

The Gleaner

AND
NORTHUMBERLAND SCHEDIASMA.

VOLUME II.]

"Nec araneorum sane texus ideo melior, quia ex se fila gignunt nec nos ter vilior qui ex alienis libamus ut apes."

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THE GLEANER.

EUROPE.

FROM THE EDINBURGH EVENING POST.

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM.

WHEN this Journal was begun in the month of May 1827 its conductors manfully set themselves in opposition to the fashionable principles of LIBERALISM in all its branches and modifications—regarding it as a spurious and monstrous offspring of Jacobinism and Popery,—and that opposition, however powerless and ineffectual it may have been, has never been relaxed or swerved from during a season of unexampled trimming and tergiversation among public men and public journals. This consistency, in the midst of seductions and examples which might have enabled them to glide gently into the prevailing current of popular versatility without incurring much reproach, is a fact that reflects credit on the individuals who have successfully presided over the political and leading department of "THE POST";—for although that succession has been as frequent nearly as changes in higher spheres, and although untoward circumstances have, from time to time, cramped the means which were essential to give full energy to this publication—its praiseworthy steadfastness, in this particular, has secured for it the continued support of those who originally patronized it, and has gradually acquired an accession to the number of its readers, who concur in its principles, and sympathize in the feelings that have uniformly characterized it, notwithstanding the usual quantum of minor blemishes incident to every newspaper. This circumstance is peculiarly gratifying at a time when events have occurred to stamp with the authority of fact and of experience, the soundness of the principles which it has all along inculcated—and when political clouds are fast gathering around us, and over the face of the world, that are likely ere long to drive thousands who had been deluded from the standard of constitutional doctrines, to seek shelter once more from the storm, within that pale which they had abandoned and assisted to break down, but which it has been our endeavour and our pride to uphold and to defend.

We are again called on by new occurrences to persevere in the direct and straightforward course which has heretofore been pursued. We allude particularly to the recent agitation which has been created on the subject of PARLIAMENTARY REFORM. This subject has been the favourite stalking-horse of every pseudo patriot for the last half century, who in Parliament had an eye to the treasury benches, as his ultimate retreat, or who out of doors affected more than ordinary wisdom and public spirit; or of those fanatics, who, uniting the morality of the pot-house with the cant of the conventicle, or the philanthropy of the infidel, aspired to be the lights and liberators of the world. This mania was at its height soon after the commencement of the first French Revolution, and it has been agitated from time to time with a greater or less degree of intensity, until at length its most strenuous supporters were averse to, or sick of their work; and even Sir Francis Burdett, declined to urge his oft reiterated common-places on the subject, and consented to lay them on the shelf, when he agreed to become the follower of Mr. Canning, its great opponent, in 1827. Of late years the only movement in Parliament was an abortive effort made by Lord John Russell, in which he met with very slender support or sympathy in the country.

Within these few days, however, strong symptoms have appeared of a revival of the project; and meetings have been held in various parts of the kingdom for the purpose of awakening once more the flame of internal dissension. Mr. John Lawless, Mr. Henry Hunt, and Mr. Joseph Hume, have taken the measure under their especial patronage, and have respectively harangued, almost simultaneously, the LABOURING classes in Scotland, England, and Ireland, on the absolute necessity of a reform in Parliament, as the only means of salvation for the country. Lawless and O'Connell excite their countrymen to once more become "United Irishmen." Hume exhorts them to become "Friends of the People," (ominous designations truly,) while Henry Hunt and his myrmidons invoke the memory of Watt Tyler as one that is consecrated in the cause of liberty. Kindling at the blaze of the late revolution in France, these worthies recommend to the people of this country to unite in measures for dissolving the united empire, and for transferring by violence the government from the authorities to which it was intrusted at the revolution, and settled by the union of the three kingdoms, to a democracy, in which EVERY MAN of every description shall be placed on a footing of equality. Nay more, they urge them to insist upon this—to say that they are determined to have it so; and their iterated exhortations at Carlisle, for instance, declare openly that unless what they demand is conceded, they will FIGHT FOR IT as the people of Paris, of Brussels, and of Brunswick have done to remedy the evils, real or imaginary, under which they laboured.

