

**REPORT OF THE ACTING
COMMITTEE TO THE STANDING
COMMITTEE OF WEST INDIA
PLANTERS AND MERCHANTS,
13TH JANUARY, 1847**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649316694

Report of the acting committee to the standing committee of West India planters and merchants,
13th January, 1847 by Various

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VARIOUS

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[Printed for the West India Body.]

West India planters and merchants, London.

REPORT ^{HF}
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1847

OF

THE ACTING COMMITTEE

TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE

OF

WEST INDIA PLANTERS AND
MERCHANTS,

13th January, 1847.

LONDON:

MAURICE & CO., HOWFORD BUILDINGS, FENCHURCH STREET.

1847.

Acting Committee.

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CHARLES CAVE, Esq., DEPUTY-CHAIRMAN.

THE EARL OF HAREWOOD, Chairman of the Standing Committee.

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R E P O R T.

SHORTLY after the meeting of the Standing Committee in July last, Parliament determined, by a large majority, to repeal the Corn-laws. Although the discriminating duties on sugar were, in their origin and design, very different from the restrictions upon the importation of corn,—yet, having some analogy, and having long been the object of assiduous misrepresentation, they were so associated in the public mind, that, as soon as the greater question was settled, it became evident that these duties would undergo early revision. It was in anticipation of this event that the Acting Committee, in their Report to the half-yearly meeting in March last, expressed their conviction that the Colonies would not be unwilling to encounter extended competition, if even partially prepared for so formidable a conflict by the *immediate* concession of those measures which they had a right to claim as preliminary to any further change of policy towards them. No concession, however, was made to prepare for such a change.

The differential duties on sugar were not granted

or maintained as a boon to the Colonies, but merely to countervail the restrictions imposed upon them by the Imperial Parliament for the benefit of various interests in the mother-country. They have never been adequate to that purpose,—they have never afforded an equivalent for these restrictions,—and consequently the Colonies have not derived any *favour* whatever from them. These duties have, nevertheless, been valuable latterly in defending the Colonies from unequal competition with those countries which since the peace have carried on an immense traffic in slaves, and, thereby acquiring abundant and cheap labour, have proportionably enlarged their cultivation. Because they have thus most justly afforded some degree of protection to the Colonies, they have been ignorantly or inconsiderately regarded as conferring an undue privilege. So general, indeed, has been the practice, even among intelligent men, when discussing questions affecting the Colonies, to bring into prominence the advantages they have recently enjoyed, and to omit all consideration of the burdens and disabilities they have long endured, that the most erroneous popular belief has been formed. By the great majority it is never doubted that they have always existed upon the bounteous liberality of the mother-country, and that she has been unhappily persuaded to maintain an exclusive system for their support. The mother-country has, on many occasions when calamitous visitations have afflicted the Colonies, generously

and promptly extended her aid for their immediate relief. But she has never failed to consult her own special interests, and to prefer them to theirs, in regulating their trade. Formerly, no attempt was made to conceal this fact. On the contrary, it was openly avowed, for nothing can be more frank than the declaration in the Act upon which the Colonial system was founded,—the 12 Car. II., cap. 18,—wherein the motive for the enactment is stated to be the sole benefit of our own navigation and people. And even if this distinct intimation had not been given, there could not have been any difficulty in discovering its intent, for it was certainly not calculated to be beneficial to the people of the Colonies.

If, instead of adopting this compound system of prohibitions and distinctions,—which was altogether her own work, for they had no part in its construction,—she had accorded to them at an early period the freedom of trade which has recently become the national policy, there can be little doubt that they would now be in a state of comparative prosperity and independence. This view is confirmed, though on different grounds, by the most ardent opponents of the Colonial system, who, while alleging that, notwithstanding its peculiar design, it has been injurious to the mother-country, also insist that it has been still more prejudicial to the Colonies. They have, therefore, had no reason to prefer the restric-

tive, or, as it is more frequently called, the protective system. It is true they have generally been adverse to great changes. All parties whose interests are connected with fixed capital naturally entertain the same reluctance. But their opposition has in every case arisen chiefly from an apprehension of partial legislation, which has, moreover, been invariably justified by the event. This partial legislation is strikingly exemplified in the act for abrogating all difference of duty on sugar, whether British or foreign, the produce of free or slave labour.

In abandoning a system which was originally devised for the sole benefit of our own navigation and people, and which had, with little practical variation, been maintained for that purpose for two centuries, it might have been expected that a comprehensive view would be taken of all its parts,—restrictions as well as supposed equivalents,—and that they would be simultaneously abolished. This would have presented an appearance of equity which would have commanded a very general assent, though justice, or at least a liberal consideration of the actual state of the Colonies, might have required that the abolition of restrictions should rather precede than accompany the abatement of privileges. For nearly forty years, and especially during the last twenty, the Colonies have been subjected to a series of measures, both in respect to their social

condition and their relations with the mother-country, which have progressively diminished the amount, and enhanced the cost, of effective labour in the face of increasing competition. Even regarding these measures as the necessary though painful remedies for the cure of a great evil, and assuming that they have been applied in the most judicious manner,—though that is a point which might well be questioned,—it cannot be denied that during this transition the proprietors of the Colonies have suffered, and that they are now suffering, most severely. While they have been contending with all the difficulties incident to these changes, and have been advancing,—through ameliorating laws, short-time bills, and apprenticeship,—to absolute freedom, and the condition of their labouring population has been rendered equal to that of any peasantry in existence, their competitors have maintained their cheaper production by an immense slave-trade, and the most rigorous slavery.

It could hardly have been deemed a great stretch of liberality if, under these circumstances, the mother-country, in declaring her intention to adopt a different system, had determined, as the *first* step in her new career, to unfetter the Colonies, to abrogate every restriction affecting the growth or sale of their products, to give full scope to their capabilities, and to serve them with such ample notice to quit all dependence upon differential duties as would