

PROTECTION OR FREE TRADE?

BY HENRY GEORGE. CHAPTER II. (CONTINUED.) CLEARING GROUND.

Nor yet did the reaction against originate in Great Britain, but in France, among a school of eminent men headed by Quesnay, who were Adam Smith's predecessors and in many things his teachers. These French economists were what neither Smith nor any other subsequent British economist or statesman has been—true free traders. They wished to sweep away not merely protective duties, but all taxes, direct and indirect, save a single tax upon land values. This logical conclusion of free trade principles the so-called free traders have shirked, and it meets today as bitter opposition from the Cobden Club as from American protectionists. The only sense in which we can properly speak of "British free trade" is the same in which we speak of a certain imitation metal as "German Silver." "British free trade" is spurious free trade. Great Britain does not really enjoy free trade. To say nothing of internal taxes, inconsistent with true free trade, she still maintains a cordon of custom house officers, coast guards and baggage searchers, and still collects over a hundred million dollars of her revenue from import duties. To be sure, her tariff is "for revenue only," but a tariff for revenue only is not free trade. The ruling classes of Great Britain have adopted only so much free trade as suits their class interests and the battle for free trade in that country has yet to be fought.

On the other hand, it is absurd to talk of protection as an American system. It had been fully developed in Europe before the American colonies were planted, and during our colonial period England maintained a more thorough system of protection than now anywhere exists—a system which aimed at building up English industries not merely by protective duties, but by the repression of like duties in Ireland and the colonies, and wherever else throughout the world English power could be exerted. What we got of protection is the wrong side of it, in regulations intended to prevent American industries from competing with those of the mother country and to give her a monopoly of the American trade.

The irritation produced in the growing colonies by these restrictions was the main cause of the revolution which made of them an independent nation. Protectionist ideas were doubtless at that time latent among our people, for they permeated the mental atmosphere of the civilized world, but so little disposition was there to embody those ideas in a national policy, that the American representatives in negotiating the treaty of peace endeavored to secure complete freedom of trade between the United States and Great Britain. This was refused by England, then and for a long time afterward completely dominated by protective ideas. But during the period following the revolution in which the American Union existed under the Articles of Confederation no tariff hampered importations into the American States.

The adoption of the Constitution made a Federal tariff possible, and to give the Federal Government an

independent revenue a tariff was soon imposed; but although protection had then begun to find advocates in the United States, the first American tariff was almost nominal as compared with what the British tariff was then or our tariff is now. And in the Federal Constitution state tariffs were prohibited—a step which has resulted in giving to the principle of free trade the greatest extension it has had in modern times. Nothing could more clearly show how far the American people then were from accepting the theories of protection since popularized among them, for the national idea had not then acquired the force it has since gained, and if protection had then been looked upon as necessary, the different states, not without a struggle have given up the power of imposing tariffs of their own.

Nor could protection have reached its present height in the United States but for the civil war. While attention was concentrated on the struggle and mothers were sending their sons to the battlefield, the interests that sought protection took advantage of the patriotism that was ready for any sacrifice to secure protective taxes such as had never before been dreamed of—taxes which they have ever since managed to keep in force, and even in many cases to increase.

The truth is that protection is no more American than is the distinction made in our regular army and navy between commissioned officers and enlisted men—a distinction not of degree but of kind, so that there is between the highest non-commissioned officer and the lowest commissioned officer a deep gulf fixed, a gulf which can only be likened to that which exists between white and black where the color line is drawn sharpest. This distinction is historically a survival of that made in the armies of aristocratic Europe, when they were officered by nobles and recruited from peasants, and has been copied by us in the same spirit of imitation that has led us to copy other undemocratic customs and institutions. Though we preserve this aristocratic distinction after it has been abandoned in some European countries, it is in no sense American. It neither originated with us nor does it connect with our distinctive ideas and institutions. So it is with protection. Whatever be its economic merits there can be no doubt that it conflicts with those ideas of natural right and personal freedom which received national expression in the establishment of the American Republic, and which we have been accustomed to regard as distinctively American. What more incongruous than the administering of custom house oaths and the searching of trunks and hand bags under the shadow of "Liberty Enlightening the World?"

As for the assertion that "the English theory of free trade" has been used "to destroy the industries and oppress the people of Ireland," the truth is that it was the English theory of protection that was so used. The restrictions which British protection imposed upon the American colonies were trivial compared with those imposed upon Ireland. The successful resistance of the colonies raised in Ireland the same spirit, and led to the great movement of "Irish Volunteers" who, with cannon bearing

the inscription "Free Trade or —!" forced the repeal of those restrictions and won for a time Irish legislative independence.

Whether Irish industries that were unquestionably hampered and throttled by British protection could now benefited by Irish protection, like the question whether protection benefits the United States, is only to be settled by a determination of the effects of protection upon the country that imposes it. But without going into that, it is evident that the free trade between Great Britain and Ireland which has existed since the union in 1801 has not been the cause of the backwardness of Irish industry. There is one part of Ireland which has enjoyed comparative prosperity and in which important industries have grown up—some of them, such as the building of iron ships, for which natural advantages cannot be claimed. How can this be explained on the theory that Irish industries cannot be re-established without protection?

If the very men who are now trying to persuade Irish American voters that Ireland has been impoverished by "British Free Trade" were privately asked the cause of the greater prosperity of Ulster over other parts of Ireland, they would probably give the answer made by religious bigotry—that Ulster is enterprising and prosperous because it is Protestant, while the rest of Ireland is sluggish and poor because it is Catholic. But the true reason is plain. It is, that the land tenure in Ulster has been such that a larger portion of the wealth produced has been left there than in other parts of Ireland, and that the mass of the people have not been so remorselessly hunted and oppressed. In Presbyterian Skye the same general poverty, the same primitive conditions of industry exist as in Catholic Connaught, and its cause is to be seen in the same rapacious system of landlordism which has carried off the fruits of industry and prevented the accumulation of capital. To attribute the backwardness of industry among a people who are steadily stripped of all they can produce above a bare living, to the want of a protective tariff or to religious opinions is like attributing the sinking of a scuttle ship to the loss of her figurehead or the color of her paint.

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