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WOULD

REFORM IN PARLIAMENT

BE A

BENEFIT TO THE COUNTRY?

BY B. S. ESCOTT, ESQ.

It is good also, "not to try experiments in States, except the necessity be urgent, or the utility evident; and well to beware, that it be the Reformation which draweth on the change, and not the desire of change that pretendeth the Reformation.—LORD BACON.

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WOULD REFORM IN PARLIAMENT BE A BENEFIT TO THE COUNTRY?

There seems to be no good reason why those, who living under a free government have been in the habit of reflecting on the affairs of their country, should refrain from giving their sentiments that publicity, which time and opportunity may allow; or why opinions entertained with sincerity, and conceived in no spirit of party, should meet with any other reception, than that which is due to their truth, their error, or their insignificance. It is no doubt true, that many are inclined to magnify the importance of present objects, and, in their view of passing events, to suffer their imagination to depict consequences, and their fear to portray dangers, which owe their existence to no other source than a lively and morbid exercise of the inventive faculties of their minds. Others there are, and theirs is the more dangerous error, who seem to think all the occurrences of the passing day, in which they are not individually interested, as of no importance, or at least unworthy of their care; and who, disregarding the signs of the times, and the gathering of the tempest, will
not allow their imagined security to be interrupted, till the flood, which is destined to overwhelm them, defies obstruction, and mocks at flight.

Examples of each of these extravagant modes of thinking, or of thoughtlessness, are very abundant. Who is there, who from his earliest recollections has not heard anticipations of national difficulties, of critical embarrassments, of final catastrophe, repeated year after year, with equal confidence, and equal remoteness from truth? Some have been amused, and some terrified; but all who have looked for any fulfilment of such predictions, have looked in vain; and the fears of readers, and the credit paid to pretended foresight, being both dissipated by the hand of time, the government and the nation, and the national honour, have survived amid the murmurs of the discontented, and in spite of the ravings of political fanatics.

ruituraque semper
Stat (mirum) moles.

It is the natural consequence of such delusions, when exposed, to lead the mind into the contrary error: and where confidence has been the cloak of ignorance, or the weapon of faction, many who would avoid the imputation of stupidity, or of party violence, are often led either to form no opinions, or to conceal them; to distrust their own speculations when they have been misled by those of others; and to avoid flagrant error by taking refuge in indifference.
But this indifference is in its consequences most important. It is almost an axiom in politics, that those who are not adversaries are friends. It is but a short step from neutrality to acquiescence, and whether it be taken or not, the effect is generally the same. In the one case something is conceded, not spontaneously, but at the instance of another; in the other case something is taken, but not by violence, for there is no resistance: and in both cases the active leader of a party recruits his forces and gains new allies, partly by his own energies, but partly by the pusillanimity of those, who have either yielded up their arms to their opponent, or at least neglected to use them in their own defence. In a word, it is the common character of the mass of men, whatever be their rank or station, not to be convinced by reason, but to be dazzled by appearances; and to follow in the train of those, to whom nature has been more prodigal in her gifts, and committed the destinies of states; and then, and then only, will the division of the numerical strength of a country afford any test by which to judge of the truth of any given opinion, when an equal balance has been struck between the talents, the knowledge, and the energies of the leading men on either side. But whoever would infer the truth of a proposition, or the justice of a measure, from the support it may receive from the people, reasons as correctly as one who would prove that Aristides was an unjust
man, because he was banished by the citizens of Athens.

These considerations have been suggested by the present state of the question of parliamentary reform, to which, as it is commonly discussed and supported, they appear capable of a close application. It is perhaps impossible that any impartial inquirer should imagine that there exist no defects in the system of parliamentary representation established in this country; it is improbable that he should not see dangers more or less remote, which may owe their origin to those vitiated spots which have been the object of his observation. But it is equally impossible that he should close his eyes to the merits and beauties of a system, which he may still wish to see more perfect; or that in his ardour to remove blemishes, and avert dangers, he should not be diffident of his own fitness for the task, anxious to make a fair comparison between the dangers of things as they are, and the dangers of change; and knowing that the discretion of man is ever exercised in the choice of evils, be resolved to act on whichever side the balance may incline.

But if this be the proper temperament of mind to bring to the discussion of any question of laws or of government, it is one which the people cannot attain. They are, as they ever have been, the instruments with which others work; and it is thus that they are used for the present purpose.

The most frequent argument for parliamentary
reform, the most convincing to its friends, the most appalling to its foes, is derived from what is assumed to be the general opinion of the country in its favour. It is said, and with truth, that men of orderly minds, and loyal feelings, sensible, moderate, and discreet in their dealings, with property to defend, with principles and characters to support, have at length been compelled to admit that the form of government under which they live is faulty in an essential part of its constitution; that change alone can restore its health and reinstate its vigour; that there is a rottenness which must be removed, or increasing contagion will be the consequence, and the inevitable end, decline and ruin. But such is a new light by which they have been visited: for twenty, or thirty, or forty years, they have been living in a very happy ignorance of those things by which they have been at last awakened. They have bred up families, and amassed fortunes, and thought the reformers a busy and a mischievous race, with little to lose, and much hope of gaining by state convulsions; or at best they have considered them as the ordinary weapon of a parliamentary opposition, which it was the easy task of the minister of the day to parry or to beat down. There is no effect without a cause; nor is this conversion at all inexplicable, but it is not the work of reason in the converted, and should be no argument in the mouths of others. While reform was advocated by ignorant and vul-
gar men, while it was preached by itinerant orators, and listened to by mobs; when, if sometimes found in honourable company, it still carried about it the indelible marks of ill breeding, and low habits; when it lurked up and down in dark places, and was more than suspected of treasonable designs; so long did men of prudent and sober minds regard it, according to their different dispositions, with indifference, with detestation, or with contempt. And when, in the periodical revolutions of seasons, as was often the case, reform became the subject of parliamentary discussion, and, in more modern days, was confided to the care of some honourable person of pure intentions and moderate abilities; how rapidly were the columns traversed, fraught with lamentations over the corrupt practices of electors, and the inequality of franchises, that time might remain, not to skim over, and to glance through, but to read, to ponder, and never to forget, the eloquence which was sure to dissipate the gloomy forebodings which had preceded it, and turn the mind from its dread of fancied evil, and its unsettled longing for improvement, to the contemplation of existing blessings, the preservation of that which we enjoy, rather than the acquisition of things which are unknown.

But that voice is now silent; and when the spirit by which it was animated took its flight, it left no kindred genius to occupy its deserted place. There are not wanting those, who pretend to affirm,
that had that great statesman survived to the present day, his opinions on this question would have undergone a change. But he would have been more likely to have still led the opinions of others, than to have followed in their train; it was but three years ago that he uttered in the House of Commons an uncompromising declaration against reform. He pledged himself without regard to time and circumstances "that he would oppose it to the end of his life":"* this declaration was received with

* "Reform, which he (Mr. Canning) considered would more vitally affect the existence of the Constitution, than the settlement of the Catholic question."---Life of Canning, by A. G. Stapylton, Esq. vol. ii. p. 138.

The latter part of the sentence is elliptical: but it is plain, that, in the Author's opinion, Mr. Canning would not have yielded to reform, unless prepared to give up the Constitution.

But hear Mr. Canning himself:---"That the noble lord (Lord J. Russell) will carry his motion this evening, I have no fear; but with the talents which he has shown himself to possess, and with, I sincerely hope, a long and brilliant career of parliamentary distinction before him, he will, no doubt, renew his efforts hereafter; although I presume not to expect that he will give any weight to observations or warnings of mine, yet on this, probably the last opportunity which I shall have of raising my voice on the question of parliamentary reform, while I conjure the House to pause before it consents to adopt the proposition of the noble lord, I cannot help conjuring the noble lord himself to pause before he again presses it upon the country. If, however, he shall persevere, and if his perseverance shall be successful, and if the results of that success shall be such as I cannot help apprehending, his be the triumph to have precipitated those results---be mine the consolation, that to the utmost and the latest of my power, I have opposed them."---Speech in the House of Commons, April 25th, 1822.
the cheers of an immense majority of his hearers,—
and he was not a man to have relinquished the
support of parliament, to court the favours of
popular opinion: but the truth is, the popular
opinion in favour of reform did not exist while
he lived to divert it into other channels. And
those who have thought proper to abandon
their own principles, and therefore insinuate
that he would have abandoned his, must seek
some other sanction for their conduct, and some
other mode of defending their new doctrines, than
that which can be derived from the supposed in-
consistency and insulted memory of their great
master.

