

POLITICAL ECONOMY FOR IRELAND.

From *The Nation*, February 28, 1846. A review of Isaac Butt's
Protection To Home Industry.

By the postscript to Mr. Butt's Preface, dated 31st January, 1846, we find that this publication was not undertaken with any reference to the discussions on protection which now occupy the English Legislature – that, in fact, the book was in type weeks before the declaration of the ministerial intentions.

But the subject of the Lectures is so apposite to those discussions, and, what is of more importance, that subject is treated with so especial a regard to Ireland, and particularly to *Irish famine*, that it is well worth while to examine what is put forward by such an authority.

The question of protection, or no protection, Mr. Butt insists, ought to be argued, like any other question of national policy, by estimating the advantages or disadvantages of it. There is no abstract right in the case. Commercial freedom has nothing in it one whit more sacred than personal freedom; yet the well-being of society requires various restrictions upon the latter. Protective duties are not necessarily an evil, any more than a protective police force. The question is, do the advantages preponderate? – is it worth while to submit to the restrictions by reason of any benefits which society reaps from it?

These questions, again, the author thinks, must be answered for each country – not upon any universal principles laid down by political economists, but with reference to the circumstances of that country, to the nature of its produce, to the amount and actual working of the duty.

Now, to come to Ireland. Our trade is exportation of provisions to England, and importation of manufactures from England. It has long been quite 'free;' but Ireland is one of the most fertile countries in the world, and her people are 'the worst fed, the worst clothed,' &c.

Here is a state of things which at least justifies the inquiry, whether any legislative interference would help to cure it; and Mr. Butt grapples with the question boldly, and we think conclusively. Legislative measures to force Irish manufactures into existence, or rather to revive them, being out of the question, so long as our laws are made by those *who eat the food that is taken away from us*; Mr. Butt recommends, as the next best thing, that a voluntary *preference* should be given to articles of home manufacture by those who have money to spend – even although, for a time, the rich might have to put up with worse hats, coarser cloth, inferior carriages, &c.

He recommends this, not as a benevolent sentimentalist, but strictly as a political economist. He insists that, in a country situated like Ireland, such a preference (such *protection*, if we had a legislature) would increase the national wealth, and eventually enrich all classes of the community; and his reasoning is shortly as follows.

The whole revenue of Ireland is derived from the cultivation of the soil; it is out of the agricultural produce (which we shall call *bread*) that all our people, rich and poor, derive their subsistence, as well as their luxuries. The wealth of a rich man is only his control over so much of this *bread* (to eat it, to send it across the sea, to burn or destroy it,) as his yearly income represents. If he employ artizans of his own country to minister to his luxury and taste, the persons so employed receive some of that *bread* as wages – it is eaten in Ireland; but national wealth consists not in what a country *produces*, but what it *uses*; and every pound paid for a foreign manufacture takes twenty shillings' worth of bread out of the mouths of the people here, and gives it to be eaten by foreigners. The withdrawal of bread to pay for foreign luxuries has precisely the same effect on the national wealth of Ireland as if the owner burned it, or, by a miraculously enlarged appetite, devoured it all.

And it is not true, as the Political Economists tell us, that if we export bread we get *value* in return. A diamond of one thousand pounds' price – a thousand pounds' worth of London jewellery – is *not* value *to this nation* for a thousand pounds' worth of corn. But what has the nation to do with it? (asks some disciple of Mill and MacCulloch) does not the man who sends away the corn get value, or what he thinks

to be value – and is it not his affair? Why interfere with the natural course of trade, by which we send away our surplus produce, and take the produce of other countries in return? Consider the blessings of commerce, &c.

This opens the whole question. And we cordially approve of Mr. Butt's answer to it, which we give in his own words: -

“But it is said that this exportation is the disposal of our surplus produce, and, as such, is an advantage to the country. To this argument, gentlemen, there is but one answer which, in the present circumstances of our country, any man ought to give. *I know of no surplus produce until all our own people are fed.* The surplus produce of a country is that which it has to spare after supplying the necessary wants of all its own people. I use the words with deliberation, and with a deep and solemn sense of their import. The surplus produce of a country is that which remains for the rich to spend upon luxuries, after provision is made for supplying the necessities of all.”

