

**SELECTED SPEECHES  
ON PUBLIC  
QUESTIONS**

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Selected speeches on public questions by John Bright

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**JOHN BRIGHT**

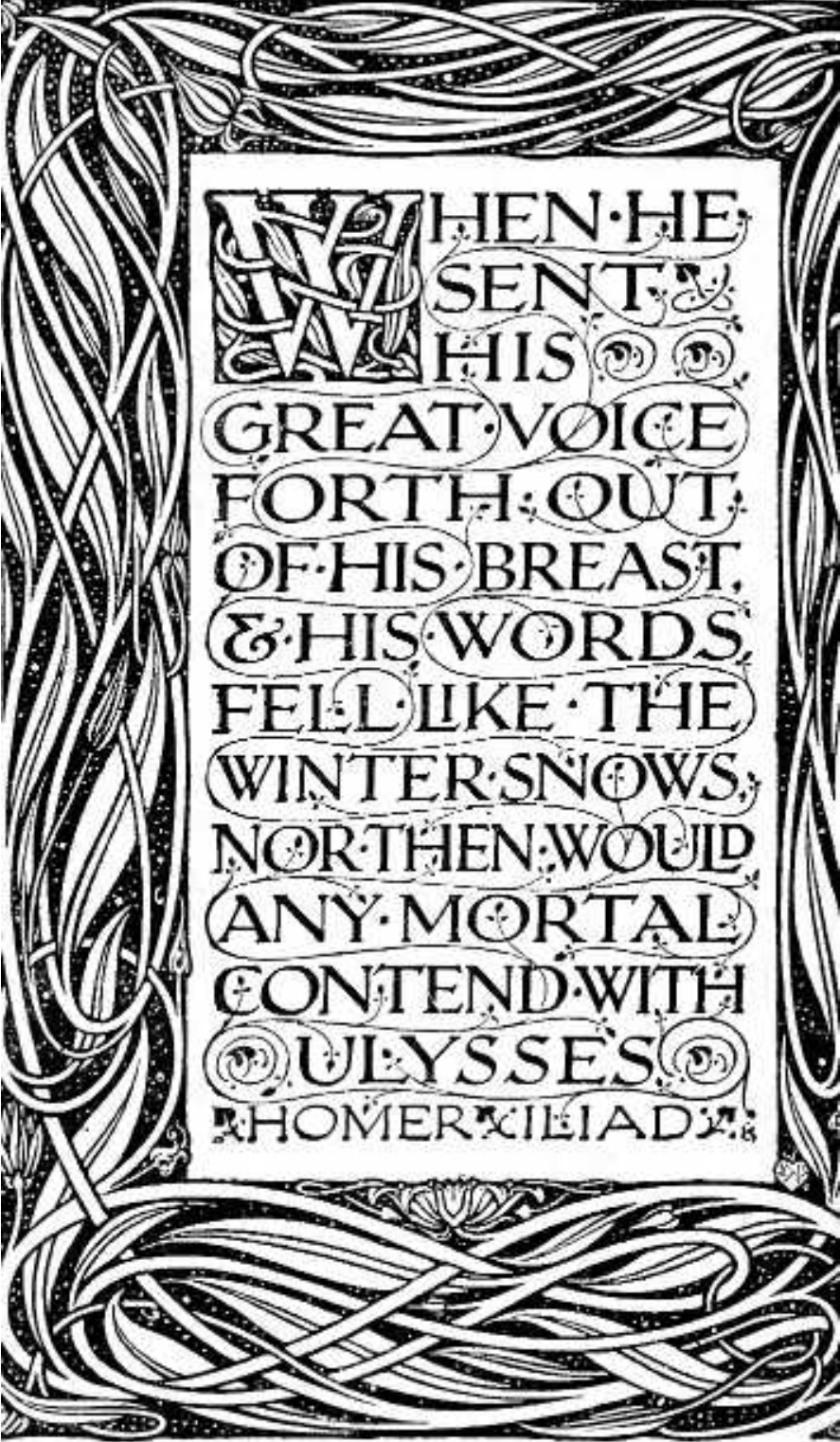
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SELECTED SPEECHES OF  
THE RIGHT HON. JOHN  
BRIGHT, M.P., ON PUBLIC  
QUESTIONS WITH AN  
INTRODUCTION BY  
JOSEPH STURGE



WHEN HE  
SENT  
HIS  
GREAT VOICE  
FORTH OUT  
OF HIS BREAST,  
& HIS WORDS  
FELL LIKE THE  
WINTER SNOWS,  
NORTHEN WOULD  
ANY MORTAL  
CONTEND WITH  
ULYSSES.  
HOMER ILLIAD.

SELECTED  
SPEECHES  
*of the R<sup>t</sup> Hon<sup>ble</sup>*  
JOHN BRIGHT M.P.  
*on Public Questions*



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## INTRODUCTION

JOHN BRIGHT was born at Rochdale in 1811, and he died there in 1889. He came of an old Quaker family, was educated at Quaker schools, and remained to the end of his days a loyal member of the Society of Friends. His father was a cotton manufacturer, and John Bright was himself trained to business at the mills, in which he was all his life a partner. When he was a Privy Councillor, the older hands, who had known him from a boy, still regarded him as one of themselves. When Bright was a young man the whole country was convulsed by the great Reform agitation, and from that time forward he took a keen interest in public affairs. His earliest speeches were in support of temperance, and he soon won repute in the contest against the local church-rate. It is recorded that in 1840 his eloquence carried an amendment at a public meeting called for the purpose of levying such a rate. About the same time his sympathy was aroused by the sufferings of the masses of his fellow-countrymen from the stagnation of trade and the high price of food, caused by the incidence of Protection. He spent a large part of his time between 1840 and 1846 in agitating, in co-operation with Richard Cobden, for the abolition of the Corn Laws. In 1843 he was elected M.P. for Durham, and in 1847 for Manchester.