There is in the rational, as in the subordinate
works of creation, a filling up of vacancies, a
perpetual succession. One great light is extin-
guished, that another may shine forth with a
brighter lustre. The triumphant adversary of re-
form was gone; and he had so far silenced the
supporters of the cause, that those who should now
become its champions, would be freed from that
impediment, which to high and generous minds
is the most irksome, and to the advancement of
any great cause by legitimate means, the most
untoward—the alliance and co-operation of mean
and unworthy partisans. A more favourable mo-
ment could not have been desired; and there was
not wanting one to take advantage of it. Not
while the words of him that was no more had
scarce died upon the ear; and while they derived a
sad charm and a solemn sanction from his lamented absence; but after a convenient pause; and due time and vigilance bestowed on rallying his forces, and collecting all the implements of his warfare; a leader well-fitted for the work took, and occupies the field. The standard of reform is raised, and an immense army assembles under its shadow. The largest province solicits the honour of his patronage; not on account of his wealth, his birth, or his local influence; of these he had none; but because of his talents, his knowledge, and his principles.

The facts are simple and plain: these two men are the great political speakers of their time. While one flourished, he opposed reform, and it was kept down: he is gone. The other flourishes, and reform is become popular: whither those may be conducted, who follow under the auspices of this second leader, is uncertain. That they will not be suffered to remain where they are, few can doubt.*

But to the effect of popular eloquence is added the power of the press. Nine men in ten, who discuss political questions and form opinions on state affairs, adopt the arguments and follow the course prescribed by the newspaper which they are in the

* Ουκ αἱρεσιν ὑμῖν διδόσι τὸν πράττειν ἡ ἁγείν ἡσυχίαν· ἀλλ' ἀπελεῖ, καὶ λογοὺς ὑπερηφάνους, ως φασί, λέγει καὶ οὕχ ὁ ὦς τε εστιν, ἔχων ἃ κατεστράπται, μενειν ἐπὶ τούτων, ἀλλ' ἀνέι τι προσπεριβαλλέται, καὶ κυκλῳ πανταχῇ μελλοντας ἡμᾶς καὶ καθημενοὺς περιστοιχίζεται. Demosth. Philipp. I.
habit of reading. It is true that these newspapers are in themselves much under the control of the leading politicians of the day, not voluntarily, but insensibly and in the same manner as the public are under the control of both; but then that circumstance is itself an additional proof, that it is to the talents and exertions of these great men, and not to the intrinsic right of the cause, that it gains support and becomes triumphant: it is no less true that the press must be also subservient to public opinion; it must please and pamper it, in order to secure its support; it must not offend those on whose favour it lives; but then there are modes of leading and influencing the opinions of men by no means inconsistent with the securing their approbation and their good will. Do not the theologians tell us that the readiest way to convince the judgment, is first to touch the heart? Their dictum is true to the very letter, and its principle has been applied in the present case, by writers of a different description, to a very different purpose, but with the same knowledge of the motives by which the mass of mankind are actuated, and with at least an equal portion of success. Let an able periodical writer select for the object of his patronage a subject to which the minds of his readers must be naturally predisposed; such an one is parliamentary reform; most men wish to take a part in the government of their country, and the mass who are excluded are therefore anxious to adopt any
measures which offer them a hope of gratification. Let him treat this question in a popular manner, and day after day instil into his readers an indefinite desire of improvement, an abstract hatred of corruption, and a discontent arising from the exposure of defects, and a careful concealment of comparative advantages; the effect is certain and irresistible. He will please and captivate by his subject, but he will lead and excite by his manner of treating it. He is so far subservient to the will of the people, as to be compelled, for his own interest, to choose a subject naturally popular. But he is the moderator of their opinions, and the leader and dictator of their actions, and his subserviency is only a skilful choice of instruments by which his own vantage ground is secured, and his readers aroused from their former inactivity, and adopting arguments so flattering to their feelings, become in their turn arguments in his hands for the very measures to which they have been converted, and are told next day, that a government cannot refuse to grant what the people think proper to demand.

No man, whatever be his own opinions, can deny that this is a true statement of the conduct of the press at the present day, nor is it easy to imagine how it can ever be subject to the guidance of any other principles. The effect of their operation has been to enlist those amongst the parliamentary reformers, who were formerly either the opponents of reform, or at least acquiescing in the arguments,
and thereby strengthening the hands, of the great antagonists of change.*

Here then are two opinions opposite to each other, both equally popular at different times; and the practical question for a statesman to decide is, which of the two is consonant to reason, and justified by political expediency, and would, if acted upon, be conducive to the happiness of the people.

But one, who is not a statesman, though he may reflect on the same materials, is free from that responsibility which, while it enjoins decision, may sometimes warp and fetter the judgment. He may mistrust his own opinion, without any ill consequences to others; and he may state doubts and difficulties, as they occur on either side, more with the view of satisfying himself, and trying the correctness of his own views, than with any intention of laying down the law. One thing is at least clear—the two opinions cannot be both true: the moderate men, who now think reform necessary, must have been wrong when they thought it injurious; or, if their former opinion was correct, they must since have been led astray. Time and

* This is sufficient for the argument; but I will further remark, that the tergiversation and scurrility of some of the leading newspapers has been of late so bad, as not only to make one dread a tyranny of the press as the worst of all evils, but to induce also, the contrary fear, that the press may lose all its salutary influence, by exposing to view the baseness of its principles.
circumstances have not justified the change. Opinion is the weathercock which has turned round, speaking and writing have been the blasts to turn it. The blemishes which exist in our representative system, existed then; they existed in equal, if not greater force. But it may be argued, that they have been at length exposed to view: that it took time to make the people comprehend the vices of their government, and to open the eyes of ordinary men; and that the change which has taken place, is not owing to fickleness, but to reasonable conviction.

There are two objects which may be aimed at by innovation, either an improvement of our present system without a total change of its form and character, or an annihilation of existing institutions with a view to substitute better ones in their place. It shall be here assumed, that the first of these objects is, that which the great body of the respectable reformers imagine they are pursuing. The other is, indeed, not reform but revolution, though it may be brought about by legal and peaceable means.* Moderate men will not discuss the question, of whether a monarchy or a republic be the better form of government, because they will consider it to be the duty of good citizens to cherish that form under which

* There are two sorts of revolutions——one peaceable, the other warlike——but both total changes of government; and the last is threatened as an argument for carrying the first; but the first is not reform, and the threat is absurd.
they have been born and brought up, and enjoyed their liberty. Such men, therefore, desire reform, because they wish to remedy abuses; and the question with them must be, how far the changes which they contemplate would restore the edifice without impairing its original conformation.

The defects which these men complain of may, for the present purpose, all be reduced to three heads.

The influence of money. The inequality of franchises. The influence of property and rank.—A word or two on each.

*Bribery* is an evil inherent in the present system. The politician laments its existence, as the means of returning unfit representatives; the philosopher, as an instrument of mental, as well as political corruption, a moral degradation of him who gives, and him who takes. But it must be allowed to be of all evils the most difficult to remove. While one man is rich, and another avaricious or poor, and the latter has to bestow what the former desires to possess, an arrangement and a compromise will take place between them; and a mode will be invented to evade law, and escape penalties, where both parties have the same desire to gratify, and both are equally interested in concealment. That this is the case at the present day, no one will deny. But a remedy is proposed; not to multiply laws already proved to be ineffectual, but, by increasing the number of electors, to render that
impracticable, which prohibitory enactments have failed to prevent. There are serious objections to such a scheme: its fitness for the execution of its avowed purpose must entirely depend on the extent to which it is carried; for unless electors be so far multiplied as to make it out of the power of any degree of wealth to offer a temptation to their virtue, the means of bribery may indeed have changed hands, and fewer purses will be adequate to the purchase of votes, but the principle will still remain in active operation: prices will fall where the market is overstocked; a lower rate of corruption will be fixed; and men will still find a way of gratifying their favourite propensity of buying each other, and selling themselves. But the weightiest objection to such an extension of the right of election, is the constitutional danger attendant on its operation, and the undue weight it would probably give to the popular principle of our government: and as this objection applies with equal force to the other schemes of reform, and is the grand constitutional argument against their adoption, its consideration must be for a moment deferred.

