

**WHAT WILL
PARLIAMENT DO
WITH THE RAILWAYS?**

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What Will Parliament Do with the Railways? by Henry Renshaw

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HENRY RENSHAW

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9
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*Imogen, Prithas speak,
How many score of miles may we well ride,
'Twixt hour and hour?*

*Pisanio. One score, 'twixt sun and sun
Madsen, 's enough for you, and too much too.*

CYMBELINE.

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THIS is a question of deep interest to our country. It is one on which much more will depend than at first meets the eye, and it merits the consideration of those who look beyond the present day, and can calculate on the ultimate effects of a system as yet almost new in England.

The question, so far as it affects the interests of those who embark their capital in such undertakings, is not to be here discussed. Such parties, it may be assumed, either understand the subject themselves, or are content to place their entire reliance on the skill and integrity of the acting promoters. These are comparatively private questions, the extent of which can only be a certain loss or gain to some speculative individuals. But there are higher grounds on which the subject should be examined, and on which it is incumbent on the legislature to view the question. It must be viewed with reference to its remote effects on the whole frame of society.

On the first introduction of the system it was received with distrust by all, and with aversion by many. The proprietors and occupiers of land were alarmed, and the depreciation and ruin of their property were foretold. Under such circumstances the difficulties in obtaining Acts from the legislature were great, and it was only after a succession of failures that a Company could hope to obtain the sanction of Parliament to its plan.

These apprehensions, which gave rise to determined oppositions on the part of the landowners; have now been proved to be groundless. The experience even of a few years has shown that the value of districts traversed by Railways has been uniformly increased. The evidence given before both Houses of Parliament on this subject is conclusive and unanswerable, and a corresponding effect has been produced on the minds of nearly all classes of intelligent landowners. Those who but a few years since would have risen *en masse* to oppose a Railway, now come forward as advocates and supporters. True it is that at intervals there will be found some prejudiced, short-sighted individuals, for whom improvement has no charms, and who prefer their ancient solitary reign to any consideration of public advantage; but these are the exceptions; generally speaking, the landowners

court and encourage the system, and are anxious to bring it to bear in their neighbourhood. Hence, then, arises the cogent importance of the question—

What will *Parliament* do with the Rail-ways?

What will PARLIAMENT do? for it is to the Legislature that the nation must look for that beneficial control which the fears of the landowners have hitherto supplied: nay, it is to the individual members of the committees of both Houses of Parliament that this important trust is now mainly to be left.

The apprehensions of landowners, unfounded as they have proved, were most salutary in their day. Opposition was raised, the promoters were compelled to contest their ground inch by inch, the most rigid and searching inquiries were instituted, and bills were again and again thrown out. The consequence was, that each successive failure led to a more careful scrutiny into the merits of the respective undertakings. The country was again minutely examined, alterations were made in the lines, local objections were removed, and every improvement which this compulsory deliberation could suggest was successively brought forward.

The influence which was exerted to defeat the projects only brought them to a later but more perfect maturity.

But what is the state of affairs in the present session? It differs widely from any hitherto

known, and the altered circumstances call for new and altered views on the part of our representatives and the Upper House. The number of plans which are brought forward for Railways far exceeds that of any former year; many of them are well-matured and substantial, but such is not the case with all. The feverish excitement which is well known to have prevailed in the money market has fostered the spirit of speculation which was abroad, and this unnatural heat hatched into existence a swarm of useless and misshapen vermin; some of these will not live to reach the door of Parliament, and others will expire within the threshold. It will be for Parliament itself to expose and reject the rest of these ill-digested schemes, whilst it encourages those plans which are substantially good.

“But how,” it may be said, “can this be a *national* question? and of what importance is it to the public if individuals choose to squander their capital on hopeless or even impracticable undertakings?” This then brings us to the main question.

It is admitted by all intelligent men that the system of Railways is of vast and almost incalculable public advantage:—that since the discovery of printing and the mariner’s compass, no improvement has been so calculated to advance the progress of civilisation and to increase the wealth and prosperity of a nation; a glance at the effects produced by it in the United States

must be sufficient to satisfy the most sceptical on this subject.

We have seen what the application of steam power to navigation has done in a few years. Its application to the purposes of internal communication will produce far more striking results.

But it must be borne in mind, that great as the benefits derived from the system may be, the expense is enormous. The average cost of Railways throughout the kingdom cannot, it is believed, be stated at less than eighteen thousand pounds per mile. Many of them considerably exceed that amount, and some may be short of it. But however this may be, the cost is confessedly so great as to render it impossible that more than one line should exist in the same district.

Can it then be doubted that it is essential for Parliament to take every possible means of ensuring to the public that that *one* line shall be *the best*?

A bad line, if allowed, will not only prove ultimately a failure in itself, but it will operate as a barrier against a better.

These undertakings originate, as is well known, entirely in motives of private advantage: it is the pride and boast of our country that such vast works can be executed by the enterprise of private individuals, without assistance from the public purse; and far be it from Parliament to

check this valuable and characteristic spirit. But it is this very circumstance which calls for redoubled vigilance on the part of the Legislature.

Let care be taken that public good is not sacrificed to private advantage!

The Acts which Parliament grants to these Companies confer great powers: it is necessary for the due execution and working of the system that they should do so. But it is only by the consent of the nation at large, through the Legislature, that such powers can be obtained. The nation has, therefore, a strict right to require that the best equivalent should be given in exchange for such powers. Let them not be entrusted to puny hands, nor given to sanction one irrational or unnecessary project.

It is not enough that a certain number of wealthy and influential persons have subscribed the capital, and have put forth the plans for a Railway. Nor is it enough that their object may in itself be good: it should be seen whether the same object may be attained in another way more beneficial to the public, or whether some further and *more enlarged* advantages may not be combined with it.

Local and individual interests have before now impeded the progress of great public works. The same partial interests may again interfere with the public good, by foisting on the Legislature selfish and exclusive plans.

With these views it will be incumbent on