He was a convinced individualist in all things, and held throughout his life that it is unwise, and in many cases oppressive, to restrict the working hours of adults by *Act of Parliament*, though he was in favour of the legislative protection of children.

"He was not a philanthropist in the common and rather hackneyed sense of the word. His sympathies



did not run in that channel. He had not much faith in remedies prescribed for the occasion, nor in short-cuts for reforming social evils. On such matters he was a difficult man to move. Hence he was not found hurrying to and fro in quest of every fresh symptom that might be clamorous for a cure. But he had a steadfast faith in the operation of general causes, such as temperance, education, the improvement of the material condition of the people, and the removal of political inequalities. He aimed chiefly at being just and doing justly. He believed in the remedial power of justice, and he loved it with an ardour which set his whole being on fire. But having given the people what they were entitled to, he was not disposed to go further. Anything like petting or coddling seemed to him to be at variance with manliness, and sure to fail of its object. Give them, he would say, equal political rights with the rest of the community, remove every hindrance to their industry, and then, with the aid of the schoolmaster and a cheap press, they may be left to work out their own salvation" (Dunkley).

His strong conviction that the Crimean War was a blunder and a crime brought him into collision with the great body of his fellow-countrymen, and ultimately cost him his seat for Manchester. He was, not long afterwards, elected Member for Birmingham, and continued to represent that constituency to the day of his death. When three-fourths of the Members of the House of Commons were anxious for the break-up of the American Union, in the dispute over the question of slavery, Bright adhered heroically to the cause of the North, appealing, not without success, to the tribunal of working-class opinion on behalf of his faith in freedom.

After the General Election of 1868, he became a member of Mr. Gladstone's Government; he finally left it in 1882 as a protest against the bombardment of Alexandria. It is important to notice, however, that in this case, as in the case of the Crimean War, he based his opposition on the merits of the quarrel, and that he refused to commit himself to any condemnation of all war in the abstract. During his tenure of office the

Bright Land Clauses of the Irish Church Act, which were the basis of all subsequent Irish land legislation, proved his success as a practical legislator. His suggestion of a commercial treaty between England and France, taken up by Chevalier, led to the famous treaty which Cobden carried out between the two countries in 1861, with such beneficent and far-reaching results. With all his sympathy for Ireland, Mr. Bright never accepted the idea of a separate legislature, and Gladstone's Home Rule Bill, therefore, did not obtain his approval. To his infinite regret, he consequently passed his last years in political separation from Mr. Gladstone and from many of his other old friends.

One of Mr. Bright's great sayings was, that "statesmanship consists as much in foreseeing as in doing." His historian, in the "Dictionary of National Biography," thus points out the singular success of his own important forecasts. In his first speech in the House of Commons (August 7, 1843) he remarked that Peel was at issue with his party upon principles. On June 25, 1844, he predicted that Peel would repeal the Corn Laws at the first bad harvest. From the outset of his career he denounced the Irish Church establishment. He foresaw the danger of restriction to one source for the supply of cotton; the probability of a cotton famine ensuing on the break-up of slavery, and the consequent disorganization of the Southern States. He insisted that India should be brought under the authority of the Crown. While Palmerston was asserting the revival of Turkey, Bright as consistently insisted that Turkey was a decaying power. Sir James Graham afterwards made him the admission, "You were entirely right about the Crimean War; we were entirely wrong." He predicted that the successful defence of Turkey would lead to fresh demands on her as soon as Russia had recovered from her exhaustion. He foretold that the cession of Savoy would bring about Italy's independence from French control. He said, as far back as 1878, that an Irish party hostile to the Liberal party in Great Britain involves the perpetual reign of the Tories."

A man who attacked all the cherished idols of the ruling classes, and who characterized the aggressive foreign policy of Palmerston as "a gigantic system of out-door relief for the aristocracy of Great Britain," was not likely to be much loved by the great ones of the earth. And "there was nothing deprecatory about John Bright. He could be quite as insolent in his way as any aristocrat in his. What was really irritating about him was that his disdain was genuine. He did think very little of the Tory party, and he did not care one straw for the opinion of society. He positively would not have cared to have been made a Baronet."

Years have elapsed since these speeches were delivered, but they are not therefore out of date. Of the 1,500 pages that Rogers selected for publication there are very few that do not still afford good reading, and the same applies to many other addresses which might be disinterred from old newspaper files. The great problem of Indian government is always with us. Protection, which its champion, Disraeli, said was "not only dead, but damned," is again trying to rear its head. The military and naval expenditure, which Bright held to be absurd and wasteful, was small compared with that which a Liberal Government now considers necessary. Those causes which, largely through Bright's influence, were carried to a successful issue, and have become part of the national inheritance, depended on the underlying principle of faith in freedom, which is of undying value and importance. His great saying, "Force is no remedy," deserves specially to be revived at a time when its spirit has been eclipsed by clouds of materialism and passion.

As models of the clear and convincing expression of thought, Mr. Bright's speeches will be read and re-read by every student of the English language and by every one who wishes to learn so to express himself as to influence the minds of his fellow-countrymen. It was said that Bright and Gladstone were the only men of their time in the House of Commons whose eloquence actually changed votes. Thorold Rogers remarked how well these speeches fulfil the three demands of Aristotle