Now this is a project which every honest man in the country, and every honest journalist must oppose stoutly instantly. The incendiaries have one and all of them attempted to inflame

the minds of their humble auditors with false representations regarding the state of the country, and the causes of individual distress, ascribing every evil to the corruption of Parliament, created, they allege, by the ascendancy of the aristocracy, and nothing to the extravagance, the folly, and the vices of those whom they address. This is the never-failing artifice of all demagogues. They distort and exaggerate every fact, and then they follow up their turgid declamations by prescribing the quack medicine of RADICAL REFORM as an infallible cure for all evils, political, moral, and physical.

The fundamental doctrine of all these preachers of sedition is, that all men have an equal right to a participation in the government of the country—a natural and unalienable right—that there is no property except labour—and by the assumption of these two theories, they very easily reach their conclusion, that the labourer who earns a shilling per diem, is equally entitled with the nobleman or the capitalist worth £200,000 per annum, to be a legislator in the land. This, passing over entirely all the miseries which have ever attended mob-governments, founded on such principles, is the most monstrous nonsense that ever was maintained.

In the first place it is an absolute fiction, that every individual, in a social community, is on a footing of equality with respect to POLITICAL RIGHTS. Such a state of society never existed, and never can exist. In a metaphysical and abstract sense, the NATURAL rights of all mankind are the same; but in a social state this is impossible: for the very idea of a social union, presupposes the existence of laws for their common government, and therefore necessarily excludes the recognition of any natural rights that are inconsistent with these social regulations. And it is impossible that what are called the natural rights of mankind, can ever be brought into full operation except by the absolute and complete dissolution of society to its primary elements—namely, by the abolition of all laws—all individual property—and every thing else that constitutes civilized society. These reformers, then, can only mean such a dissolution when they found upon their supposed natural rights; for if they talk of rights referable to existing governments, they can have no rights whatever except such as are established by the existing laws of that community of which they are individual members.

Taking this test, therefore, as the only admissible criterion of the rights now claimed—universal suffrage for example—we would ask them, where is there in the whole range of laws and usages which form the constitution of this country, any declaration that every individual has an equal right to a vote for a member of Parliament? We say there is none, and refer Mr. Hume or Mr. O'Connell to point out any such maxim, or to adduce from the whole volume of the history of this country, a single instance of any such right being enjoyed at any period. They must confine their pretensions, therefore, on the matter of right, to the social right recognised by existing law, unless, as already stated, they contend for an absolute abrogation of every thing in the shape of constitution—recurring to that blessed state of savagism in which every man is a law unto himself. This they will scarcely venture to do; but unless they do so, all their claims as matter of right are baseless.

If, however, driven from their plea of natural and social right, they resort to that of expediency and utility, as a reason for admitting every man to the privilege of voting for a member of Parliament, they take up another ground which is not more tenable than the former—although, doubtless, it may be urged with more effect in so far as practicability and usefulness can be satisfactorily established. By the constitution of this country, the Legislature alone, consisting of King, Lords, and Commons, can, practically speaking, judge of the alleged utility of such a claim being admitted. The claimants may try to convince them if they can, that it is just and expedient to grant universal suffrage; but if they fail and are still dissatisfied, their only remedy is to retire from the control of a government repugnant to their feelings or their supposed interests, and to place themselves under those more happy institutions in other countries, where Professor Myles of Glasgow tells them, "pure governments are established." They may tell us indeed that the majority of the people have a right to control the minority—the many to govern the few—but that is not an admitted doctrine of the British constitution, nor is it consistent even with those individual natural rights, of which we hear so much. It is a theory—but it is only a theory—and cannot be binding on those who do not assent to it. They may also, as is now the fashion, say, we are DETERMINED to have universal suffrage—we will FIGHT for it. But what is such language and such conduct if resorted to, but a direct appeal to force—to that sort of force too which is the essence and great engine of pure despotism, no matter whether regal or democratical.

