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Anti-Slavery: Trades Unions: the Chartists: the Anti-Corn Law League

The Anti-Slavery Association

Such were the failures of two great combinations, respectively representing the Catholics and Protestants of Ireland, and their ancient feuds. While they were in dangerous conflict, another movement,—essentially differing from these in the sentiments from which it sprang, and the means by which it was forwarded,—was brought to a successful issue. In 1833 the generous labours of the Anti-Slavery Association were consummated. The venerable leaders of the movement which had condemned the slave-trade,(1) together with Mr. Fowell Buxton, and other younger associates, had revived the same agency, for attaining the abolition of slavery itself. Again were the moral and religious feelings of the people successfully appealed to: again did the press, the pulpit, the platform,—petitions, addresses, and debates, stimulate and instruct the people. Again was public opinion persuaded and convinced; and again a noble cause was won, without violence, menace, or dictation.

Trade Unions—the Tolpuddle Martyrs

Let us now turn to other combinations of this period, formed by working men alone, with scarcely a leader from another class. In [405] 1834, the trades' unions which had hitherto restricted their action to matters affecting the interests of operatives and their employers, were suddenly impelled to a strong political demonstration. Six labourers had been tried at Dorchester for administering unlawful oaths, and were sentenced to transportation.(2) The unionists were persuaded that these men had been punished as an example to themselves: they had administered similar oaths, and were amenable to the same terrible law. Their leaders, therefore, resolved to demand the recall of the Dorchester labourers; and to support their representations by an exhibition of physical force. A petition to the king was accordingly prepared; and a meeting of trades' unions was summoned to assemble at Copenhagen Fields on the 21st of April, and escort a deputation, by whom it was to be presented, to the Home Office. About 30,000 men assembled on that day, marshalled in their respective unions, and bearing emblems of their several trades. After the meeting, they formed a procession and marched, in orderly array, past Whitehall, to Kennington Common, while the deputation was left to its mission, at the Home Office. The leaders hoped to overawe the government by their numbers and union: but were quickly undeceived. The deputation presented themselves at the Home Office, and solicited the interview which Lord Melbourne had appointed: [406] but they were met by Mr. Phillips, the under-secretary, and acquainted that Lord Melbourne could not receive the petition presented in such a manner, nor admit them to his presence, attended, as they were, by 30,000 men. They retired, humbled and crestfallen,—and half afraid to announce their discomfiture at Kennington: they had failed in their mission, by reason of the very demonstration upon which they had rested their hopes of success.

Meanwhile the procession passed onwards, without disturbance. The people gazed upon them as they passed, with mingled feelings of interest and pity, but with little apprehension. The streets were quiet: there were no signs of preparation to quell disorder: not a soldier was to be seen: even the police were in the background. Yet, during the previous night, the metropolis had been prepared as for a siege. The streets were commanded by unseen artillery: the barracks and public offices were filled with soldiers under arms: large numbers of police and

special constables were close at hand. Riot and outrage could have been crushed at a blow—but neither sight nor sound was there, to betray distrust of the people, or provoke them to a collision with authority. To a government thus prepared, numbers were no menace: they were peaceable, and were unmolested. The vast assemblage dispersed; and a few days afterwards, a deputation, with the petition, was courteously received by Lord Melbourne.(3) It was a noble example of moderation and firmness on [407] the part of the executive,—worthy of imitation in all times.

Chartism

Soon after these events, a wider combination of working men was commenced,—the history of which is pregnant with political instruction. The origin of Chartism was due to distress and social discontents, rather than to political causes. Operatives were jealous of their employers, and discontented with their wages, and the high price of food; and between 1835 and 1839, many were working short time in the factories, or were wholly out of employment. The recent introduction of the new poor law was also represented as an aggravation of their wrongs. Their discontents were fomented, but their distresses not alleviated, by trades' unions.

In 1838, they held vast torch-light meetings throughout Lancashire. They were addressed in language of frantic violence: they were known to be collecting arms: factories were burned: tumults and insurrection were threatened. In November, the government desired the magistrates to give notice of the illegality of such meetings, and of their intention to prevent them; and in December, a proclamation was issued for that purpose.