The inequality of the right of voting is a perpetual object of attack with the advocates of reform; and it may be admitted, that no man of any age or country, who had applied his mind to the invention of a representative system, would ever have devised that variety of franchises, which
exists in the borough representation of England. Whether he would ever have devised any thing which would have been productive of the same good, or enjoyed the same permanency, is another question. But the franchises are unequal: and this very inequality is the direct and immediate cause of sending men of unequal rank, fortune, talents, and opinions, to take a part in the councils of the state. Is this an evil?—it is the very spirit and practice of real representation: a representation of the country, and all its interests, not of the people contradistinguished from the country, (which is an un-English idea;) of the whole, not of a part. An assimilation of franchises, and an equalization of the right of voting, would produce a corresponding equality in the objects of the elector's choice: if it did not do this, it would do nothing: it is the very purpose for which it is demanded, or, at least, the unavoidable effect of its adoption; and it is impossible that a more unfortunate change could occur in the formation of the House of Commons, than that its members should be elected by one class of constituents, for the purpose of supporting one set of opinions.

Another cause of offence, is the influence of great men, of peers especially, in the elections; it is said, that when a single man possesses such an influence over his tenantry and his dependants, as to oblige them to vote according to his dictation,
the election is in fact his nomination, and not the voluntary and discreet act of those who are misnamed constituents and electors. But the influence exercised by peers is said to be of a still grosser nature: it is not only anomalous, and destructive of the pure principles of representation, but it is a confusion of the separate parts of government, and a direct violation of positive law. Now, though all this were true, the same question occurs here as in all these cases, whether the present defect or the proposed remedy be the greater evil? Many real, as well as speculative advantages, may be bought at too high a price. In order to ensure to a rich man's dependants the free exercise of their elective franchise, rights of property may be interfered with, which are as valuable to the poor as to the rich. There are few who would not admit, that some influence may be fairly exercised by those to whom fortune or talent has given a higher station than their neighbours: but who will undertake to fix these boundaries by positive enactments?—or how shall law discriminate what philosophy is unable to determine? Laws which are sure to be evaded, are worse than useless; they bring obedience into contempt, and by making transgression common, deprive it of its enormity. This consequence has already followed the vain attempts which have been made by the legislature, to deprive the peers of that influence, which they have always exercised, and
still continue to exercise, as attached to their property, not their persons. And yet, if it were clearly shown, that this influence was hurtful to the state, it would be more proper to attempt other measures for its suppression, than to allow the failure of former experiments to be a cause of despair.

Now, few will deny that the men possessed of the greatest property are those who have the greatest interest in the well-being of the state; and, consequently, in maintaining good government and wise laws; but are they not also the best judges of the talents and character of those men who are likely to become efficient members of Parliament; useful guides of public opinion, instead of servile followers in its train; and, in a word, wise legislators. Is there any man, with his senses about him, who would venture to deny, that a peer, possessed of natural abilities and a liberal education, would be a better judge of the qualifications necessary to form such a character as has here been delineated, than a mob of potwallopers, or even a more respectable retinue of scot and lot voters? But if in theory, and, on abstract principle, this is clear—it is clearer still in its practical effects. How are the great lights of the Lower House returned to parliament? for what sort of boroughs have they generally taken their seats, ever since the public attention was first directed to this question? Why, with scarce an exception, they have all been ushered into public under the auspices of some
great man, who, possessing property of this description, had also possessed the discrimination to perceive, in their nascent abilities, the germ and the promise of their future greatness. Pitt, Canning, Fox, Burke, not to have recourse to living examples—it was no popular representation which introduced them on the stage of public life, and enabled them to exhibit their great powers, whether for the benefit or the bane of mankind.

But though this cannot be denied, some will say, it is the very fault they wish to remedy. They lament the existence of such a power of sending men to Parliament on account of their talents—honesty is what they want. Well, and are the excellent potwallopers more likely to be nice upon this point, too, than the man of rank, of talent, and education? is there, in the first place, any test by which the honesty of a candidate can be fairly tried; and in the second, are not those generally found to prove most true to their principles, and, in other words, most politically honest, who, left to the direction of their own judgments, and the guidance of their own patriotism, are not subservient to the dictation of ignorant men, or the ungovernable caprices of a venal mob?

But perhaps the truth may be, that those who would deprive so large a mass of property as is possessed by peers, of any share in the return of members to the House of Commons, very little un-
derstand the nature of that form of government, which they are so ready to criticize; or that those who do understand it, really disapprove of its essential character, and desire to see something more in accordance with their own sentiments substituted in its place. At all events, there is a question, which they do not discuss, nor attempt to answer;—whether it be not by those very checks, which they call corruptions, and which reform, even moderate reform, seeks to remove, that the House of Commons has been prevented from encroaching, or rather from exercising, its natural dominion, and our mixed form of government been preserved to the present hour.* They never consider that the House of Commons is a part of the legislature; nor the effect which its re-construction would have on the kindred branches of government. Nor do they attempt to show that that omnipotence which they would confer on one portion of government, would not end in the annihilation of those other portions whose use had been already superseded.

No one who is acquainted with the state of public opinion, can be ignorant, that many who are reformers by name, are in heart republicans; and there can be as little question that on both sides of this great argument, are to be found men whose violence of opinion is in exact proportion to their total ignorance of all that relates to the science or

* See Hume's Essays, vol. i.
the practical working of the government under which they live. It is much easier to show what a thing is not, than what it ought to be. It is very easy to prove, by ten thousand arguments, that the House of Commons is not an actual representation of the people. The reformers have proved it over and over again; but never better, than in a celebrated petition presented to Parliament, in the year 1793, by a noble lord now high in his Majesty's councils, then an active and eloquent member of the lower House, and of opposition. But this might indeed have been granted without any proof at all. What they ought to have proved, and never have proved, and the proof of which, in the petition alluded to, is especially protested against, and the affirmative assumed, is, that the House of Commons ought to be an actual representation of the people. It is the commonest of all rhetorical fallacies to take that for granted on which the strength of the whole argument depends; and to assume as an admitted premise, that which should have been proved as a conclusion, is a very compendious mode of reasoning. It may be true, that some opponents of parliamentary reform have not been in the habit of denying this position, and putting their adversaries to the proof of it. If this has been the effect of any fear to state an unpopular truth, it is a circumstance much to be regretted, and deserving of very great censure: but it is one which does not alter the essential nature of the
question, nor debar any man from making his own opinion the guide of his conduct, in a subject in which all have a very deep interest, and all, who are not biassed by party motives, must desire to arrive at a correct judgment.

The grammatical import of the phrase "House of Commons" has misled many; they think that the term necessarily implies a representation of the numerical majority of the nation; (they might with the same accuracy of interpretation, think that it means an actual concourse of the whole people;) and the difference which they perceive between the literal meaning of words, and that which they are used to signify, obscures their judgment, and is a stumbling-block to their sense of propriety; but the name is of no importance; they should prove that the House of Commons ought to be that which the term primarily implies.

