowingly opposed them. In my way, and on a small scale, I myself have been a determined reformer.

Now my idea of *Parliamentary* Reform comprehends—

1st. The reduction of all unnecessary expenditure.

I do not shut my eyes to the fact that *thirty millions* of taxes have been reduced since the peace.

2d. The raising the necessary revenue by taxes the least galling in their nature, and the least injurious to the trade and industry by which, at all times, the state is enriched.\*

3d. The finding out, and rendering contributory, the property that, in various ways, may now evade contributing its fair proportion.

4th. The rendering Justice *cheap* and *certain*.

These—and many other matters of *detail* connected with the business of the House,—seem to me to afford the proper field of reform.

Thus, husbanding our resources, keeping out of war, and binding up, instead of tearing open the unsightly wounds of political division, we may be preserved a great and free people; a happy contrast to our restless and excitable neighbours.

But if to meet the spirit of the times we are to set about experiments on the House of Commons,—if we are to recompose our *constituency*, let us endeavour to secure a *sound one*.

It has been stated, and I believe it is not denied, that, after the present generation of voters shall

\* He who declaims against all influence of the peers in the lower House, on the strength of one constitutional maxim, should abstain from referring to that other maxim, that says, no man shall be taxed but by consent of his representative; or he will be reminded that the House of Peers must not touch a money-bill.

have passed away, the entire number of electors in the kingdom will not be more under the Reform Bill than they now are. But they will be *changed*, and the change will, in the opinion of those who oppose the bill, introduce a more **EXCITABLE** class of voters to an overwhelming preponderance.\*

In settling a constituency on principles of justice and expediency it would, doubtless, be desirable that *every* great class of our fellow subjects should be *adequately* represented. The wishes of large bodies of people ought to be expressed and interpreted by a certain number of representatives chosen on the most open and popular principles. Side by side with these should be seen a *considerable number* of intelligent men ready to offer the result of their reflection without being distracted by the concerns of a large constituency, and without being accountable for their *enlarged views of policy* at any other tribunal than that of the public opinion of the country *generally*. Others should be there connected with,—and thoroughly understanding the state of those complicated interests of Commerce, which, by industry and enterprise have grown to vast importance, and require wise legislation and protection—and even mere Wealth should not be without its representatives, because the welfare and greatness of the country is bound up with its protection; and because the possessors of wealth pay largely to its support, and are deeply interested in the permanence of its greatness.

Now, an election on popular and uniform principles appears, both from *reason* and *experience*, to tend to the return of the *first mentioned* class of representatives, (often the merest demagogues,) and to the comparative neglect and exclusion of all the rest. Nothing is more easy than to frame a general and uniform *plan* for the election of a House of Commons; but, if we are to *forecast* the *consequencs* of

\* “ In the worst of all hands—the population of large cities”—*but see the whole of the 31st chapter of Lord J. Russell’s Essay on the English Constitution.*

the intended measure, all reasonable men will agree that the question becomes one of *deep difficulty*—and, I should think, that all reasonable men might unite in regretting that such a question has been transferred to the *hustings* of our elections.\*

Many with me still entertain the hope that the wisdom of Parliament will follow the example of our Ancestors; and, *for the sake of the people* maintain a counterpoise to their *occasional excitement*. *Large masses* of electors are proverbially *EXCITABLE*. Let us not place the vast and complicated interests of our country at the mercy of any delusion, with which the spirit of Party, or of the Press, may inoculate the *ten pound householders* and the *class just above them*, on the eve of a General Election. Think how easy, at such time to raise a cry against the Corn-laws,—the Debt, or the Currency. Think what fatal mischiefs would be done before the people were awakened to their error. Think of a House of Commons *pledged to vote one way* on any of those great and vital questions; meeting, not to deliberate, but to record the will of those whom you call the *People*.

I have, indeed, heard one argument for the Bill which demands a serious attention.

It is said that, with or without the Reform Bill, we must, by the mere circumstances of our position, be, in a very few years, carried upon a Revolution; and that unless the universal feeling of the country is conciliated by the passing of the Reform Bill, we shall not pass through that crisis peaceably and unitedly.

It would be but candid to put this argument fore-

\* The power of dissolving Parliament is a prerogative extremely liable to abuse. By threatening a *dissolution* for the purpose of intimidating the House of Commons, the Executive can obtain the votes of many who are placed beyond the sphere of its ordinary influence; and by actually appealing to the people at the moment of some violent outcry, ministers can avail themselves of a popular delusion spread by themselves.—(*Edinb. Rev.* No. 31, p. 209.)

most. I have reason to believe that it is the secret strength and motive of very many supporters of the bill. Away then with the pretence that the measure is to *prevent* a revolution!

