

HOUSE OF COMMONS, May 7.

SHIPPING INTEREST.

General GASCOYNE rose to bring forward his motion for a Committee of Inquiry into the state of the British Shipping. So extensively was the distress felt, that there was hardly a port in the kingdom that had not petitioned the House for redress. The right honourable gentleman (Mr. Huskisson) was identified with new principles—but still he thought the question ought to be inquired into. Laws had been repealed that had lasted for centuries—that existed when there was not such a debt as now bore upon the country, and consequently when protection was not required so much as now. He doubted not that £27,000,000 were embarked in shipping—and on going into a Committee he should be able to show that a depreciation of 25 per cent. had taken place, or about £7,000,000. These calculations were derived from the most accurate and authentic documents. The reciprocity duty, &c., had been constantly petitioned against and complained of; however, the right honourable gentleman (Mr. Huskisson) had persevered. The experience of the plans had shown their injurious tendency—a system that had admitted the Prussians and others, to the extent of 5,000 ships, almost unasked, to all advantages of the mitigated system.—America has also greatly benefited from the changes enforced by the new system. In Prussia, France, Holland, &c., the ship-building was £8, £9, and £10 per ton, in London £26 10s, at the outports £18. The manning, &c., were at moderate expenses, equally disadvantageous to England. How was it possible to compete with ships so advantageously navigated; and there were no counter advantages, no facilities to British shipping, although it was at a much greater expense. The removal of the discriminating duties had been of the most injurious consequences. Since this petition had been presented to the House, their property had diminished in value from 5 to 10 per cent. Since the year 1816 there was a diminution of sailors to the extent of 11,000 or 12,000. Our tonnage had diminished instead of being increased, in consequence of the Treaties. Many vessels were now built in Canada. There were 118 vessels now building in England; but only 20 of them were to order—the rest were on speculation. There ought to be an increased extent of ships built in England. The ship-builders and seamen were in great distress. The arrivals of foreign ships, as compared to British ships, were increasing every month. The result of the experiment had been ruinous, and would continue to be such, if persevered in; and he felt persuaded that inquiry could not be justly resisted. The merchants might in some instances have profited from the alterations—but the downright ship owner had been a great loser. It would be impossible to satisfy the ship-owners without inquiry—however eloquently the right honourable gentleman might answer his statement (hear,) inquiry ought not to be refused, on account of the declaration of any individual backed by mystic figures. [A laugh.] As to delay, that might only increase the ruin. He did not press the motion from any party motive; he belonged to no party, he had no personal attachments. He came forward from duty alone, and he hoped the motion would not be supported or opposed by party feeling. He concluded with moving for the Committee of Inquiry.

Mr. HUSKISSON said he had now been a member of Parliament for upwards of 30 years, and from the first moment that he had the honour of a seat in this House down to the present, he had always considered himself

as liable to that moral responsibility to which every other member of Parliament is liable, be his rank or station in the country what it may. He made this declaration as to his feelings and as to his readiness to meet the charges which had been brought against him, without the slightest reserve. Among the many singular statements of his honourable and gallant colleague, that was not the least singular in which he stated that for the last two or three years the House had been overwhelmed with petitions from the ship owners of all the ports in the country, complaining of distress, and that the Government had paid no attention to them whatever. The gentlemen who presented the petitions moved nothing more than that they should be laid on the table and be printed. Now, if a perusal of these petitions had led him to suppose that the shipping interest of the country was really endangered, he should have felt that it was incumbent upon him, holding the office which he held in the Government, to have inquired narrowly into the matter; and, as a proof of such disposition on his part, he referred to the statement which he had given in the last session, of his own accord, of the real situation of the commercial marine of the country. He declared at the same time the principles on which he had proposed the alterations in the Navigation Laws. He had also an opportunity of showing the House the growth of our commercial marine since the year 1792; of comparing our means at present with our means at other periods; and of explaining to the House the opportunities which we had of manning our military navy immediately, whenever a naval armament should be suddenly required. He had also compared our means, increased as they were within that period, with the means of other countries, aiming to be our rivals, not our enemies, in maritime affairs. The ship-owners appeared to employ a logic quite peculiar to themselves—a logic which he (Mr. Huskisson) knew not how to designate, unless he described it as that which prevailed amongst philosophers during the dark ages. It was not from facts, from observation, from experience, from a knowledge of what was passing before them, that these gentlemen drew their conclusions. They seemed to revive the exploded arguments used last Session, to induce the House to recede from its altered policy with regard to the silk trade. The course was then to assume, as an incontrovertible fact, that if the measure was carried, our silk trade would be rooted out and utterly dissipated. We were told of 500,000 helpless women and children, as well as workmen, all subsisting upon the silk trade, who would be left to starve, with a thousand other horrible consequences; now during the distresses of the past year, no branch of trade had suffered so little, and was now in a more flourishing condition than the silk trade. [Cheers.] The result of a free competition was this, that the silk manufacture had made much progress throughout the country, and that we were now exporting to France more or less of our silk goods, nay, some houses were actually making Bandana handkerchiefs for the purpose of exporting them to India. [Hear, and a laugh.] But the ship-owners went further than the parties to whom we alluded; they not only assumed what were to be the measures of Government, but they pronounced what had been already the effects of them—namely, that the shipping interest was in a state of total decay. He had taken the trouble to read all the petitions on the part of the ship-owners, and he could state that there was not one which did not proceed upon the principle that the foreign shipping had increased, and British shipping had decreased, and some were bold enough to say that we should soon reach such a condition that