If any statesman of other times, (and he must be of other times, or he would not be an impartial witness,) of liberal opinions, and sound views of government, had been asked to give his opinion on the question of what was the best form of government, he would have described something as nearly like that, which is nominally established in this country, as his own limited knowledge would have suggested to his mind. He would have spoken of the three great principles of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy; and having weighed all, and found them wanting, he would have endeavoured
to build a system of his own, which, embracing the virtues of the three, should avoid their vices—nullumque ex iis unum esse optimum, sed id præstare singulis, quod e tribus primis esset modice temperatum;* but if he had then been asked, how long this mixed form of government would be likely to exist; how it would stand amidst the convulsions of states, and weather out the turbulence of the people; his tone of congratulation would have changed; and, having lamented the instability of human institutions, he would have predicted to this offspring of a beautiful theory, a brief existence and a violent end.† For he would have felt, that though nominally composed of three principles and three parts, the whole power of the government was in fact wielded by the people. That the representatives, elected by them and having the sole control of the money of the state, would of course be subservient to their will, and use this vast engine of political power for the promotion of their interests: that the monarchy and the peerage would soon be esteemed useless appendages; become objects of jealousy and dislike; and finally, be held unnatural encroachments on the people's rights. The supplies would be stopped—abdication, or unlimited concession to the people's will, must be the consequences, either equally destructive to the regal cause. But the case of the nobles is equally with-

* Cic. de Repub. 206.  † Tacitus.
out hope; they could not resist measures which a
whole nation was in arms to carry.* A partition of
lands and a proscription of titles appear to the for-
tunate inhabitants of this isle as wild and fanciful
apprehensions; and so they are; as long as wise
laws are not trampled on by mobs; but few who
consult history will maintain that titles would not
be objects of hatred to a legislative people, or that
a peerage would long survive the exhaustion of
that fountain from which its honours are derived.

That such would be the result of a state of go-
ernment in which an actual representation of the
people was established, many will deny; but the
denial will be unsupported by any semblance of an
argument: and will rest on the authority of no single
example in the whole history of the world; and it
is remarkable, and argues a consciousness of some
inherent danger in such a state of representation,
that none of the leading reformers of modern times
have dared to prove, that such a state of represen-
tation is required: nay more, that those who have
raised their courage to this point, and made a plain

* There is but one instance in English history of a House of
Commons which possessed this power; and it so happens, that
that House of Commons most decidedly used it. January the
30th, 1648, the "Lords desired a conference with the Commons,
about settling the government, and the administration of justice,
the judges' commissions being determined by the King's death.
The Commons, without answering the messenger, voted the Lords
to be useless and dangerous, and therefore to be abolished."

avowal of their plans and their principles, have as surely been cast aside, and disavowed, by the more respectable advocates of the same question; stigmatized as levellers and republicans, or derided as radicals. Which of these two parties may be more likely, by their different plans of operation, to afford scope for the future development of republican principles, is another question: that both have a tendency to establish direct and actual representation is clear, one avowedly, the other tacitly: and the opinion here attempted to be expressed, and which reasoning can alone remove, is that such a representation is inconsistent with the principles and the permanency of such a form of government as our own, and can only be supported by arguments which, however excellent in a republic, are good for nothing in a monarchy.

It will be said, that these are matters of opinion, founded on no certain experience, capable of no demonstration, and not even attempted to be distinctly and positively affirmed. And this is true; but is no objection either to their propriety or their usefulness. A valid objection, indeed, might be made, were the contrary the case. In politics as well as in other things, the ignorant are positive and dogmatical, and, in consequence, often prove the worst enemies of their own cause. But where knowledge is unattainable, inquiry is not always useless; and it can never be productive of mischief to raise difficulties and doubts, when, if they are
unsubstantial, they may be easily removed; if they are real, it is high time they were better understood.

But it would be well, in the mean time, that those moderate reformers who wish to preserve our monarchy and its hereditary peerage, should hear the voice and understand the sound deductions by which the consistent enemies of the constitution advocate reform, as the sure means of abolishing institutions which they dislike. It is a fact, perfectly notorious to all who are acquainted with the machinery by which this reform question is worked, that there are a great many able writers who, avowing, when questioned on the subject, their desire for a total change in the form of government, profess that they mean to use reform in Parliament as the sure instrument by which that change is to be effected. They say with equal plainness and with equal correctness of inference, that thinking a King and a House of Lords very useless and very expensive things, they also suppose that the readiest way to their destruction lies through the pleasant and alluring region of moderate reform: they know well enough that without the co-operation of the quiet, and peaceable, and respectable men, their efforts must be unavailing; and they know also, that this co-operation will be secured by the profession of moderate measures. Delusion and ignorance are the means; revolution is the completion of the work.
But as there are men who will not view this question in a large and comprehensive light, who cannot be persuaded that in considering reform in the House of Commons, they are bound to consider the effect that reform would have on the functions of the other branches of the legislature, and who, not attending to the examples of history and the suggestions of reason, expect to preserve a monarchical form of government and its kindred institutions, though the House of Commons shall be independent of both, and a mirror of the popular will; such persons must be left to compare their arguments and their mode of reasoning with the opposite inferences of the avowed republicans, always remembering that the question, "which of the two are the best logicians," may never be decided till all interest in the decision is at an end; and when, it is to be hoped, that the gratitude of one party for aid administered, will be at least equal to the consternation and too late conviction of their moderate allies.

But even supposing it possible that the uncontrolled representatives of the people would tolerate the interference of a King and a House of Peers, and that the constitutional power of three estates would survive through the mercy of that one by which their efficacy had been absorbed, the practical question with every impartial man must still be, What is the nation likely to gain by reform? And if that question be answered, as it must be,
by the reply, that it will gain a more popular representation, and a diminution of the influence of the crown; a second question immediately arises, namely, whether the representation ought to be more popular, and whether the influence of the crown ought to be diminished with a view to the measures and not the form of government.

No moderate man will venture to affirm, that the effect of public opinion over the councils of Parliament is not greater at the present moment than at any peaceable period of our history. But it may be admitted that this is not enough. It is necessary to go a step further: and it must either be proved, that the acts of the legislature, constituted as it is, have been so beneficial to the nation at large as not to justify the demand for change; or it must be shown in the second place, that the contemplated change would not be productive of increased good.

In estimating the benefits derived by a nation from the measures of its government, it is especially necessary to guard against the erroneous and mischievous idea, that laws which meet with the approbation of the people, are alone those by which their real interests are advanced. There is often no readier way of protecting their interests, than by opposing their prejudices. “Illum laudant literæ vestrae Patriæ rectorem qui populi utilitati magis consulat quam voluntati.”* Indeed, governments have been

* August ad Ciceronem.
established for no other good purpose, than to insures the happiness of those whom they govern, because they are supposed to be better judges of those measures by which that happiness may be promoted. Now, it will be a strong presumption in favour of an existing system of government, if it shall be found, through a series of years, to have secured to its subjects a great degree of comparative enjoyment; a quiet and secure possession of property; a pure and unsuspected administration of equal laws; a degree of personal liberty, and a power of rising by individual talent and exertion unequalled in any other country; and a national name and reputation founded on these things, as far beyond that of any other state, as its power transcends the amount of its population, and the extent of its territorial possessions. But though all this be true of the unreformed government of this country, and though the moderate reformers themselves are as zealous as any in their patriotic admiration of such things; yet they will say, that there is still a great deal to find fault with, much that might have been better; some useful measures carried, it is true, but carried after so much delay, as to lose half their value; and many more yet unattempted, which the present situation of the country most urgently demands. It would be very extraordinary if this were not the case; and reform will have done wonders indeed, when it shall have superseded the necessity of legislatorial vigilance, and
rendered improvement a hopeless speculation. But without demanding of the reformers to prove that which nevertheless is the fair inference from those premises which they have themselves assumed, (for if defects are an unanswerable argument for change, they should be ready to prove that their new system would be perfect, or else that which they propose to establish will, itself, be in need of change,) there is, without pushing them to this, a second question, which they are bound to answer, and if they cannot answer it in the affirmative, they are bound to yield, and that is, whether that House of Commons which they propose to form, would be more likely to insure the success of such measures as would prove beneficial to the country.

