

THE BRUSSELS CONVENTION AND FREE TRADE

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The Brussels Convention and Free Trade by Earl Spencer & Sir. H. Campbell-Bannerman

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EARL SPENCER & SIR. H. CAMPBELL-BANNERMAN

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SPEECHES DELIVERED BY

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AND

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*At a Cobden Club Banquet, on
Nov. 28th, 1902.*



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LORD SPENCER'S SPEECH.

LORD SPENCER proposed "Prosperity to the Cobden Club." In doing so he said:—

Twenty-two years ago, when I had the privilege of occupying the chair as I do to-night, I was fresh in the second Cabinet of Mr. Gladstone. I was asked to preside at the Cobden Club dinner, which took place in those days at Greenwich. Those were not the days when Cabinet Ministers and Members of Parliament made a hasty rush out of London for the week-end holiday. (Laughter and cheers.) I am not saying a word against the week-end holiday; but am only referring to what was the practice in those days. Mr. Gladstone used to have Cabinets on a Saturday, and on the occasion to which I refer I met at the Cabinet one who was always most kind to me—a very great man, whose name I am sure will always be received with enthusiasm, not only in Liberal circles but especially in Cobden Club circles—I mean Mr. Bright. (Cheers.) I told Mr. Bright I should have to leave early that afternoon. Mr. Bright

inquired the reason. I replied, "Oh, for my sins"—and you must recollect that I disliked speaking then even more than I dislike speaking now—"for my sins I have to go down to Greenwich to preside over the Cobden Club dinner." Mr. Bright turned to me gravely but kindly and said, "Lord Spencer, you ought not to use expressions like that, for a greater honour could not be conferred on anyone than that of presiding at a Cobden Club dinner." (Cheers.) That great man, whom we all revere now as we revered him then, then gave in a sort of way his blessing to these dinners. (Cheers.)

THE WORK OF SIR ROBERT PEELE.

It is not necessary for me to go at length into the principles and objects with which the Cobden Club was founded, but I often think that the younger politicians, unless they have studied very carefully their political history, may sometimes hesitate about Free Trade principles, or not know why the Cobden Club was founded to maintain them. It is on that account that gatherings like this are very useful, for they explain the origin of the Cobden Club and why Free Trade holds such a high place even now in the policy of this country. People sometimes forget the state of things which existed in this country before the days of Free Trade. (Cheers.) A terrible state of things existed. Agricultural depression was of a deeper and worse character than now. There was a cessation of work in the great commercial centres,

rioting bordering on revolution was going on, and to many minds it appeared that the country was verging on a state of bankruptcy. Sir Robert Peel, by his vigorous application of the policy of Free Trade, overcame those evils and put the country on a more stable and satisfactory basis. It was on Free Trade principles that our great commerce throughout the world was established and the great riches in our manufacturing centres were collected. Without Free Trade we should not have had this great amelioration of the state of the people, this great increase of our trade which has made us the greatest trading nation in the world, and not only a great trading nation, but also a nation who is spreading her noble and high principles of liberty and civilisation by means of her trade in every quarter of the globe. (Cheers.) This great change is due almost entirely to the principle of Free Trade. And it is not only Sir Robert Peel that we have to thank for Free Trade, but other great men. There were Cobden, Bright, and Villiers, and last, but not least, our great leader, Mr. Gladstone—(cheers)—who all fought and worked for that great principle and helped to build up that satisfactory edifice of prosperity all over the world of which we are so proud. (Cheers.)

MR. CHAMBERLAIN'S RECENT SPEECH.

We have had great discussions on this subject recently, and I have noticed particularly that those who are bringing forward measures to which Free

Traders have the strongest possible dislike, because they break their cherished principles, constantly assert that they are true Free Traders. Their Protectionism sneaks out though sometimes, and in the speeches that they have made in the House of Commons there are doctrines which show what the beginning would end in if they had their way. There was a speech of Mr. Chamberlain's the other day—I do not suppose I need have any scruple about quoting him, though at this moment he may be tossing in a very disagreeable place. (Laughter.) He avowed himself a very strong Free Trader; but he could not help letting the cat out of the bag. He said in that speech: "I do not believe for a moment that there are more than 50,000 people employed in different trades which in any sensible degree are dependent on sugar; but whether they be 50,000 or 1,000,000, I say there is nothing whatever to induce us to believe that we might not have had even more British subjects, more British capital, more British machinery in sugar refinery and production if only we had protected them against this competition in time." Is this Free Trade? Are these the doctrines of a Free Trader? I say they are the doctrines of a Protectionist. (Cheers.) Before I touch on the subject of sugar I should like to point to another danger which accompanies this praise of Empire which is being sung so often in triumphant tones by so many Jingoës and others. I am not at all one who wishes to underrate the Empire. I wish

that we should do our duty towards the Empire and to our Colonies, and try to bind them together in the closest bonds to us, but I think a great deal too much has been said on that subject. I fear that too often there is a danger of our sacrificing the greater interests of our trade with the world to the smaller interest that belongs to trade, imports and exports, with our Colonies.

THE NAVIGATION LAWS.

I feel this very strongly. At the conference of Premiers which was held during the year there was one very remarkable resolution which was passed, which I think is another indication that we all, as Cobdenites, should try to prevent the spread of fatal and wrong principles—fatal and wrong action as regards the great principles of Free Trade. The resolution was :

“That it is desirable that the attention of the Governments of the Colonies and the United Kingdom should be called to the present state of the navigation laws in the Empire and in other countries, and to the advisability of refusing the privileges of coastwise trade, including trade between the mother country and its colonies and possessions, and between one colony or possession and another, to countries in which the corresponding trade is confined to ships of their own nationality, and also to the laws affecting shipping, with a view of seeing whether any other steps should be taken to promote Imperial trade in British vessels.”

Is not that going back to the old navigation laws? Since 1854, when they were finally repealed, our coastwise trade has increased by leaps and bounds, and what share do you think the dangerous foreigner has in that trade? His share in our coastwise traffic is only 0·4 per cent. (Laughter.) Are we going back to those navigation laws? I say that as Free Traders we must protest against it.

THE BRUSSELS CONVENTION.

With regard to the Brussels Convention, I am not in favour of bounties, for they are not in accordance with Free Trade principles. I do not at all object to our neighbours giving up bounties, if they do so freely, and unshackled by conditions; but in the circumstances in which the Brussels Convention has been agreed to I maintain that we shall be doing a very great injustice, an unnecessary injustice, to a very large body of consumers in this country. (Cheers.) Why is it done? It is done, as we were told, in order to save the West Indies from ruin. Yet there are many people who say that even if bounties are abolished the sugar producers in these colonies will not be able to hold their heads above water. There is a very remarkable passage in a despatch from Sir H. M. Jackson, Governor of the Leeward Islands, to Mr. Chamberlain on this question of the bounties. He writes:

“What the effect of the abolition of bounties may prove to be in large colonies producing