foreign shipping would supersede the British in the foreign trade of the country. He found in some of the petitions allegations which he must own surprised him, because they were at variance with what the getters up must have had under their own personal knowledge. He would advert briefly to one or two. The first he should refer to was a petition from Scarborough, presented on the 16th of February, which stated that the value of British shipping had decreased from 20 to 25 per cent. since the year 1825; and expressed regret and alarm at “the great increase in the entry of foreign, particularly Baltic vessels, at all the British ports.” He would just read the official return of the entry of British and foreign vessels in this very port of Scarborough. In 1825, the number of British vessels which entered inwards was 19, their tonnage amounted to 2,421; the number of foreign vessels was 17, their tonnage 978. In 1826, the number of British vessels was 17, their tonnage 2,349; the number of foreign vessels that year, instead of 17 was 2, and their tonnage 149. [Cheers.] So much for the petition from Scarborough! [Hear.] The next petition was from the port of Greenock, which contained the same allegations, with reference particularly to the British provinces in North America: it stated that “by the benefit bestowed upon foreign shipping, so decided a preference is given to foreigners in the timber trade, that the petitioners can no longer compete successfully with them.” How the facts really stood he should now proceed to show. In 1825, the number of British vessels which entered inwards in this port was 201; their tonnage was 51,000. The number of foreign vessels was 21; their tonnage was 6,300. In 1826, the British tonnage was 54,000; the foreign 2,300. He adverted to another petition (with reference to the argument that the poorer classes were deprived of employment by the change) from the labourers in the port of London connected with the shipping. They stated that their condition in 1825 was prosperous; but that in 1826, owing to the increase of foreign shipping, they had suffered great distress. Now it appeared in 1825 that the tonnage of foreign vessels entering inwards in the port of London amounted to 302,222 tons; these persons then found no want of employment. In 1826, the tonnage of foreign amounted to 215,254 only. [Cheers.] He was aware that the subject was a dry one, but he must trespass upon the House, in order to vindicate Parliament, and show that the country was not deriving injury by persevering in the present measures. It was true, that last year he made a statement to the House before the returns had been produced; and now an endeavour was made, since the returns were furnished, to accuse him of inaccuracy. It became, therefore, his duty, before he came to discuss this subject in the present Session, to exhibit the returns in such a shape as would repel the suspicion of his having adapted them to suit the object of a pitiful misrepresentation. He now held in his hand an account of shipping since the restoration of peace. The result was, that excepting that extravagant year, 1825, (and the year 1826 was necessarily influenced by that year of speculation,) there had been a comparative increase of British shipping. Even 1826 exhibited a greater number of British ships entering inwards and outwards than any year (except 1825) since 1814. [Hear.] The tonnage of British vessels entering inwards in 1826 was 2,478,000; in 1814 it was 1,846,000. But as Ireland was now separated from the foreign trade, he had required that its tonnage should be separated in each year from the accounts of foreign

trade properly so called, since 1814; and here the comparison was still more favourable. The tonnage of British vessels trading between Britain and foreign parts, excluding Ireland, in 1826, exceeded considerably that in any one year since 1814, except 1824, which was a year of speculation, when compared with 1826. The decrease in British shipping in 1826, compared with the preceding year, was 230,000 tons. The tonnage in 1825 was 2,027,000 tons; that in 1826 was 1,796,000 tons. The foreign shipping, mean-while, had fallen off 250,000 tons; that of 1825 was 809,000 tons; that of 1826, 640,000. Thus there was a less decrease in the British than in the foreign shipping; and a most triumphant answer herein appeared to the objections as to the relative increase of foreign and British shipping. In order to exhaust the subject in every possible way, he would notice the objection of some, that the colonies and British North America, were there was no foreign competition, should be excluded as well as Ireland. From the account of the tonnage of British vessels arriving from foreign ports, excluding the British colonies in all parts of the world, it was gratifying to find that the quantity in 1826 exceeded that of any year since 1814, except 1825. There was not a single year besides that which was not greatly inferior to 1826. He did not deny that in the foreign trade there was a continued tendency to increase; but if our shipping continued to increase also, were we to proceed to measures of hostility because, forsooth, there had been an increase in foreign trade as well as our own? One point he would refer to more particularly: one-fourth of the foreign shipping consisted of vessels under 50 tons, whilst our shipping averaged 400 tons. The trade between the opposite ports of France and Dover, Ramsgate, and other places in England, employed small vessels bringing eggs, butter, vegetables, poultry, and fruit, which were all included in the returns. These vessels came with one tide, and returned with the next. Was such a commerce as this a nursery for seamen? No; we should look to distant foreign trade, at the extremity of the world, which would form our seamen by inuring them to hardships and to dangers. Yet it was little known to what extent this petty commerce was carried. The number of eggs imported from France in these small vessels in the course of last year amounted to 63,000,000, and the duty paid upon them was £22,000. It was the same with a hundred other articles. He would now proceed to that part of the subject which related to the trade with all parts of the world strictly foreign out of Europe. In 1814, the amount of British tonnage employed in this trade was 535,000 tons. In 1826, it was 878,000 tons, being an increase of 3-8ths. With the single exception of the United States of America, the foreign shipping in that trade was greater than in any one of the six years preceding 1814 than it was last year. He now turned to the trade with the colonies. The British shipping engaged with the West India colonies last year was greater in amount than in any year since the peace, always excluding 1814 and 1815, because in those years we possessed colonies which had since been restored to foreign Powers. The trade with our North American colonies had increased in a most gigantic degree. Instead of amounting to only 151,000 tons, as it did at the peace, it now amounted to 397,000 tons, and the trade of last year exceeded that of any former year, always excepting 1825. With the East Indies our trade had increased from 50,000 tons to 72,000 tons. With the coast of Africa it had increased from 9,000 tons to 26,000 tons.