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STRICTURES

On the necessity of inviolably maintaining the Navigation and Colonial System of GREAT-BRITAIN.

BY LORD SHEFFIELD.

LONDON, 1804.

(Concluded from our last.)

NOT long since Great-Britain had to sustain a principle of great importance, and she sustained it with firmness and with vigour. When she was abandoned by all her allies; when the several Maritime Powers of Europe had combined against her; when she had risked her last and only army in the plains of Egypt; she, nevertheless, thought it necessary to risk her principal fleet also, against all the Powers of the North, in order to maintain her right of visiting neutral bottoms. But that right, however incumbent it might have been to maintain it, is of secondary consideration, compared with the necessity of preserving, inviolate, the principles which have hitherto enabled us to preserve that naval superiority, without which our right to inspect neutral bottoms would be a shadow. Surely, if the right be of importance, that which empowers us to vindicate the right is incomparably more so; the right is comparatively of temporary value, but the system, on which alone it is to be preserved, is of permanent necessity; and yet, such is our infatuation, that we often manifest a disposition to fritter away the essence of the system, even while we hazard the existence of the Empire in pursuit of inferior objects.

When I assert the importance of that system to the commercial and maritime prosperity of this country, I rest my opinion on no abstract and theoretic grounds, but on the strong and stubborn evidence of experience and of fact.—For some time after the American war, the increase of our shipping was rapid and extraordinary; and Lord Liverpool,* and other very intelligent men, have not hesitated to ascribe that increase to the policy, and the policy alone, with which England then inviolably maintained her navigation and colonial principles. Whereas, in the course of the last ten or twelve years, a very extraordinary revolution has taken place: and, while we were renouncing our old and wise regulations, encouraging the carrying trade of foreigners against ourselves, and admitting other nations to ports which should have been open only to our own commerce, it has been found that the number of vessels employed by Britain in the American trade has diminished as rapidly as it formerly increased, and America has been enabled to boast, that the aggregate of her tonnage, including that of her small naval force, is, as we have seen, 939,000; that is within about 15,000 tons of what is known to have been the whole commercial tonnage of England in the year 1787.†—Hence conclusions might be drawn yet stronger, perhaps, than those already stated; and it would appear not only that our commerce and marine are intimately connected with our navigation system, but that, as that system is infringed or maintained, they are to flourish or to decline.

We sometimes talk, nevertheless, very lightly on the claims of the Americans, and listen, very stoically, to those of some of the West-Indians; but we neither sufficiently weigh them in their nature and tendency, nor are we often sufficiently aware of the danger of compliance. Yet that danger even the slightest view of our West-India trade will render obvious. The number of vessels employed in our commerce, twelve years ago, with that part of the world, as appears by the report of the committee of the Privy Council, in the year 1791, amounted to upwards of 740, containing 154,643 tons.‡ This is great in a commercial, but still greater in a political estimate. For the sailors so employed are of the utmost importance to the marine strength of the nation; and, while those engaged in distant voyages are not to be obtained for the purpose of our navy, there are always at command, and can always be added, on emergency, to the naval force of the kingdom. Of such a trade, in proportion as the prosperity is great, the system on which it has advanced is wise. If you touch that system,

* I embrace with pleasure the opportunity afforded me of observing, that this country is much indebted to Lord Liverpool, for his intelligent and persevering support of the question relative to the intercourse of the Americans with our colonies; and, although he may have been obliged to yield too much on this point, there is reason to conclude that he is, in principle, the decided friend of our colonial system.

† A return, made about two years after passing of the Register Act, which is more accurate than any that has ever been made before, and which proved the quantity of our tonnage to be considerably more than had been supposed, states that, in the year 1787, the ships and tonnage of England and Scotland were as follows:

	Ships	Tonnage
England	8711	954,729
Scotland	1700	133,034

It should be observed, however, that the East-India ships then at sea are not included in the above tonnage.