The most questionable part of the policy of this country for the last half century, has been the waging of wars, the contracting of debts, and the imposition of taxes; they are the acts of government most grievously complained of by all who would vilify the present system, and more than suspected by many who are sincerely attached to it. Now, as to debt and taxes, whatever may be their attendant evils; it is quite plain that the war could not have been carried on without the debt, nor the interest of the debt paid without the taxes: and for those who maintain the necessity of war to be offended at the debt, the cost of war, is the mere caprice of a child, who cries for those things which it has been
his pastime to destroy. But let it be granted for the sake of argument, that the wars of the last fifty years have been unnecessary; that the debt and taxes which those wars have entailed upon us are oppressive, and may, perhaps, prove ruinous to our very national existence. What then? *Would a reformed House of Commons have prevented those wars?* Would an actual representation of the people have been more likely to oppose the people's will?—and would the chosen representatives of a nation intent on war, have met together at Westminster, and breathed nothing but submission and peace? Such questions are closely applicable to the known facts of the case, and one answer is due to all. Whoever knows any thing of the history of this country, knows that wars are popular things: that they ever have been popular till they have been marked by failure; and that the moment when a minister has come down to Parliament, with the message of his sovereign on his lips, to announce that dread decision on which hang the lives of myriads, and the fate of nations, that very moment has been the one, in which he has least of all felt the want of support, either from the representatives of the people, or the people themselves. So far otherwise, it has been a signal at which men of all parties have laid by their former animosities to arm for the defence or the honour of their com-

* The affirmative is always assumed at a reform meeting, proof being neither suited to the time nor place.
mon country; the habitual leaders of opposition have been disarmed: of course there have been exceptions, but the general feeling cannot be mistaken; and the voice of the country has been unanimous and loud, to forget difficulties, to postpone considerations of the future, to fight out the battle, and care not for the cost. It is therefore a fond thing to imagine that reform would have averted war, or debt and taxes, the natural attendants on war. And those who sigh over the well-fought fields of Europe, and their brave countrymen who perished there, and lament the blood that has been shed, and the treasure that has been lavished, and think it all too dear a price to have paid for military glory and national independence, would do well at the same time to remember, that these wars were sanctioned by that popular voice which they delight to honour, and that measures in which they prophetically descry the destruction of public faith, and all the horrors of civil commotion, have met with the same approbation, and been demanded with the same unanimity of expression, as is now set forth as the unanswerable argument for a reform in the representation of the people.

But if wars would not have been averted, is there no good measure the success of which might have been impeded by reform? The conflicting opinions of men of probity and talent, and the feelings of triumph and disappointment which have scarce yet subsided, make it difficult to speak of the restora-
tion of the Catholics as an allowedly good measure; but doubtless the great body of the reformers in Parliament will admit that it deserves that character; but will they venture to assert that the Catholics would have been yet restored to an equality of privileges with their fellow citizens, if a reform, and a dissolution of Parliament, had preceded the discussion of their claims? *

It may, perhaps, be answered, that the success of a single good measure, carried on a bad principle, does not atone for systematic defects: that a powerful minister was enabled to do his country a service; but the very facility with which he conducted the operation proves the corruption of those who yielded to his will. The first fallacy here is in the word corruption: but influence beneficially exerted, is not altered by the name with which it may be branded. And secondly, if this might have been said a month ago, it can hardly be said now. Under the auspices of the same minister, a new Parliament assembles, elected of course in the same corrupt and unreformed manner as its predecessor: and what is the consequence? Why, in the very form and fashion of the popular will its very first act is to

* It was admitted by a noble lord, who has attained a kind of prescriptive right to bring forward this question in Parliament, that the Revolution of 1688 would never have been effected had the House of Commons of that day represented the opinion of the country.—Lord J. Russell's Speech in the House of Commons, April, 1822.
reject that very minister. The most perfect system of actual representation could have done no more. It is true that the measure which has been already mentioned, the restoration of the Catholics, by exciting the animosity of those who had been formerly attached to that minister, had induced them to join a party to whose principles they had been previously opposed; and that to this circumstance his defeat is mainly to be attributed. But whether the reasoning of such men be correct or not, is not the question, any more than whether the civil list was framed with a due attention to economy. The fact remains the same; the inference that a minister cannot control Parliament exists unshaken, and the independence of the House of Commons is not the less manifest because it may have been exercised on unreasonable grounds, or attended with most mischievous consequences.

But the phrase "independence of Parliament" is one of very dubious import. Independent of what? Of the crown and the minister? Most assuredly. But there is another kind of independence, which consists in not being subjected to popular clamour. Those who have watched the events of the last few months, may reasonably fear that this independence has been too lightly valued: that promises on particular questions before discussion savour more of local agency than of the deliberative duties of a member of parliament, and are as prejudicial to that high character as to the real interests of the
people; and if this be so, they will ask themselves, whether reform would not increase such things? And whether it would ever have attained its present progress, if those who should have been the counsellors of the state for the benefit of the people, had not found a ready way to gratify their private ambition by flattering the ignorance of their constituents.*

It does not appear then that reform would have been any remedy for those acts of government against which complaint is loudest; and it might have excited a civil war, by withholding a long-expected measure, and thereby exasperating a people peculiarly apt to be led into acts of violence by the instigation of turbulent and discontented men.

It is not extraordinary, that those who are forgetful of the past should be careless of the future. Very few of the moderate reformers have ever considered what it is they really mean, or what would be the probable legislative results of the measures which they advocate: they do not contemplate, in their ardour for a uniform and direct representation, that the natural consequence of their scheme is to leave the greater portion of the British empire without any representation at all. Do they forget our colonies? do they forget India? do they think them of too little importance for

* It would be painful to give examples, but they will occur to every one.
their care? or that distance will supply the place of legislation, and that that representative protection which is to be the sovereign remedy for the ills of England, would be powerless to benefit those whom the ocean and the desart have separated from our view? or have they given up thinking, because it is troublesome, and might interfere with that easy acquiescence in the leading article of their newspaper, which has hitherto saved them from so irksome an operation? The argument for reform is, that representation ought to be universal, at least as far as regards property. The effect of reform would be to leave the East and the West Indies unrepresented.

But to return to domestic affairs. There can be little doubt that the far greater number of the well-informed and respectable portion of the community are really attached to the venerable institutions of our church; it would be well that such duly considered the effect which reform in parliament might produce on their stability. The clamour which has been raised throughout the country on the subject of tithes, has been joined in by many, who, from their station and talent, should have been ashamed of misleading, or of being misled. But that clamour has not been without its effect; and that effect necessarily is to lessen the attachment which has long existed in the minds of the people to our excellent church. For to say that the church is not, in fact, attacked by those who labour to prove that
its subsistence is improperly extorted from the people, is what a plain man can scarcely comprehend. Now the object of reform in parliament is to give to these very enemies of the church a greater power than they now possess in the councils of the state. And that such an object, if attained, would be detrimental to the interests of the clergy, follows as a necessary consequence. There are certainly many consistent advocates of reform, who would esteem such a consequence as one of the best fruits of their success; as there are many others who will deny the tendency of reform to produce such consequences: but there are also many of the new converts to the reforming doctrines, who, having church property, or being attached to the establishment from conviction, must deprecate the possibility of such a result. Such, then, would do well to consider, whether in abandoning their former professions, the "vias antiquas" of their political faith, they are really able to give a good reason for their present opinions, or have acted with the caution due to their former character.

But if good churchmen should be induced by considerations of interest as well as duty, to look suspiciously at reform, let the fundholders be warned, by at least one of these motives, to take heed what they are doing. The argument for reform is, that the House of Commons does not represent the country; the object of reform is to get a House of Commons which shall. What consistent reformer
can say, that the country shall pay debts, which through the inadequacy of its representation, it never contracted to pay? Or that a reformed House of Commons shall entail upon its constituents the exactions of its corrupt predecessor? The very first principle upon which the delegated representatives of the people must act, would be to absolve the people from the fulfilment of contracts to which the people was no party. And however grievous the consequences of robbery and spoliation, in the language of a consistent reformer they would become stern virtues, and it would be only justice to undo that which had been unjustly done.

