

PROTECTION OR FREE TRADE ?

BY HENRY GEORGE.
CHAPTER I.
INTRODUCTORY.

They extol the virtues of protection as furnishing employment, without asking how it comes that any one should need to be furnished with employment; they assert that protection maintains the rate of wages, without explaining what determines the rate of wages. The ablest of them, under the lead of Carey, have rejected the Malthusian doctrine, but only to set up an equally untenable optimistic theory which serves the same purpose of barring inquiry into the wrongs of labor, and which has been borrowed by Continental free traders as a weapon with which to fight the agitation for social reform.

That, so far as it has yet gone, the controversy between protection and free trade has not been carried to its logical conclusions is evident from the positions which both sides occupy. Protectionists and free traders alike seem to lack the courage of the convictions. If protection have the virtues claimed for it, why should it be confined to the restriction of imports from foreign countries? If it really "provides employment" and raises wages then a condition of things in which hundreds of thousands vainly seek employment, and wages touch the point of bare subsistence, demands a far more vigorous application of this beneficent principle than any protectionist has yet proposed. On the other hand, if the principle of free trade be true, the substitution of a revenue tariff for a protective tariff is a ridiculously inefficient application of it.

Like the two knights of allegory, who, halting one on each side of the field, continued to dispute about when the advance of either must have revealed a truth that would have ended their controversy, protectionists and free traders stand today. Let it be ours to carry the inquiry wherever it may lead. The fact is, that fully to understand the tariff question we must go beyond a tariff question as ordinarily defined. And here, it may be, we shall find ground on which honest divergences of opinion may be reconciled, and facts which seem conflicting may fall into harmonious relations.

CHAPTER II. CLEARING GROUND.

The protective theory has certainly the weight of most general acceptance. Forty years ago all civilized countries based their policy on it; and though Great Britain since discarded it, she remains the only considerable nation that has done so, while not only have our own colonies as soon as they have obtained the power, shown a disposition to revert to it, but such a disposition has of late years been prevailing in Great Britain herself.

It should be remembered, however, that the presumption in favor of any belief generally entertained has existed in favor of many beliefs now known to be entirely erroneous, and is especially weak in the case of a theory which, like that of protection, enlists the support of powerful special interests. The history of mankind everywhere shows the power that special interests, capable of organization and action, may exert in securing the acceptance of the most monstrous doctrines. We have, indeed, only to look around us to see how easily a small special interest may exert greater influence in forming opinion and making laws than a large general interest. As what is everybody's business is nobody's business so what is everybody's interest is nobody's interest. Two or three citizens of a seaside town see that the building of a custom-house or the dredging of a creek will put money in their pockets; a few silver miners conclude that it will be a good thing for them to have the government stow away some millions of silver every month; a navy contractor wants the profit of repairing useless iron clads or building needless cruisers, and again and again such petty interests have their way against the larger interests of the whole people. What can be clearer than that a note directly issued by the government is at least as good as a note based on a government bond? Yet special interests have sufficed with us to institute and maintain a hybrid currency for which no other valid reason can be assigned than private profit.

Those who are specially interested in protective tariffs find it easy to believe that protection is of general benefit. The directness of their interest makes them active in spreading their views, and having control of large means—for the protected industries are those in which large capitals are engaged—and being ready on occasion, as a matter of business, to spend money in propagating their doctrines, they exert great influence upon the organs of public opinion. Free trade, on the contrary, offers no special advantage to any particular interest, and in the present state of social morality benefits or injuries which men share in common with their fellows are not felt so intensely as those which affect them specially.

I do not mean to say that the pecuniary interests which protection enlists suffice to explain the widespread acceptance of its theories and the tenacity with which they are held. But it is plain that these interests do constitute a power of the kind most potent in forming opinion and influencing legislation, and that this fact weakens the presumption the wide acceptance of protection might otherwise afford. And it is a reason why those who believe in protection merely because they have constantly heard it praised should examine the question for

themselves.

Protection, moreover, has always found an affective ally in those national prejudices and hatreds which are in part the cause and in part the result of wars that have made the annals of mankind a record of bloodshed and devastation—prejudices and hatreds which have everywhere been the means by which the masses have been induced to use their own power for their own enslavement.

For the first half century of our national existence American protectionists pointed to the protective tariff of Great Britain as an example to be followed, but since that country, in 1846, discarded protection, its American advocates have endeavored to utilize national prejudice by constantly speaking of protection as an American system and free trade as a British invention. Just now they are endeavoring to utilize in the same way the enmity against everything British which long oppressions and insults have engendered in the Irish heart, and, in the words of a recent political platform, Irish-Americans are called upon "to resist the introduction into America of the English theory of free trade, which has been so successfully used as a means to destroy the industries and oppress the people of Ireland."

Even if free trade had originated in Great Britain we should be as foolish in rejecting it on that account as we should be in refusing to speak our mother tongue because it is of British origin, or in going back to hand and water power because steam engines were first introduced in Great Britain. But, in truth, free trade no more originated in Great Britain than did the habit of walking on the feet. Free trade is the natural trade—the trade that goes on in the absence of artificial restrictions. It is protection that had to be invited. But instead of being invited in the United States, it was in full force in Great Britain long before the United States were thought of. It would be nearer the truth to say that protection originated in Great Britain, for, if the system did not originate there, it was fully developed there, and it is from that country that it has been derived by us.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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