‡ This statement does not include the vessels employed between the remaining British colonies, and the British Islands in the West-Indies, and which amount to 52, containing 4837 tons.

with a rude and incautious hand, you may shake the key stone of the whole structure. If you tamper with that trade, and fend it adrift, you may destroy in wantonness what is so necessary to your existence, and sacrifice to light and ruinous innovation, that very portion of British commerce, which, from the nature and bulkiness of the merchandise, is most productive of wealth, and of the employment of shipping and seamen, and most essential to the maintenance of our maritime superiority. It must be repeated, and with deep concern, that we often inconsiderately sacrifice to mercantile speculation, or partial and mistaken interests, the essential principles of laws and systems, under which we had flourished; and which had been the object of applause and imitation at home and abroad.*

I use this strong language because I am apprehensive of change. Some of the West-India merchants, more than once, and that with every management and clamour, have laboured to accomplish their views of an unrestricted intercourse with America; and though their efforts failed, and their arguments were thought to be refuted, I have known the activity of zeal, or imaginary interest, carry so many points, and the attention and prudence which should watch over public affairs so often suspended, that I should scarcely be surprised at any result. On the occasion of the treaty of 1794 with the American States, we know they proceeded so far in conjunction with the Americans, as to obtain the important and mischievous concession, that American vessels, not exceeding 70 tons, should enjoy a free trade to the West-India ports. Fortunately for us the Americans were dissatisfied with the limitation, but though they suspended the ratification of the Article, (and they should in future be kept at their word) the fact is still the same; and still continues to speak a very forcible admonition. I am therefore apprehensive; and that apprehension, as it may possibly be useful to disclose it, I am not solicitous to conceal.—They who take these affairs into their own hands are, of all others, perhaps the least fit to form a solid judgment on them; their pursuits and their attentions have not been previously pointed to such subjects; they are too apt to listen to those who have a measure to carry, or a prejudice to maintain; and, however convenient they may be in theory, and theoretic writings, which often mislead, they have not sufficient practical knowledge to comprehend the full meaning and probable consequences of what is proposed.

I dwell much, and anxiously in this question, on the connection of our navigation laws with the existence of our navy. But, in truth, what I have already intimated, the subject involves not merely the maintenance of our navy, but the whole use, and advantage, and dependence of our colonies. Sir Josiah Child, speaking of our W. I. Islands, maintains that "if they were not to be kept to the rules of the Act of Navigation the consequence would be, that, in a few years, the benefit of them would be wholly lost to the nation." Mr. Adam Smith frequently implies the same persuasion, and asserts, unequivocally, "that the same Act is the worst of all the commercial regulations of England." These conclusions, and this approbation, sanctioned by such names, cannot but be of great weight; and I do not hesitate to assert my own persuasion, not only that if the admittance of American shipping into the West-India ports is to be allowed, those Islands would become dependent on the American States; and that, rather than surrender the carrying trade to the Islands it would be incomparably better to renounce the Islands themselves.

Let it be remembered that Britain derives no benefit from her West-India colonies, except those accruing to her navigation, manufactures, and agriculture, by supplying their wants, and by the monopoly of their carrying trade; and it is those advantages alone, procured and preserved by the navigation system, which can countervail, in any respect, the enormous expence of protecting them. The same articles which they furnish, might be purchased at least twenty per cent. cheaper at other markets, and the same revenue would arise from them, if they came through the Dutch, the Danes, or the French. I see not, therefore, why we should make the sacrifices expected from us, either with America, or the Islands: with respect to America, because there can be no doubt of her continuing to take from us more than she can pay for; and with respect to the Islands, because the monopoly, which they enjoy of the British market, secures to them a better price than they could elsewhere obtain. There is no friendship in commerce. The Americans, particularly, had no object but commercial advantage in all their negotiations. Even before the era of their independence, they avoided taking from this country, as much as they could, those articles which were not absolutely necessary to them, or which they could obtain at other markets with greater advantage.† And when we consider, besides, that our trade is infinitely more necessary to them than theirs to us; that by taking our commodities they are enabled to trade on British capital; and that our exports to them, at best, are much less than is generally supposed; we shall, I hope, feel

* The Navigation, Corn and Poor Laws, have all been altered without attention to the true spirit of them.

† I do not mean this invidiously. It is but what might be expected from any people in the same situation; and I make the observation merely to remind the reader, that commercial selfishness is not to be charged solely to the account of Great-Britain.

yet more disinclined to yield to their avidity any principle of those laws which have been so universally regarded as the ground work of our commercial and naval superiority.