Hitherto the Chartists had been little better than the Luddites of a former period. Whatever their political objects, they were obscured by turbulence and a wild spirit of [408] discontent,—to which hatred of capitalists seemed to be the chief incitement. But in 1838, the 'People's Charter' was agreed upon; and a national petition read at numerous meetings, in support of it. Early in 1839, a national convention of delegates from the working classes was established in London, whose views were explained in the monster national petition, signed by 1,280,000 persons, and presented to the House of Commons on the 14th of June. It prayed for universal suffrage, vote by ballot, annual parliaments, the payment of members, and the abolition of their property qualification,—such being the five points of the people's charter. The members of the convention deprecated appeals to physical force; and separated themselves, as far as possible, from those turbulent chartists who had preached, and sometimes even practised, a different doctrine. The petition was discussed with temper and moderation: but certainly with no signs of submission to the numbers and organisation of the petitioners.(4)

Chartist Riots

While the political section of Chartists were appealing to Parliament for democratic reform, their lawless associates, in the country, were making the name of Chartists hateful to all classes of society. There were Chartist riots at Birmingham, at Sheffield, at Newcastle: contributions were extorted from house to house by threats [409] and violence: the services of the church were invaded by the intrusion of large bodies of Chartists. At some of their meetings, the proceedings bore a remarkable resemblance to those of 1819. At a great meeting at Kersal Moor, near Manchester, there were several female associations; and in imitation of the election of legislatorial attorneys, Chartists were desired to attend every election: when the members returned by show of hands, being the true representatives of the people, would meet in London at a time to be appointed. Thousands of armed men attacked the town of Newport: but were repulsed with loss by the spirit of Mr. Phillipps, the mayor, and his brother magistrates, and the well-directed fire of a small file of troops. Three of their leaders, Frost, Williams, and Jones, were tried and transported for their share in this rebellious outrage. Such excesses were clearly due to social disorganisation among the operatives,—to be met by commercial and social remedies,—rather than to political discontents,—to be cured by

constitutional changes; but being associated with political agitation, they disgraced a cause which,—even if unstained by crimes and outrage,—would have been utterly hopeless.

The Chartists occupied the position of the democrats and radical reformers of 1793, 1817, and 1819. Prior to 1830, reformers among the working classes had always demanded universal suffrage and annual parliaments. No scheme less comprehensive embraced their own [410] claims to a share in the government of the country. But measures so democratic having been repudiated by the Whig party and the middle classes, the cause of reform had languished.(5) In 1830 the working classes, powerless alone, had formed an alliance with the reform party and the middle classes; and, waiving their own claims, had contributed to the passing of a measure which enfranchised every class but themselves.(6) Now they were again alone in their agitation. Their numbers were greater, their knowledge advanced, and their organisation more extended: but their hopes of forcing democracy upon Parliament were not less desperate. Their predecessors in the cause had been met by repression and coercion. Free from such restraints, the Chartists had to encounter the moral force of public opinion, and the strength of a Parliament resting upon a wider basis of representation, and popular confidence.

The Crisis of 1848

This agitation, however hopeless, was continued for several years; and in 1848, the Revolution in France inspired the Chartists with new life. Relying upon the public excitement, and their own numbers, they now hoped to extort from the fears of Parliament, what they had failed to obtain from its sympathies. A meeting was accordingly summoned to assemble on the 10th of April, at Kennington Common, and carry a Chartist petition, pretending to bear the signatures of 5,000,000 persons, to the very doors of the House of Commons. The Chartist leaders seemed to have [411] forgotten the discomfiture of the trades' unions in 1835: but the government, profiting by the experience of that memorable occasion, prepared to protect Parliament from intimidation, and the public peace from disturbance.

On the 6th, a notice was issued declaring the proposed meeting criminal and illegal,—as tending to excite terror and alarm; and the intention of repairing to Parliament, on pretence of presenting a petition, with excessive numbers, unlawful,—and calling upon well-disposed persons not to attend. At the same time, it was announced that the constitutional right of meeting to petition, and of presenting the petition, would be respected.