The lecturer does not place the duty of supplying these necessities upon an eleemosynary ground; it is not that we ought to relieve the destitute, or are bound by humanity to succour the afflicted. But hear him again: -

“I do not hesitate, then, to say, that to the contemplation of the Christian moralist or economist, there can be no such thing as a surplus produce, until the wants of all classes in the country are supplied. The surplus produce – I will add, the disposable labour of a country – is that which, after providing for the wants – and I include in the wants, the reasonable comforts of all who are willing to give to society their labour – society may permit to be directed to the luxuries or the vanities of the rich. This is that portion of the income of the community which we have to spend upon matters of ornament, of taste, or of caprice. But the first care in the direction of the resources of the country, should be that all may be fed. The poor have their rights as well as the rich. Every man in this country is born a member of a great and powerful society; and we never hesitate to act towards him on the supposition that his being so born gives that society rights to be enforced against him. Equally true is it that he has a birthright by being born a member of society. One pennyworth of property he may not inherit; his parents may not leave him one foot of the earth on which he may freely walk — one chattel article that the conventional laws of society may permit him to call his own. All that he sees may be appropriated to others' use; but yet, as a member of our community, born by God's ordinance subject to its laws, and owing, independently of any choice of his own, an allegiance to its authority, he

has a birthright as sacred and as indefeasible as the right by which the sovereign inherits the crown, the peer his privilege, or the lord of broad acres his estate. In the words of the greatest of political philosophers, he has “a right to all that society, with all its combinations of skill and capital can do in his favour.” In the words of one greater than man — the words in which is recorded the primeval sentence of our race — a sentence which contains at once the hard lot of the labouring man, and the great charter of his rights — a charter prior to the authority of states or the rights of property, he has a right “IN THE SWEAT OF HIS BROW TO EAT BREAD.”

But he not only recognises the *right* of the people to be fed, and that comfortably, but as an economist he recommends, in order to secure to the people the benefit of that right, *the employment of native artizans* — the encouragement of home manufacture by voluntary preference, (or in a new order of things by legislative protection,) even although the rich would thereby be compelled to put up with an inferior article for a time.

In short, Mr. Butt’s argument is precisely that of Dean Swift in the ‘Drapier’s Letters,’ and of Bishop Berkeley in ‘The Querist.’ He despises and tramples under foot the modern doctrine of political economy, ‘the proposition so often and so confidently laid down, that it must always be the interest of a country to buy its goods at the cheapest market, and sell them at the dearest, without reference to the question whether either market be the foreign or the home.’

This proposition is simply *not true*. The ‘interests’ of those who have money to spend in outlandish luxuries is *not* the interest of the country; and the cheapening of British or other foreign manufactures does not compensate for the removal of all the Christian food of the island to pay for them.

But as to the commercial relation between this country and England, the lecturer goes still further. Throughout he treats Ireland as one nation, and England as another; and the payment of so vast a rental to absentee proprietors living in England, he calls a ‘subsidy’ — an annual payment of so many millions which Ireland has to pay out of her national wealth *to another nation*; and, inasmuch as the vast export of corn is made in order to pay these rents, that corn, every grain of it, is as absolutely lost to this country as if it were thrown

back into the sea. It goes away, and *nothing* comes back; the bread is eaten in England; the price of it is spent in England; and the advantage of this sort of ‘commerce’ is thus described by the sometime professor of Trinity College. It is well worth reading in itself, and also because of the quarter from which it comes: -

“No mistake could be greater, than to *argue from the mere fact of a country having a large export trade*, that it is therefore in a prosperous condition. In every case the mere fact of exportation is in its own nature an evil — it is the act by which the country parts with its wealth. It may, or it may not lead to greater wealth coming into the country in return, according to the circumstances under which it is sent away, but the advantage is in the returns; the act of exportation is, in itself, and without reference to its resulting importation, a loss. No mistake could be greater than to pause in the inquiry upon the simple fact, that we find a nation sending away its substance, and this is all an export trade can evidence. An island of slaves toiling under the lash, for the benefit of task-masters in another country, and retaining nothing for themselves but what the regulations of the driver allows them, would have their harbours filled with the vessels that were to carry away, to other countries, the products of their toil. Had the land of Goshen been separated from Egypt, by the sea, the children of Israel, according to this theory, would have carried on a very thriving export trade in the products of the brick-kiln, when they were bound to supply a certain quantity to their task-masters. Innumerable instances might be adduced of the absurdity of such reasoning. A country bound to pay a subsidy to a foreign state, would be most prosperously affected by such subsidy, if this argument be true. We have already seen, in the very case of Ireland an instance of its utter untruth. A large portion of the provisions that are annually exported from Ireland, is sent abroad, in the direct shape of a subsidy, to pay the rent of absentee landlords — as a debt, it is true, which by the rights of property we owe, and must justly pay — but with just as little advantage to the country from the act of exportation, as, in the case we have supposed, the Israelites would have derived from the exportation of their bricks.”