But after all, it is the duty of those who advocate change, to point out, and to make manifest the probability of those benefits which change is to effect. The burthen of proof is upon them: and that proof does not depend upon the existence of defects, but on a comparative estimate of the defects as they are, with those contingent amendments which futurity can alone discover. It would be well that the reformers were a little more explicit in stating what these amendments are. It is said that the object is not to innovate, but to restore. It would be well that the things to be restored were accurately set forth: that it was declared at what period, or in what reign, or even in what century, there existed that perfection of the representative system, which has perished through the folly, or the misfortune of succeeding ages. It could be
scarcely under the dynasty of the Tudors. The messages and imprisonings of Elizabeth are not very congenial to the modern notion of liberty of speech. Under which James, or which Charles? at the Protectorate, or after the Restoration? or must we descend to the days of a Godolphin, of a St. John, or a Walpole, for a plan by which to re-edify the ruins of the constitution?

It is idle to search for that which never existed; there never was a time in which influence and wealth, and royal power, had not a share in returning members to Parliament, at least equal to that which they now exercise. So far otherwise, that the very hopes of the reformers are raised, because that which they condemn is in fact diminished; and whenever the House of Commons consents to reform itself, it will be because the effect of aristocratic influence is already too weak to withstand popular clamour: it is not then a return to what we have lost, it is not reparation, it is not reform; it is a new system which the reformers would establish; disguise it how you will, it is revolution not restoration which they seek.

But restoration, it will be said, does not mean a return to any state of things which has actually existed in former times; but such a change as will restore the uniformity which time has itself impaired. Boroughs which have sunk into insignificance should return members no longer, and great towns which have grown up to opulence, should no
longer remain unrepresented.* This scheme is extremely popular with the most moderate reformers. Its object is either to confer a benefit on the great towns by giving them representatives, or to improve the character of the House of Commons by the admission of such men as they would elect. With regard to the first point it may be observed, that these towns have flourished and grown to that consequence which they now possess without representatives of their own, and that the boroughs have not been saved by their franchise from dilapidation and decay. But the second is the important consideration, and those who wish to see the House of Commons more popular than it is, are right in supporting such a measure. Others should remember, that if five large towns have the elective franchise conferred on them, the cause of reform will probably gain ten votes in the next parliament; that it will gain as much more additional support from the influential character and talents of such men as are likely to be elected, and that in truth, after such a concession, there would be no

* No better example could have been desired of the inefficiency of an extended franchise to prevent enormous and corrupt expense, and illustrate the plan of giving representatives to Birmingham, &c. than the late Liverpool election, in which it is said £70,000 has been expended. The principle is quite plain. It is true that it is more difficult to bribe a vast number; but towards the end of an election the votes rise in value; and a contest may be as effectually decided by buying ten or five, or even one vote at Manchester, as at East Retford.
good reason why any large town, or body of men in the country, should be without representatives, while a smaller one possessed them. But this is not all; suppose many boroughs have dwindled down to comparative insignificance, and that the popular responsibility of their representatives is gone. This is but a part of the question. The influence of popular opinion upon the whole House of Commons; not upon the members for certain boroughs, is the thing to be looked to, and that may not only not have diminished with the population of Old Sarum and Gatton, but may have actually increased, while those places have been sinking into decay. The inference, that because such and such inhabitants of a town once possessed the right of voting, it would be good for the country that they now had it restored to them, is so extraordinary, when used by men of education and reflecting minds, as to afford a lamentable opportunity for remarking the facility with which great learning and undoubted integrity of purpose may be used to sanction the projects of those, who, possessing neither, are delighted to pervert both. An historical account of corporations, and a learned disquisition on burgesses and freemen, are all very useful in their proper place; but they neither prove nor attempt to prove, that the restricted nature of the franchise has been the means of returning unfit representatives to Parliament, or that its extension
to the resident householders would promote the prosperity of the country.*

Are there, then, no flaws in the representative system of England, which wise and moderate men would both desire and attempt to remove? The first answer is, that the remedy must not be worse than the disease which it pretends to cure; and secondly, it may be reasonably suggested, that the most efficacious method of checking those abuses which do exist, and are the most offensive in the present system, would be by adopting a course the very opposite to that of the popular reformers. To raise franchises, not to extend the right of voting: to take that which is now in the hands of the low, the poor, and the ignorant, and give it to men of property, of education, and moral habits: to take it from those who value the right, because they can sell it to the highest bidder, the man who gives the best treat, the most drink, or the most money; and confer it on those who would despise bribery, and exercise their franchise with a desire to promote their country's good. And this is a

* See Mr. Serjeant Merewether's Address to King, Lords, and Commons, on the Representative Constitution of England; to which he has prefixed the motto, "Nolumus leges Anglice mutari;" but as the laws which are the subject of his admiration are not those now existing, but those of two hundred years ago, he should have changed "mutari" into "mutatas esse;" and used an expression of regret, not of volition.
view of the subject, to which the attention of those who are for restoring and perpetuating the designs of their ancestors, may surely be directed.

When the statute * passed, which restricts the right of election for counties to freeholders to the value of forty shillings, that forty shillings was worth fifty pounds at the present day; and the character and habits of its possessor were proportionably beyond that of the present voters for a county. The preamble is very remarkable: it is in these words, "Whereas the elections of knights of shires to come to the parliaments of our Lord the king in many counties of the realm of England, have now of late been made by very great, outrageous, and excessive numbers of people dwelling within the same counties of the realm of England, of the which most part was of people of small substance and of no value, whereof every of them pretended a voice equivalent as to such elections to be made, with the most worthy knights and esquires dwelling within the same counties, whereby manslaughters, riots, batteries, and divisions among the gentlemen, and other people of the same counties, shall very likely rise and be unless convenient and due remedy be provided in this behalf:" and it then goes on to provide that the knights shall be chosen by such as have free land or tenement to the value of forty shillings by the

* Henry VI. c. 7.
year at the least. But if this reasoning of the parliament be correct, the way now to return to former principles, to obviate the inconvenience of "outrageous and excessive numbers" of people of small substance pretending a voice equivalent as to such elections with most worthy esquires, to prevent batteries and divisions among the gentlemen and others, would be to extend the limitation to all such as did not possess land to the value of fifty pounds. This would be a consistent line of argument for the friends of restoration, and would meet two of the weightiest objections to the present system, which are bribery and expense.*

But as it is not here pretended to provide remedies, but to examine those which have been furnished by others, these things may pass. The grand question after all is, whether it be expedient for the nation that its legislature should be a more immediate expression of the people's will. And on this point there will probably always exist, as there ever has existed, a difference of opinion, not dependent on argument, nor reconcileable by reason, but inherent in the diversity of dispositions which nature

* Such a plan would probably diminish the expense of a contest for a large county at least one half. Whether, at the same time, it may not diminish the influence of property to a dangerous degree, by giving the franchise to those who would act independently of the great landed gentry, is another question. At all events it would not be very popular at a county hustings.
has implanted in the breasts of men; in constitutional feelings, and habitual prejudices, inscrutable in their origin, undefinable in their extent, irresistible in their operation. It is by the balance of these great conflicting principles that the peace of free states is preserved; and the predominance of either is as destructive to liberty, as the rapid growth of one is hostile to legitimate rule.

But there is a wise, though homely maxim, "that it is good to leave well alone;" and none have better reason to follow so approved a rule, than the physicians of the body politic, whose patient is the constitution of their country. If in the House of Commons, constituted as it is, any wise and good measure, brought forward in an intelligible manner, is sure to make its way, to prevail against the force of prejudice and interest, and eventually to become law for the good of those whom the laws govern: then the House of Commons constituted as it is does answer all the purposes of good government, and it is wise to leave well alone. But further; if it be not proved by the reformers that the House of Commons which they mean to establish, would do the work of legislation better than that which they mean to subvert, that it would be more watchful of the honour and interests of the nation, and, without overthrowing the monarchy, be more laborious in seeking out the people's good, unless these things be all proved, it is still well to avoid the risk of change, and it is
wise to leave well alone. Now that which has been here put as the hypothetical character of the present House of Commons, is true; and that proof of consequent advantage which is the only justification of change, is not forthcoming.

