

**REMARKS ON THE PRESENT
STATE OF OUR WEST INDIAN
COLONIES, WITH SUGGESTIONS
FOR THEIR IMPROVEMENT**

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Remarks on the Present State of Our West Indian Colonies, with Suggestions for their Improvement by Anonymous

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REMARKS,

&c. &c.

OF all the subjects which for several years have engaged the attention of the Legislature and people of this country, there are none which appear to me to have been less understood, yet more confidently determined, than those questions which have affected the interests of our West Indian Colonies. The distance of those possessions, and the non-representation in the Legislature of the parties chiefly concerned, may doubtless account for many of the errors which characterize our Colonial legislation. But there are other mistakes of so grave a nature, which so manifestly indicate a policy the reverse of that which the circumstances of the Colonies most obviously required, that it is difficult to excuse or explain such palpable errors upon any grounds which either candour or experience of human affairs can sanction.

I. In hastily glancing at the past and present condition of these Colonies, it is not necessary to go far back into their history. It is enough to commence

at that period when, in deference to the public opinion of the people of this country, it was determined by Parliament to abolish the slave-trade of our Colonies. A righteous act it surely was to abolish that odious traffic, and to save humanity, so far at least as the means and influence of this country could extend, from a scourge so afflicting and so disgraceful. Yet it is not for us to cast upon our Colonial fellow-subjects the undivided reproach of that now-condemned system. They did not adopt slavery and the slave-trade without the knowledge, or against the wishes, of the people of this country : on the contrary, every sanction which law or custom could give to the acquisition of property, to be cultivated by means of the labour of slaves, was freely given ; estates were bought and paid for ; money was lent, and contracts entered into ; and every title and security was confirmed by the law of the State. Nay, more : a large portion of the public revenue consisted of the duties which were levied upon Colonial produce thus obtained ; the country at the same time securing to itself the monopoly of such produce, by compelling the planters, under all circumstances, to import it direct into this country, when to allow them access to other markets would have been regarded by the planters of those periods as a boon.

Nor need we go further back than a comparatively recent period in the last century, when we shall find occasions when some of the Colonial

Assemblies would have desired to put a stop to the slave-trade, as being unnecessary, if not injurious, to the Colonies, but were restrained by the imperial Government, who interfered, and insisted on the continuance of "a trade so beneficial to the nation."*

The Act for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade to all British Colonies, was passed in 1807, since which period not a slave has been imported into any of these Colonies.

After the extinction of the *Slave-Trade* in the British Colonies, various enactments were passed, at different periods, with the humane purpose of mitigating the condition of the slave, by limiting the hours of his labour, and protecting him against the oppression or the caprice of his master. And it is important to notice, that, down to the period of *emancipation*, there was no material decline in the exports or imports of the Colonies.

On referring to a return to the House of Commons, of the prices of British plantation and Foreign Sugar, it appears that the *Gazette* price of the former, on an average of the nine years from 1825 to 1833, both inclusive, was 30s. 1d. per cwt., free of duty; while the average price of *Brazil* Sugar, for the same period, (taken from the *Mer- cantile Prices Current*) was 24s. 11d.; showing that down to the time of *emancipation*, although the slave-trade, extinct in our own Colonies, was

* *Vide* Lord Dartmouth's Reply to the Agent of Jamaica, 1775.

vigorously carried on by Brazil (as it is now), our West India Colonies still produced sugar at a difference of price of only 5s. 2d. per cwt.

This difference in price arose entirely since the period of the abolition of the slave-trade, in our own Colonies; for down to that period, viz. 1807, the West India planters were prepared, if such had been then the policy of this country, to have maintained a successful competition with the sugar-planters of all foreign nations, whether in the market of this country, or any other market of Europe.

In 1832 and 33, soon after the passing of the Reform Bill, the public mind in England became strongly excited on the question of slavery in the British Colonies. Public meetings were held, and strong appeals were made to the reason, and conscience, and passions of men: the system of slavery was denounced as cruel and oppressive; and the planters were held up to public scorn, as a set of heartless men, whose incomes were derived from the unrequited labour of slaves, and their protests for further time to pause and deliberate on all the probable consequences of emancipation were disregarded, as but the natural representations of sordid interest.

Unhappily, the result in an economical point of view (and to that chiefly I wish at present to allude) has too amply verified the predictions of the planters, and too clearly falsified the confident hopes of the advocates of emancipation.

In a *moral* point of view, the change was far more satisfactory. There was no interruption of the public peace, the people on the whole have been quiet and contented, and their habits, in some most important respects, are much improved : they are, however, sadly deficient in industry ; being little disposed to labour, and then only for wages which are so extravagant as to leave no income to the planter ; while in the principal Colonies of Jamaica, Guiana, and Trinidad, a large proportion of the negroes have withdrawn themselves from all kinds of plantation labour.

To the planters, the results of emancipation have been thus extremely disastrous. It is true that the West India Colonies received compensation to the extent of 17,000,000*l.* being the portion assigned to them of the 20,000,000*l.* which were voted by Parliament to the owners of slaves in the West Indies, the Mauritius, and the Cape. But any such sum, large as it was, was but a fraction of the value of the property of the West India planters ; whose estates, slaves included, were valued by the Crown Commissioners at 140,000,000*l.* : the slaves alone were appraised at 43,000,000*l.* But if the labour of these slaves be withdrawn from the cultivation of the estates, and no other substituted, it is obvious that the estates, with the buildings and machinery thereon, can be of no value whatever.

At the period of emancipation, the amount of the future loss of the planters was necessarily uncer-

tain: now, unhappily, it is being placed beyond all doubt. And I do not think it is too much to say, that, instead of 17,000,000*l.* being equivalent to the planters' loss, the real aggregate loss of *income* alone, down to 1846, consequent on diminished crops and the double and treble wages of precarious labour, together with fresh advances of capital, has probably amounted to *twice that sum*.

What were the planters to do? They must either have abandoned their estates, at some seventh or eighth part of their value, or they must struggle on to maintain their estates, at all hazards, in cultivation. They could not allow these estates to lie uncultivated for a single year; for the waste and ruin of a neglected estate in tropical climates is excessive; owing to the exuberance of wild vegetation, and the rapid deterioration of buildings and machinery, arising from the effects of heat and rain. To sell the estates would have been an obvious remedy to the planters; but no buyer was to be found.

Such was the state of matters down to 1846; when a demand was made, by some of the parties who agitated for a repeal of the Corn Laws, that, because we were now to have cheap corn, we must also have *cheap sugar*!

The uninterrupted policy, which, for forty years, had distinguished this country; the millions we had spent in compensation to the Colonies; the sacri-