We are pleased to find that Mr. Butt does justice to the commercial views of our illustrious countryman, Bishop Berkeley, contained in ‘The Querist,’ a work now universally ridiculed by those who call themselves political economists; but as we profess to be, like Mr. Butt, considerably behind our age on these points, we shall quote one or two of the good Bishop’s questions, and supply them with

answers such as we apprehend Swift, Berkeley, Doyle, and Butt, would give them: -

“Whether trade be not then on a right footing, when foreign commodities are imported in exchange for domestic superfluities?” *Yes*.

“Whether the quantities of beef, butter, wool, and leather, exported from this country, can be reckoned the superfluities of this country, when there are so many natives naked and famished?” *No*.

“Whether she would not be a very vile matron, and justly thought either mad or foolish, that should give away the necessaries of life from her naked and famished children, in exchange for pearls to stick in her hair, and sweetmeats to please her own palate?” *Surely*. A very vile matron; and the children and neighbours ought to take the purse from her, to allowance her, and, if necessary, to tie her up that she should not go abroad.

“Whether a nation be not a family?” *Yes*; but sometimes a family in which there are many step-children, and in which the mother is no better than she ought to be.

“Whether there be a people that so contrive to be impoverished by their trade, and whether we are not that people?” *Yes*; for the present we are that most unfortunate, most long-suffering, and most infatuated people.

One more extract from the Lectures: -

“I have stated to you that which is not, perhaps, strictly a portion of Political Economy — my own views of the labourer's right. I believe that social system to be the best, that country to be the most prosperous—I care not whether you call it the most wealthy or not — in which this right is the most fully recognised. And all that I have said of the necessity and the possibility of counteracting, by some agency, the monopolizing power of wealth, is not confined to this or any other country. I believe this question to be the most important of all that relate to our modern social system. It is a question that concerns the rich as well as the poor. Sooner or later it will force itself upon the attention of those that are at ease, and be heard in the palaces of the proud. The inequalities of property we must have; but it is open to us to control the effects of these inequalities, so far as they affect the means of existence of any portion of our people. That one man should monopolize the labour of hundreds is an evil; but an evil inseparable from our present state of existence, and compensated for by the principle to which I have called your attention: but that one man should sweep from the surface of the land, upon which is located a starving population, the food that might give sustenance to hundreds — this is an evil which is not necessary to be borne — a form of the monopoly of wealth which brings with it no compensation. I will not say that it is a tyranny for which no

right of property gives to the nation a warrant; but, I repeat, the right of the labouring man to earn his bread was a right that was chartered to our race before an acre of ground over the wide surface of the globe was claimed as property by man; and I am bold to repeat, that interference there must be, there ought to be, with the workings of that economic process by which matters so result that there are men in the land willing to work who cannot earn bread.”

We wish that we could quote the whole book. There is not one word of it in which we do not most heartily concur; but we are fully sensible that, in the hasty observations here offered, justice is by no means done to the close reasoning and impressive eloquence of these Lectures.

Several considerations cannot fail to arise out of the matters here treated, and the views taken of them by Mr. Butt. The habitual dearth of food in Ireland is on the verge of being aggravated to famine. The wretched root that feeds our poor people is rotting off the face of the earth, and the Minister proposes to give us *more free trade*. The corn that grows on our own soil is leaving us daily, because those who produced it have no money to buy it, and keep it at home for their own food; and Sir Robert Peel says to us: - ‘Behold the fertile plains of Pomerania, the great Mississippi valley; they shall be your granaries and your magazines; Russia shall send you her wheat, and America her maize. Are not your ports open? Shall not the two hemispheres conspire to feed you, and pour their golden grain into your lap?’

We shall not pursue the topics suggested here. Enough that we have shown pretty clearly that whatever Ireland wants, it is *not* ‘Free Trade.’

Here are the last words of the Book: -

“When I ask of you to look upon our country's unimproved resources, her unexplored treasures, her unemployed population, and still uncultivated fields, may I not, in the words of that illustrious philosopher, so many of whose questions I have quoted for you to day, pray of you seriously to reflect upon one more a problem, for which the century which has elapsed since it was proposed has, alas! found no solution?”

“What hinders us Irish from exerting ourselves, using our hands and brains, doing something or other, man, woman, and child, like the other inhabitants of God's earth?”

Now, we think there is a solution to this question, and one which most of Mr. Butt's readers, if not himself, will feel no scruple in applying.