But some one will surely say that the time for choice has passed by: that it is idle to discuss the question of whether our form of government is sufficiently popular, when a whole people deny the fact; and that the only mode by which much of our present institutions can be preserved, is by timely concessions to the will of the people; and that this is, above all, demanded by the growth of intelligence, and the increase of knowledge. Such a statement is inconsiderate and rash; and the inference attempted to be drawn from it is illogical.

It will be an idle task, indeed, to discuss questions of government, when the will of the people is to control the decision. It will be idle, for this plain reason, that all which it is said may be preserved by concession, will, in truth, be already lost; and such a state of things will only differ from a pure democracy, in possessing all the evils of that form, without its name and without its purity.

When a pragmatical orator told a great Athenian that the people would tear him in pieces whenever they were in a rage; “Yes,” replied he, “and they will do the same by you when they are in their senses.” *

* The story is mentioned by Swift, perhaps nearly in these
the other is equally sudden and unreasonable, but by no means unaccountable: for the same principle has been in operation in all times, and in all countries, where liberty has not been quite extinguished; and the same course has been invariably adopted, first to inflame and mislead the people, and then to appeal to their decision. The fallacy in the present case, however, is this, that their decision in favour of one thing is made an argument in favour of another. The vote of a public meeting for universal suffrage is used as an argument for conferring the elective franchise on the householders of Birmingham; and because a Middlesex mob compel their representative to support vote by ballot, the whole country is declared to be in favour of moderate reform.

The argument founded on the growth of knowledge is equally fallacious: it is a begging of the whole question, by assuming the very point in dispute. Increased knowledge will, of course, enable a nation to form a more correct estimate of such things as are for its advantage. The question is, whether reform be one of those. He, therefore, who urges its necessity from the growth of knowledge, assumes the affirmative, which he ought to prove. That knowledge is increasing there can

words.—How far they have been prevented from indulging this propensity, by the control which an unreformed parliament exercises over the democratic principle in this country, the experiment of reform will alone enable us to determine.
be as little doubt, as that it owes its flourishing condition at the present day most chiefly to the exertions of one yet among us, and whose labours in this great cause will confer on him a name as imperishable as that of any other benefactor of mankind. But the degree of the increase of knowledge is the important point; and that is a matter which exists more in speculation than in proof; and often shows itself more in a desire to expatiate beyond its proper sphere, than to work and labour in the pursuit of solid good. We are too apt to felicitate ourselves on our superiority to our forefathers, and on the improvement which we imagine time is effecting in the intellectual condition of the world.

"ημεὶς τοι πατέρων μεγ' ἀμείνονες ἐνχωμῆ' ἐως."*

The increase of knowledge is indeed a noble subject for congratulation, and the proudest distinction which a nation can boast. But before knowledge has attained that point at which it can deal profitably with questions of government, it must have passed those stages at which it is peculiarly liable to be perverted and led astray. It must have examined its own proficiency, and armed itself against the seductions of popular eloquence; and before it pretends to lead others, be quite sure that it is not itself conducted by a flattering process, and a pleasing chain, through regions

* II. 4.
whose ways are unexplored, and whose paths are beset with danger.

I heard it remarked, by one of the most learned men, and most acute reasoners, of the present age, that barbarism was the probable result of the too rapid growth of popular opinions; nor is it at all paradoxical to say, that this result may be hastened by the increase of some kind of learning among the people; because, though not so well educated as the higher orders, the little knowledge they have acquired, *added to the power of numbers*, and used as a successful argument for extending their political privileges, may give them the upper hand over those superior grades of society which are naturally the objects of their envy, but whose existence is essential to refinement of manners, the cultivation of science, and all the higher enjoyments of civilized life.

But however this may be, what, in the present state of knowledge, is a public meeting assembled to petition for reform? Are the numbers who attend it more likely to form a correct judgment for themselves, or to be the dupes of others? It is an assemblage of persons, some suffering from distress; some violent; many idle; many vain and ambitious; all met together at the beck of one who desires to enforce his own opinion by the sanction of their vote; all previously determined to agree to a particular statement of their grievances, which are, in truth, as various as their persons; and all
ready to confide the care of them to one of whom they know little more than the colour of his clothes, and the loudness of his voice. Is this a place for calm discussion? Or are such scenes to be brought forward as grave authorities to guide the deliberations of a senate? One thing cannot be denied: they are at least no authorities for moderate reform. The meetings which have been held in various places afford the fullest proof, that that which the moderate reformers desire to concede, is a very different thing from that which the people demand. Do these moderate men appeal to the voice of the country? let them know what the voice of the country is, if it is to be collected from these meetings—*it is for annual Parliaments and universal suffrage, and vote by ballot*—it is plain, and honest, and consistent; but it is a course worthy of neither of these epithets, to distort it into an argument for something of a totally different character, and which any clever mob-orator would successfully expose and triumph over at any hustings in England.* It may be an unpleasant truth, but true it is, that wherever at a popular meeting resolutions have been adopted in support of the mode-

* See the excellent speech of a Mr. Prent'ce at Birmingham, in which he very ably ridicules the idea of any franchise on reforming principles short of universal suffrage. I do not remember that, at any reform meeting within the last few months, there have been more than six hands held up against the ballot---of course always excepting the gentlemen.
rate reformers, they owe their adoption to the tender consideration of the honourable member for Preston, who, by staying away, saved their sport from being spoiled. The result then is this—not only is the voice of the people an insufficient argument in favour of any measure which it demands; but, in this present instance, the voice of the people does not demand that for which its demand; falsely assumed, is cited as an argument.

But the argument of a reformer is this—evil exists, therefore the legislature must be changed; forgetting that what he ought to prove is, that the change which he proposes would remove the evil.

It is thus, that however loud men may be in their denunciations of outrage, and the violation of property; yet some will use these very things as an argument for immediate alterations of government, will talk of winning men by kindness, or of driving them to despair, and will discover, in the atrocity of incendiaries, and the destruction of machinery, *

* With regard to the fires, it is most likely that they have been the work of some vile gamblers in the public securities. And as to the mobs, they have, in every instance, been suppressed wherever a firm spirit has existed among the magistrates and clergy. Of this there have been some notable instances among the latter, as honourable to those worthy men, as the weak and mischievous concessions of others, who should have known better, have been disgraceful. Where tithes and rents are too high, they should be reduced, when quiet has been restored. But with respect to tithes, it may be observed that they seldom are too high, because the occupier of the land has his own remedy. These are subjects
fresh proofs of the unsoundness of our system, and fresh arguments for reform. That the imperfection of law is proved by every transgression of its enactments, is clear: that the way to restore order is to proclaim the viciousness of the legislature, may reasonably be doubted. Concessions extorted by fear are victories gained, not benefits conferred. And that will be an inauspicious day for the constitution and the liberties of England, which shall witness an admission on the part of her parliament of its inability to quell violence and protect property. Distresses among portions of the people, and occasional acts of violence, are evils which will occur, and which men of all parties should use their best exertions to assuage; but they afford the least fit opportunity for meddling with the foundations of a system; for commencing a work which, of all others, requires the most circumspect mode of operation, the coolest head, and the steadiest hand, the least possible excitement either of fear or of any other passion. And if, in other times, foreign commotions have afforded a sound reason for postponing on which the darkest ignorance prevails; and on which men of excellent intentions are often committing the grossest blunders by a total disregard of first principles. And those must have an extraordinary notion of the duties of a justice of the peace, who think that the peace will be permanently preserved, by ordering a violent mob an increased allowance from the Poor Rates; or that by any regulations of theirs they can compel men to give two shillings for that labour which they can get done for one.
the consideration of such questions, as they have been urged in argument by some, and admitted by others, friends to the principles of reform; much more should domestic violence be a cause for refusing to yield to the transitory impulse of alarm, what can be only due to the most consummate deliberation. Nor is this a contention for a mere point of honour, but for the very virtual existence of all government and all law. That there exists in this country the power, and the will, if properly directed, to uphold both, no sensible man can doubt; but he must declare, with the same freedom from hesitation, that when they become subservient to the dictation of temporary fear, their practical usefulness is suspended, if not destroyed.*