I acknowledge this last argument as an unanswerable reason for the largest measures of conciliation to popular feeling CONSISTENT with the stability of our liberties. Ought I to go further? Ought I, as an Englishman, to consent to the throwing down of our barriers against democracy, lest their continuance should irritate those who are to come in upon us a flood? Ought such an argument to seduce the sworn guardians of our Institutions?

It cannot be dissembled that among those who loudly hailed the introduction of this measure, are men who are known for their hostility to our *institutions and our religion*: Some of them spoke out, and exultingly predicted the full accomplishment of their schemes.—I hope it will not be deemed *uncharitable* if I remark that another large, and far more respectable class who have been active in promoting the progress of the measure, are *Dissenters*. I presume they would consider it no objection to the bill if, *in their hearts*, they thought it likely to overturn the church of this country.—But after every deduction, there will remain among the supporters of this bill a vast number of *sincere friends of liberty and order*—men intent on no bye-ends, and willing to make generous sacrifices in behalf of what they think the cause of freedom. *I think them indeed mistaken*;—owing to the difficulty of the question requiring considerable acquaintance with the solemn lessons of History. It is with feelings of patriotic pride that I listen to their *enthusiasm*. I do not despair of my country. I ought to have faith in a controlling Providence, and I seem to myself to need it, when I witness my countrymen hurrying into a gulph where the venerable institutions in the midst of which their patriotism has been formed, will, perhaps, perish for ever!

Had the question remained in the hands of the legislature I should have been silent; but the *Newspapers*, which *must always have a corrupt interest in flattering the prevailing delusion of their readers*, have taken it up. They tell me *I* am blind and besotted, or slavish and corrupt. Now I know too much of the *gentlemen of the press*—I am too much *in their secret*,—to pay any attention to their dictation.

The leading Newspapers have on this occasion magnanimously descended to the level of the *Moniteur*. They have *accepted bribes* from the short-lived sympathy of clamour, and are deservedly *disfranchised* from their function as fit channels of general and impartial information.\*

So long as the *daily press* reported fairly, and opened its columns with some degree of impartiality, it was not ill adapted to further that political education which is one day to justify *universal suffrage*. Its *future usefulness* will apparently be limited to the recovery of a stray spaniel, or the delicate advances of a matrimonial advertisement.

\* Take one example—The illumination, and the *many thousand pounds-worth of glass* broken by way of letting in the light upon the bigotted disapprovers of the *whole Bill*, will not be soon forgotten by those who passed through the principal streets on the following morning. The *Times*, so remarkable for *early intelligence*, assured its readers next morning, of the “peaceable and orderly, and even good-natured demeanour of the crowds which perambulated the streets until a late hour;” and “their inclination rather to laugh at the opponents of reform than to treat them with reproach or violence.” Something, indeed, was let out about “a few idle boys.” On the last page of the next day’s *Times*, in *very small print*, we read that some opulent citizens had come forward at Guildhall to contradict this report of the *Times*; and it appears that *five or ten pounds-worth of glass* was broken by the crowd. On May 2d, being taunted for the suppression of the fact, the *leading journal* (that any *Englishman* should be so led!) repeats—“On no occasion of an illumination do we remember less outrage.”—On the very next day, it seems to have heard of “houses described in the papers as having suffered;” and “that *nearly two hundred persons* were taken by the police from among the crowd for the offence of *breaking windows*.” I am not aware that the *Times* has noticed the recent affidavits to the amount of damage.

The writer of this is far from denying that some judicious changes might be made in the channels and forms of elections ; but he thinks that in these times the very worst species of change is that which would augment the preponderance of the most **EXCITABLE** classes. Now, what are the classes with whom political opinions are most *rapidly generated* and *changed* but the very classes whose power in our elections this bill would double or treble !

The *veracious* press has said that the question is really between the *bill* and *no reform*.

Nothing, however, can be more certain than that if the bill be *thrown out*, a large measure of *practical reform* must be brought forward under other auspices.

But Reform, on the ground of any *theory*, would involve the admission of the false principle that government is *a matter of speculation, and not of experience*. That principle once admitted, the most plausible Theory will be sure to find acceptance ; and a series of changes will follow that will effect a *Revolution*.—It will of course be a fair-speaking and generous one :—but presently some great interests will decline being stripped and impoverished—struggles will then ensue, and your fair-speaking Revolution will put out its *talons* and **DRAW BLOOD**.