On the 10th, the bridges, the Bank, the Tower, and the neighbourhood of Kennington Common, were guarded by horse, foot, and artillery. Westminster Bridge, and the streets and approaches to the Houses of Parliament and public offices, were commanded by unseen ordnance. An overpowering military force,—vigilant, yet out of sight,—was ready for immediate action. The Houses of Parliament were filled with police; and the streets guarded by 170,000 special constables. The assembling of this latter force was the noblest example of the strength of a constitutional government, to be found in history. The maintenance of peace and order was confided to the people themselves. All classes of society vied with one another [412] in loyalty and courage. Nobles and gentlemen of fashion, lawyers, merchants, scholars, clergymen, tradesmen, and operatives, hastened together to be sworn, and claim the privilege of bearing the constable's staff, on this day of peril. The Chartists found themselves opposed not to their rulers only, but to the vast moral and material force of English society. They might, indeed, be guilty of outrage: but intimidation was beyond their power.

The Chartists, proceeding from various parts of the town, at length assembled at Kennington Common. A body of 150,000 men had been expected: not more than 25,000 attended, to whom may be added about 10,000 spectators, attracted by curiosity. Mr. Feargus O'Connor, their leader, being summoned to confer with Mr. Mayne, the Police Commissioner, was informed that the meeting would not be interfered with, if Mr. O'Connor would engage for its peaceable character: but that the procession to Westminster would be prevented by force. The

disconcerted Chartists found all their proceedings a mockery. The meeting, having been assembled for the sake of the procession, was now without an object, and soon broke up in confusion. To attempt a procession was wholly out of the question. The Chartists were on the wrong side of the river, and completely entrapped. Even the departing crowds were intercepted and dispersed on their arrival at the bridges, so as to prevent a dangerous re-union on the other side. Torrents of rain opportunely completed their dispersion; and in the afternoon the streets were [413] deserted. Not a trace was left of the recent excitement.(7)

Discomfiture pursued this petition, even into the House of Commons. It was numerously signed, beyond all example: but Mr. O'Connor, in presenting it, affirmed that it bore 5,706,000 signatures. A few days afterwards, the real number was ascertained to be 1,900,000, —of which many were in the same handwriting, and others fictitious, jocose, and impertinent. The vast numbers who had signed this petition, earnestly and in good faith, entitled it to respect: but the exaggeration, levity, and carelessness of its promoters brought upon it discredit and ridicule.(8) The failure of the Chartist agitation was another example of the hopelessness of a cause not supported by a parliamentary party,—by enlightened opinion,— and by the co-operation of several classes of society.

The Anti-Corn-Law League

The last political agitation which remains to be described was essentially different in its objects, incidents, character, and result. The 'Anti-Corn-Law League' affords the most remarkable example in our history, of a great cause won against powerful interests and prejudice, by the overpowering force of reason and public opinion. When the League was formed in 1838, both Houses of Parliament, the first statesmen of all parties, and the landlords and farmers throughout the country, [414] firmly upheld the protective duties upon corn; while merchants, manufacturers, traders, and the inhabitants of towns, were generally indifferent to the cause of free trade. The parliamentary advocates of free trade in corn, led by Mr. Poulett Thomson and Mr. Charles Villiers, had already exhausted the resources of political science, in support and illustration of this measure. Their party was respectable in numbers, in talent, and political influence; and was slowly gathering strength. It was supported, in the country, by many political philosophers, by thoughtful writers in the press, and by a few farseeing merchants and manufacturers: but the impulse of a popular movement, and public conviction, was wanting. This it became the mission of the Anti-Corn-Law League to create.