If such be their meaning, let them, with all their vaunted boldness, say so explicitly as they do substantially in other words. They say they are DETERMINED to have universal suffrage, &c., and that they will seek it with the tri-coloured flag in the one hand, and the standard of "liberty or death" in the other—masking this reasonable purpose all the while under the cowardly and hypocritical veil of seeking what they want by petition—by peaceable means—and according to the constitution! Such jargon is all self-contradictory. There are only two courses for them—either in honest and sincere peacefulness to apply to the

legislature by petition, or by waving the bloody symbols of Jacobin murder and rising in rebellion, forcing at the point of the sword their favourite suffrage. There is no middle course. They may bawl as LOUDLY as they choose—for they seem to think there is great virtue in loudness; but if they go further—and they have already gone further—they must at once be put down, before their aspiracy has attained such a height as shall endanger the peace and safety of the country.

The other doctrine already alluded to, which has been maintained by Mr. Hume and his Carlisle friends, that the labour, of the poorest man in the land is equivalent to the property of the richest Duke, and is therefore equally available to them as a grand title to a suffrage—is utterly false in a philosophical and in a common sense point of view. The labour of the peasant is as much his patrimony as the title and estate of the peer; but it is not commensurate to it in a political point of view, nor does it furnish any ground whatever for the inference deduced from it by the radical apostles—for this plain reason, that the law has not said so. If the peer were to maintain that the peasant's labour belonged to HIM (viz. the peer)—that the peasant in a word, is or ought to be his slave, and were to seek an act of Parliament to that effect, the latter would be entitled to plead that the value of his labour, his rights, and his personal liberty were secured to him by law. But he cannot go further, and contend that he, or those delegated by him, and a majority of labourers, have a natural or legal right, as a subject of this country, to legislate in such a manner as perhaps to deprive the peer of his whole property and vested right. The distinctions in society created by differences in point of property are indefeasible (to use a cant term), and in every society, howsoever constituted, must be regarded. If the labouring classes will allow themselves to look at the true state of matters, they will at once see through the sophistry by which it is attempted to mislead them. Take the case put by Mr. Hume—that of a duke with a princely estate, and the labouring man who has nothing but the produce of his daily work for his subsistence, and examine closely the reason why the former is declared a legislator by birth, and the latter has not a vote for a member of Parliament—and the inequality of fortune is not the result of any social statute, but arises from the course of providence, and the necessary unequal condition of men as to worldly circumstances. In the case of the peer, his land estate is an inheritance created perhaps by the arrangements of society at a remote period, or the immediate result of successful industry in trade or otherwise. The labourer, on the other hand, has nothing but his own industry as his fortune. The stake which those two persons have in the state is very different—the interest which the former has in the good government of his country's immeasurably greater than that of the latter;—and besides, the one is FIXED to the territory, while the latter can carry his labour to any other and better country if he can find it. The stake of the one is inseparable from the country—the other has no local habitation; and the more it is that our laws have conferred a political status and privilege on the peer, while it has withheld it from the mere labourer.

Let us not be misunderstood or supposed to be insensible or hostile to the rights of the people taken in their proper sense—for all our sympathies are with and for our countrymen—for the humblest in the land, more than with the higher classes, while we respect as politically just and expedient the privileges of the aristocracy. And as children of the same Heavenly Father, and are alike entitled to enjoy in their respective spheres the blessings of our free government, according to their several conditions in society. But it is a vain and fantastical conceit to imagine that it is practicable, without an entire subversion of the whole frame of society, for every individual in the country to have a voice in the constitution of the legislative government of the country. We do not say that there should be no change—no improvement—but we regard all the movements which have hitherto been made on this subject as tending the wrong way—as calculated to throw the franchise open to the poorest—the most ignorant, and the most unqualified electors, instead of conferring it on those who, from their possessions, their intelligence, and their characters, may be presumed best qualified to choose the fittest representatives of the people. The great vice we think of the existing system is that the elective franchise is in burghs vested in persons not always or often the fittest of their inhabitants to possess such a power, and in counties that is enjoyed by others who have only a nominal and not a real interest as the foundation of their votes. Were we disposed to devise schemes of reform, we should say that property is the true and best criterion of the right to a franchise, and that the payment of taxes, to a certain amount, is the best evidence of a voter being in a condition to exercise his privilege judiciously and independently. An extension of the franchise on this principle might check some prevalent