LETTERS AND SPEECHES ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS. IN TWO VOLUMES. VOL. II

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HENRY LORD BROUGHAM

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LETTERS

AND

SPEECHES

ON

VARIOUS SUBJECTS,

BY

HENRY LORD BROUGHAM, F.R.S.,

AND MEMBER OF THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF FRANCE.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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1840.

SPEECH

IN ANSWER TO

MR. PEEL'S CHARGES

AGAINST THE

EDUCATION COMMITTEE,

DELIVERED IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS.

SPEECH.

After the speech of the right honourable gentleman, the house, I feel confident, will extend its indulgence to me. Suddenly called upon, without any the least notice, to defend my individual conduct, and that of my colleagues in the committee, whose confidence I am proud to have enjoyed from the first day that I filled its chair, to the last when I reported its proceedings, I rise, under the additional disadvantage of almost every one of its members being absent, to meet, thus unprepared and unsupported, the long premeditated and much-laboured harangue of our accuser, surrounded by those who were doubtless well aware of the charge about to be preferred against us. (*Some members here were observed leaving the house.*) And, sir, while I lament the absence of the committee, I cannot but laud the exemplary candour of those who, having been present during the attack, are taking this opportunity of departing, that they may not listen to the defence. They hardly yield in fairness to their honourable leader. He, with a singular delicacy and equal fairness, has selected a moment for his onset, when he thought he should catch the accused unprepared, and so have him convicted without a defence. They, contented with listening to the charges, are leaving us, quite satisfied of my inability to repel them. To repel all and each of them, however, I shall instantly proceed. I delay not a

moment to perform this duty, which I owe to others no less than to myself; and in order to meet the peculiar fastidiousness which the right honourable gentleman has shown on matters of form—to satisfy that very nice and even morbid sense of order by which he is tormented, and of which he has made so mighty a parade in his solemn lecture upon parliamentary procedure—I begin by stating that, before I sit down, I shall move to refer the education committee's report to a committee of the whole house.

I feel, indeed, my situation to be almost unexampled. Without any kind of notice—anything that could give me a suspicion of such a discussion by possibility arising, as that into which I am thus hurried; without reflection or preparation, or one document, or a single note to help my memory of the details, I am called upon to answer a laboured and artificial invective against my conduct and that of my colleagues, from the year 1816 down to the present day. But meet it I must. I well know how I should be treated, were I to withdraw from the conflict. It would be said that the right honourable gentleman's observations were too strong to be faced—that they cut too deep, and went too near the bone—that they were not loose insinuations or vague invectives—that his performance was not composed of schoolboy rant or college declamation—that he, a business-like personage, gave chapter and verse for all he alleged, dealing largely in names and dates; and if his charges were left unanswered, it was only because they were unanswerable. The committee's absence would be accounted no reason for delay; I, at least, it would be said, was present, and could require no notice of that which I should at all times be prepared to defend—my past conduct, no matter how arraigned, or how unexpectedly the charges so maturely prepared, so industriously

gathered from so many quarters, might have been brought forward against us. Wherefore I enter forthwith upon my defence against that lecture, the produce of the daily toil, the midnight oil, of the right honourable gentleman, aided probably by sundry fellows of colleges, who never crossed the precincts of their vice-chancellor's peculiar jurisdiction, and certainly distinguished by all that knowledge of the law, and of the customs of parliament, which might be looked for in those academical authorities.

The right honourable gentleman has charged me with grave offences, which he has visited with what he doubtless considered as a punishment adequate to the gravest of crimes—the weight of his censure—a censure delivered almost as if it had proceeded from the chair; and which, I must say in passing, would have been nearly as forcible, though it probably would have been less solemn, had it fallen from the chair. In circumstances so unprecedented, gentlemen are now most unexpectedly called upon to decide against the committee's reports, and against my conduct and that of my excellent colleagues, and against the conduct of this house, during two successive sessions, both as regards our acts and deeds, and as regards our omissions. But if I do not now satisfy all who hear me, that the committee were right, that I was right, that this house was right, and the right honourable gentleman wrong—if I do not succeed in proving to the heart's content of every one man of common candour and ordinary understanding, that the right honourable gentleman is utterly wrong in all his charges—wrong from the beginning to the end of his laboured oration—if I do not in a few minutes, and by referring to a few plain matters, strip that performance of any claim to credit—if I do not show him to be mistaken in his facts, out in his dates, at fault in his law, ignorant of all parliamentary precedent and practice, grossly uninformed, perhaps misinformed, upon the whole question which in an

evil hour he has undertaken to handle, with no better help than the practical knowledge and discretion of those who have urged *him* on to the assault, while they showed only a vicarious prodigality of their own persons—then I will consent to suffer—what shall I say?—to endure whatever punishment the right honourable gentleman may think fit to inflict upon me and my colleagues—even the weight of his censure—which will assuredly, in his estimation, be fully equal to our demerits, how great soever they may be. But I venture to hope that the house, mercifully regarding my situation while such a judgment is impending, will allow me, ere the awful decree goes forth, to avert, if it be possible, from our devoted heads, a fate so overwhelming.

The bill immediately before the house, and the important question of exempting specially visited charities, which my former speech had raised, obtained but a small share of the right honourable gentleman's attention. He was not here for any such purpose as debating that matter. He was hurrying on to his severe attack—that was what he must at all hazards get at—the matter in question before us signified nothing; yet he said just enough on that to show that he completely misapprehended the whole drift of the legal discussion. When he treated the argument respecting special visiters as reasoning from analogy, to be sure he made a sort of apology for not being able to grapple with such points. But then, why did he touch them at all, if he confesses his incapacity to handle them? Would it not have been as well to leave the subject in the hands of those who could comprehend it, such as his truly learned and honourable colleague,* and not in so merciless a fashion show off himself and his ignorance? Besides, his incapacity to follow the legal argument did not make him at all slow to

* Sir S. Shepard, attorney-general.