This association at once seized upon all the means by which, in a free country, public opinion may be acted upon. Free-trade newspapers, pamphlets, and tracts were circulated with extraordinary industry and perseverance. The leaders of the League, and, above all, Mr. Cobden, addressed meetings, in every part of the country, in language calculated at once to instruct the public mind in the true principles of free trade, and to impress upon the people the vital importance of those principles to the interests of the whole community. Delegates, from all parts of England, were assembled at Westminster, Manchester, and elsewhere, who conferred with ministers, and members of Parliament. [415] In 1842, they numbered nearly 1,600. In London, Drury Lane and Covent Garden theatres were borrowed from the drama, and converted into arenas for political discussion, where crowded audiences listened with earnest, and often passionate, attention, to the stirring oratory of the corn-law repealers. In country towns, these intrepid advocates even undertook to convert farmers to the doctrines of free trade; and were ready to break a lance with all comers, in the town-hall or corn exchange. The whole country was awakened by the masterly logic and illustration of Mr. Cobden, and the vigorous eloquence of Mr. Bright. Religion was pressed into the service of this wide-spread agitation. Conferences of ministers were held at Manchester, Carnarvon, and Edinburgh, where the corn laws were denounced as sinful restraints upon the bounty of the Almighty; and the clergy of all denominations were exhorted to use the persuasions of the

pulpit, and every influence of their sacred calling, in the cause. Even the sympathies of the fair sex were enlisted in the agitation, by the gaieties and excitement of free-trade bazaars. Large subscriptions were raised, which enabled the League to support a numerous staff of agents, who everywhere collected and disseminated information upon the operation of the corn laws; and encouraged the preparation of petitions.

By these means public opinion was rapidly instructed, and won over to the cause of free trade in corn. But Parliament and the constituencies were [416] still to be overcome. Parliament was addressed in petitions from nearly every parish; and nothing was left undone, that debates and divisions could accomplish within its walls. The constituencies were appealed to, at every election, on behalf of free-trade candidates: the registration was diligently watched; and no pains were spared to add free-trade voters to the register. Nor did the League stop here: but finding that, with all their efforts, the constituencies were still opposed to them, they resorted to an extensive creation of votes by means of 40s. freeholds, purchased by the working classes.

Never had political organisation been so complete. The circumstances of the time favoured its efforts; and in 1846, the protective corn law,—with which the most powerful interests in the state were connected,—was unconditionally, and for ever abandoned. There had been great pressure from without, but no turbulence. Strong feelings had been aroused in the exciting struggle: landlords had been denounced: class exasperated against class: Parliament approached in a spirit of dictation. Impetuous orators, heated in the cause, had breathed words of fire: promises of cheap bread to hungry men, and complaints that it was denied them, were full of peril: but this vast organisation was never discredited by acts of violence or lawlessness. The leaders had triumphed in a great popular cause, without the least taint of sedition.

[417] This movement had enjoyed every condition of success. The cause itself appealed alike to the reason and judgment of thinking men, and to the interests and passions of the multitude: it had the essential basis of Parliamentary support; and it united, for a common object, the employers of labour and the working classes. The latter condition mainly ensured its success. Manufacturers foresaw, in free trade, an indefinite extension of the productive energies of the country; operatives hoped for cheap bread, higher wages, and more constant employment. These two classes, while suffering from the commercial stagnation of past years, had been estranged and hostile. Trades' unions and chartism had widened the breach between them: but they now worked heartily together, in advancing a measure which promised advantage to them all.

The history of the League yet furnishes another lesson. It was permitted to survive its triumph; (9) and such is the love of freedom which animates Englishmen, that no sooner had its mission been accomplished, than men who had laboured with it, became jealous of its power, and dreaded its dictation. Its influence rapidly declined; and at length it became unpopular, even in its own strongholds.