But I observe further mischief likely to flow from any suspension of our navigation system. The Americans will naturally make all possible use of their admission into the West-India ports. Their merchants, probably, will not be more delicate than those of other nations. The emoluments of contraband trade will be added to the profits of legitimate commerce; and there can be little doubt but that a considerable portion of such foreign European manufactures, East-India goods, and other articles as shall be required by the Islands and have been hitherto furnished by British vessels, will be clandestinely supplied by American bottoms; and that the officers of the customs will be found but a feeble check to so illicit and mischievous a trade.

Under such circumstances they will become the carriers to the Islands of provision and lumber; and they will in return bring back cargoes of sugar, coffee, molasses and rum. The consequences will be felt in a two fold manner by England: The price of the above-mentioned articles will be raised on the British consumer; and America will be enabled possibly to dispute with us, and certainly to participate, the advantages of supplying, with such valuable commodities, the wants and demands of foreign markets.

But the subject merits further observation. On an average of three years, during which our navigation laws were suspended, or infringed, that is, of 1795, 1796, and 1797, American vessels, amounting to 1289, containing 139,911 tons, and navigated by 8702 men, entered the several ports of the British West-Indies, and 1231 American vessels containing 128,924 tons, and 8440 men, cleared out from them. If, therefore, the opening of the ports of the Islands should be continued or renewed, it is clear that the navigation of this kingdom, and its dependencies, must experience a momentous loss: for it must lessen at least in proportion to the tonnage and number of men above-mentioned to be employed, since so much will be taken from the carrying trade of this nation*, and the very loss of the freightage of such a number of vessels, would be an evil of great magnitude, and great mischief.

In fact the Americans, so privileged, would be able to monopolize the whole, or the greater portion of the supply of our Islands. They would enjoy, whenever we were at war, all the advantages of peace insurance, peace wages, peace freight, and peace contingencies of every kind; and, at all times, they would be able to make, perhaps, a treble voyage,† in about half the time which a British vessel requires to make one full freightage to the West-Indies and back.‡ Under all these local and other advantages in favour of America, we assuredly could offer no effectual competition. We should, on the contrary, be destined to see the whole of the West-India trade snatched, in a short period, from our hands, and consequently the rapid increase of the American navy, and proportional decline of our own. The transfer of the trade would amount to a transfer of seamen; and the seamen so transferred, would soon learn to regard the country that owned the vessels in which they plied as their own, and be thus lost to England for ever.

I must now protest, and I wish to do so in the strongest manner, against a most unbecoming practice which has prevailed, and lately been extended, that of conducting the trade of this country under licenses granted by the Privy Councils. The granting of those licenses has been considered as a mere matter of form, and the licenses themselves were to be obtained for about ten pounds. To all such proceedings, as it appears to me, there are invincible objections; and my wish is to prevent, particularly during peace, any suspension whatever of the navigation laws, and yet more such extreme abuse of them as prevailed in the West-Indies, through the licenses granted there by the Governors for all shipping, particularly Americans, to enter, and which practice became common for the sake of emolument to the persons in office.

Above all, I wish that the most essential parts of the navigation laws should never be yielded by treaty, without previously referring the business to the consideration of parliament; for I cannot conceive, that to lay a treaty before parliament, when concluded, and when the mischief is done, is, in any respect, to submit it to their consideration; nor that it is constitutional to yield any thing, contrary to the law of the land, by a commercial treaty, without the knowledge and acquiescence of the legislature. I should not, however, have made this remark, if an instance had not occurred to justify it, in the 12th article of the commercial treaty with America, to which I have already alluded.—Ministers seem, at that time, to have taken advantage of the apprehension of the country, and of the necessity of union;

* The diminution will be considerably greater. The American trade with the Islands, if it should be permitted, will, it is probable, very much and very rapidly increase; and every additional vessel and man which may be, consequently, employed by America, may be estimated as a loss of so much to British trade.

† One, for instance, from America to the Islands, another from the Islands to Europe, and a third from Europe back again to America.

‡ Our vessels in general go out with about one quarter freight, or in ballast, and make but one voyage in the year.