Reform in Parliament is not only no cure for the evils of the country; but its agitation is a means of diverting men's minds from the consideration of measures which may prove really beneficial. It is not easy to perceive how the labourers of Hampshire or Kent would get better wages, and be better fed and clothed, because the manufacturers of Birmingham enjoyed the privilege of radical representation. But the work of legislation is difficult and thankless, while it is easy to obtain popularity by flattering a multitude; and the opportunity thus afforded of reaching

* See the excellent and eloquent charge of a learned judge, to the grand jury of Dorset, on the late special commissions, published in the Times Newspaper of January.
at evanescent honours, is too sweet to be thrown away by men, to whom the attainment of their object is every thing, and whose principles are weaker than their ambition. And thus it happens, that those who should deliberate gravely, and act upon conviction, yield up their judgment to others who are either ignorant of facts, opposed to the principles of government, or reckless of consequences. But it is the vice of little minds not to seek for truth, and pursue her whithersoever she may lead them, nor to give themselves up to the guidance of reason, in their search for knowledge: theirs is the easier task, to follow in the beaten track of popular opinions, and to believe, without examination, the visions by which their fears have been excited, and the tales with which their fancies are allure.

There is a moral conflict in the world between the two principles of monarchy and the popular will. We have seen its signs in other countries; and they have been used as the means of creating excitement and discontent among ourselves. True it is that the enemies of monarchy here do not openly attack either the Throne or the Upper House of Parliament; they are too wise to expose designs, whose success depends on the covert mode in which the work is carried on. They know that when they have a House of Commons which shall represent their opinions, then will be the time for open operations, and for doing that by law which
would now be treason.* Let those, then, who are prepared to admire the personification of standing armies in a national guard, and the mockery of regal power in the unsubstantial pageant of a citizen king, adopt such measures as the laws allow them for the furtherance of their unhallowed ends; but let them, in the name of good taste and English feeling, abstain from insulting their country by absurd and odious comparisons; and let them be told that the examples of other states, in which resistance to the popular will has brought on struggles, in which liberty has asserted her rights and been victorious, are totally inapplicable to the present question, as they have arisen out of a state of things totally different from that which exists in this country; and could never have been used as examples at all, but by men who are either ignorant of the facts on which such inferences must truly depend, or desirous to mislead the unwary by the powerful instruments of misrepresentation and concealment. And those who are not of the latter most wicked denomination, either forget, or haply have never known, that the struggle in neighbouring states, of which they hear the murmur, has here been already fought; that the liberty, which they dream of, has here been already victorious; that the cause in which the people of other nations have armed, has been for the very right, which they are ever loudly exercising, of complaining of

* See Mr. O'Connell's speech after his arrest.
their imaginary as well as their real wrongs; that the liberty of the press, which others have bled to vindicate, is here established by law; and that men may speak, and write, and print, with no other restraint than that which, being a great principle of English jurisprudence, is itself a protection of personal liberty, and in strict accordance with moral justice, that men must so exercise their own rights as not to violate those of others. And that these blessings of genuine freedom which they undervalue, because they have never known their want, born in the dark and stormy morning of our history, owe their growth, their perfection, their preservation, and their safety, to the unreformed Parliament of England. But liberty, ever seeking to extend her dominions, is too apt to overlook those possessions which she has long enjoyed; to omit the account of past gains in her ardour for greater acquisitions; to miscalculate the chances of success and failure; to forget how much may be sacrificed for how small a return, how little gained at how great a cost. And while it must ever be admitted, that it is by these struggles to increase her borders, that she has been enabled to keep her ground; yet it must also be remembered, that it has been by a vigorous opposition to her disorderly sallies that she has been alone prevented from becoming a curse instead of a blessing to the nations; and from finally abandoning her fair possessions, and descending from her beautiful throne,
to seize a sceptre of a dubious and a fickle rule, an instrument of the cruelest oppression and most tyrannical sway, polluted by the blood of its subjects, disgraced by the insecurity of its tenure, condemned by all history, all experience, all wise and good men.

The highest possible stretch of human intellect cannot divine with what rapidity of movement democratic principles may proceed: but the humblest can perceive with certainty, that every concession by which they are advanced, is a stepping-stone to their further progress: and that it is perilous to touch a political fabric, of complicated parts and intricate construction, which may be as much exposed to ruin by the incautious attempts of those who would repair it, as by the slow and invisible operations of age. And let the rulers of the land remember, that the soft breath of suspicion emanating from a quarter of authority, may be as the blast which hurls it to destruction.

But it is, after all, by the exertions of the gentlemen of England, that the constitution of their country may be defended, and their honour is committed in this great cause. Let them not deceive themselves. The cause of monarchy is their own; it is theirs from the king who is their head, and the chief gentleman in the land, down to the humblest of his subjects, who in this free country, and by means of those free institutions which are now traduced, may have
raised himself by his own talents, and the prosecution of great objects by honourable means, to the same consideration and the same rank as the highest birth can boast, or the noblest pedigree can furnish. The ascendancy of popular opinions is not more subversive of the institutions of the state, than it is destructive of the fair boundaries of civil society, the distinctions of birth property and education; the generous feelings which time has sanctioned, and which reason in her coolest moments dares not to despise; all that is chivalrous in name, all that is honourable in reputation; the security for all these things, of which the acquirement is difficult, and the possession dear, is to be found, and found alone, in the aristocratic character of the parliament. This is the nuisance which the reformers would abate, because it is the bulwark of privileges which they envy.

It is true, that there are men amongst them high honourable and patriotic, and who have not these ends in view: but they have, by a concurrence of events, been long excluded from the fair objects of their ambition, and taught by that exclusion to lean upon the people for support; let them take heed that the prop which has sustained them be not used as the instrument of their own destruction. They cannot carry on the government of England on the principles by which that government has been systematically opposed, and it is their duty to make personal considerations give way to the pub-
lic good; they cannot administer the affairs of a monarchy on the principles of a republic, they cannot be the servants of the people’s will, and the ministers of a great king.

But unless the gentlemen of England will tell them these truths, and make their voice heard in opposition to the clamour of mobs, and the virulent denunciations and base threats of a time-serving but powerful press, the day may yet come when repentance will be unavailing, and submission the only safety. When those who now sit at home, and if not at ease, yet refrain from any expression of their apprehensions, and give up the field to their noisy adversaries, will feel, *when it is too late*, the unhappy consequences of their former inactivity and curse that want of moral vigour, that unfortunate imbecility of purpose, that supineness of spirit, which not from any unavoidable fatality of circumstances, but from their own too fatal love of ease, has surrendered those things by which ease had honour, and made them the passive victims of men wiser indeed in their generation, but triumphant because unopposed. *It will be then “too late” to lament for the blessings of the constitution; for its freedom, for its peacefulness! it is not “too late” now to defend and to preserve them.* The voice of a despairing friend may prove as dangerous as the exultings of an open enemy, and is often the emanation of some faint heart, which would surrender all the privileges of order, and gentle
birth, and generous sentiment, to the tender mercies of a democratic legislature, giving up without a struggle, that which it wants the courage to defend, the understanding to appreciate, or the patriotism to love.

"O quisquis volet impias
Cœdes, aut rabiem tollere civicam;
Si quaeret pater urbium
Subscribi statuis, indomitam audeat
Refrænare licentiam."

But though despair be no less unreasonable than mischievous, there is at least abundant ground for caution and for warning. The object with which these pages have been written, has been to direct the attention of moderate and reasonable men, to whom the interests of England are still dear, to subjects which seem to be regarded with a degree of apathy by no means suited to their real importance. And should the fear that a more popular House of Commons would destroy the balance of our government, and endanger the peace of society, ever be confirmed by a too sad experience, it will be required of those who have effected the change to prove, that the things which they have achieved are better than those which have been lost, and that Reform in Parliament has been a benefit to the country.

THE END.

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