Review of Political Agitation

In reviewing the history of political agitation, we cannot be blind to the perils which have sometimes threatened the state. We have observed fierce antagonism between the people and their rulers,—evil passions and turbulence,—class divided against class,—associations overbearing the [418] councils of Parliament,—and large bodies of subjects exalting themselves into the very seat of government. Such have been the storms of the political atmosphere, which, in a free state, alternate with the calms and light breezes of public opinion; and statesmen have learned to calculate their force and direction. There have been fears and dangers: but popular discontents have been dissipated; wrongs have been redressed; and public liberties established, without revolution: while popular violence and intimidation

have been overborne, by the combined force of government and society. And what have been the results of agitation upon the legislation of the country? Not a measure has been forced upon Parliament, which the calm judgment of a later time has not since approved: not an agitation has failed, which posterity has not condemned. The abolition of the slave trade and slavery, Catholic emancipation, parliamentary reform, and the repeal of the corn laws, were the fruits of successful agitation,—the repeal of the Union, and chartism, conspicuous examples of failure.

But it may be asked, is agitation to be the normal condition of the state? Are the people to be ever combining, and the government now resisting, and now yielding to, their pressure? Is constitutional government to be worked with this perpetual wear and tear,—this straining and wrenching of its very framework? We fervently hope not. The struggles we have narrated, marked the transition from old to new principles of government,—from exclusion, repression, and distrust, to comprehension, sympathy, [419] and confidence. Parliament, yielding slowly to the expansive energies of society, was stirred and shaken by their upheavings. But with a free and instructed press, a wider representation, and a Parliament enjoying the general confidence of the people,—agitation has nearly lost its fulcrum. Should Parliament, however, oppose itself to the progressive impulses of another generation, let it study well the history of the past; and discern the signs of a pressure from without, which may not wisely be resisted. Let it reflect upon the wise maxim of Macaulay: 'the true secret of the power of agitators is the obstinacy of rulers; and liberal governments make a moderate people.'

The development of free institutions, and the entire recognition of liberty of opinion, have wrought an essential change in the relations of the government and the people. Mutual confidence has succeeded to mutual distrust. They act in concert, instead of opposition; and share, with one another, the cares and responsibility of state affairs. If the power and independence of ministers are sometimes impaired by the necessity of admitting the whole people to their councils,—their position is more often fortified by public approbation. Free discussion aids them in all their deliberations: the first intellects of the country counsel them: the good sense of the people strengthens their convictions. If they judge rightly, they may rely with confidence on public opinion; [420] and even if they err, so prompt is popular criticism, that they may yet have time to repair their error. The people having advanced in enlightenment as well as in freedom, their judgment has become more discriminating, and less capricious, than in former times. To wise rulers, therefore, government has become less difficult. It has been their aim to satisfy the enlightened judgment of the whole community, freely expressed, and readily interpreted. To read it rightly,—to cherish sentiments in advance of it, rather than to halt and falter behind it,—has become the first office of a successful statesman.

What theory of a free state can transcend this concurrent gradual development of freedom,—in which the power of the people has increased with their capacity for self-government? It is this remarkable condition that has distinguished English freedom from democracy. Public opinion is expressed, not by the clamorous chorus of the multitude: but by the measured voices of all classes, parties, and interests. It is declared by the press, the exchange, the market, the club, and society at large. It is subject to as many checks and balances as the constitution itself; and represents the national intelligence, rather than the popular will.

Footnotes.

1. Supra, p. 277.
2. Courts and Cabinets of Will. IV. etc, ii. 82. The Duke of Buckingham says that two out of the six 'Dorchester labourers' were dissenting ministers.
3. Ann. Reg., 1834, Chron., p. 58; Court and Cabinets of Will. IV., ii. 82; Personal observation.
4. June 14th, July 12th, Hans. Deb., 3rd Ser., xlviii. 222, xlix. 220 A motion for referring it to a committee was negatived by a majority of 189—Ayes, 46; Noes, 235.

5. Supra, Vol. I. 402.
6. Supra, p. 383.
7. Ann. Reg., 1848; Chron., p. 50; Newspapers, 9th, 10th, and 11th April, 1848; Personal observation.
8. The Queen, the Duke of Wellington, Sir R. Peel, and others, were represented as having signed it several times.—Hans. Deb., 3rd Series, xcviii. 285; Report of Public Petitions Committee.
9. It was dissolved in July 1846: see Cobden's Speeches, i. 387; but its organisation was maintained for other purposes.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

Next Contents Previous