



PARLIAMENT.

HOUSE OF COMMONS—MONDAY, MARCH 4.

[For the first part of the proceedings of this day see the last Page.]

ARMY ESTIMATES.

The Order of the Day having been read for the House resolving itself into a Committee of Supply, Mr. W. WYNN rose to propose that it be an Instruction to the Committee to make provision for the army now serving in France. If there was one principle more important than another for the Commons of England to maintain, it was, that they should have the complete control of all armed forces kept on foot by the Crown. Nothing, therefore, could be more unconstitutional, than that a standing army should be supported at Exchequer without any authority on the part of Parliament to disband them. This power could be possessed only if the House of Commons possessed the power of paying them or withholding their pay. The measure proposed was also necessary for the safety of the Ministers, who, if there was any failure or delay in the payment of the French contribution, could not advance one farthing to make it good. The Hon. Genl. concluded by moving an instruction to the Committee to provide for the army in France. The Hon. J. W. WARD said, though he had not gone the length of rejecting the Estimates altogether, he did not stand pledged to any item of them; and he hoped he should not be arraigned of any want of due regard to our Constitution, if he said that his more direct opposition to the character of the Estimates was on financial considerations. The great and permanent cause of the misfortunes of the Country was taxation—[Hear, hear!]

and though he was far from undervaluing our Colonies, it was not too much to say, that the internal happiness of this Country was of more importance to us than an Archipelago of Islands in any quarter of the Globe.—[Hear, hear!]

After all the Petitions they had seen, and all that they had heard and known as to the distresses of this Country, it was the duty of the Ministers to propose Estimates on a reduced scale of expenditure; and unless some such reduction was made, he should feel it his duty to vote against many essential parts of the Estimates before them.

The motion was carried.

On the motion that the Speaker do leave the Chair, Mr. PROTHEROE said, he should not oppose the motion, as he thought it was unfair to send back the Ministers with their Estimates without examining them. He should not, however, vote for one extravagant item. Many items appeared to him to be extravagant, and the hopes which he had conceived from the Speech from the Throne had been disappointed by the Estimates. Notwithstanding what had been said in the Speech from the Throne, the Commerce of the Country was far from a flourishing condition. The Ministers had relied too much on official documents, and the lists of Imports and exports. Many of the persons who had swelled these lists had since swelled the lists of bankrupts, or taken advantage of the pernicious Intoxication Acts.

Lord NUGENT said, that because the House had rejected the opposition of the minority, they had got therefore rejected the principle of their opposition. The present Estimates, he thought, were unequal, extravagant, and unconditional, and unless they received much modification in the Committee, he should, on the Report, oppose them again in the mass.

The motion was carried, and the House having resolved into the Committee,

Mr. OSBOURNE took the Chair, but a loud cry was raised for Mr. BROGDEN, upon which the CHANCELLOR of the EXCHEQUER rose and stated, that Mr. Brogden was prevented from attending the House by indisposition.—[A laugh, and hear, hear.]

Lord PALMERSTON said, that in calling the attention of the Committee to the construction of the Estimates upon the Table, he should endeavour to obtain from the repetition of any detail, which he had already communicated to the House, but should merely confine himself to the statement of certain points, with regard to each and all of which he should be ready to give any explanation that might be required in the course of the discussion.—[Here his Lordship entered into various minute calculations, which afforded nothing interesting.] The Noble Lord concluded with proposing the next proposition, which was, "Resolved, that a great measure, as a matter of expediency, that 170,000 men, including our army, and also that in the territories of our Colonies, and also that of the Militia, be reduced for the service of the year 1816."

Lord CASTLEREAGH was anxious to take an early part in this most important discussion; and the more so, because, as the House might perceive, his recovery from his recent indisposition was not so complete as to allow him to delay the discharge of the duty which he felt called upon to perform. The Hon. Gentlemen opposite had dealt ungenerously and unfaithfully with his Majesty's Ministers on this subject. All he claimed from Parliament and from the Country was, that they would not allow his Majesty's Ministers to be clamoured down by any imputation of a disinclination to just economy. He would endeavour to dispel a little the cloud of prejudice with which it had been attempted to involve his Majesty's Government, by shewing what had been done by them on this very subject of economy. Last year, Parliament, in their wisdom and liberality, confided in Ministers the greatest supply that had ever been entrusted to a Government. The total amount of the sums voted, including the expenses of the debt, was one hundred and twenty millions—of which the sum of 80 millions, or about two-thirds of the gross sum, was applicable to the expected service of the year. The Country was at that time in one of the most tremendous contests in prospect, in which she had ever been plunged; and that not in a part only of the globe. War had not terminated with America. War existed in the East Indies. The difficulties to which the Country had at that time to look were not those alone of the year immediately before it, but of many subsequent years. At the close, however, of the year, (the Hon. Gentlemen opposite would say by good fortune,) those wars were all gloriously terminated by treaties which there was every reason to hope would prove permanent. Nor was this all. He trusted the House would see, that while the war was carried on with vigour and activity, his Majesty's Government had shewn the most provident attention to economy. His Right Hon. Friend had already informed Parliament, that in the course of the last year 20 millions of arrears had been liquidated, that an unfunded debt to the amount of 20 millions had been reduced, and that 2 millions had been brought to the credit of the present year. The present Estimates were not the Estimates of our permanent peace establishment; they partook more of the nature of war than of peace; in fact, they were of an intermediate character, having much of war expense mixed up with them. Having in the last year made great savings, the present proposition was Estimates to the amount of 29 millions, instead of Estimates to the amount of 80 millions; and that 29 millions would in another year be reduced to 20 millions. Great reductions had taken place. In the navy the reduction had been as great as in the army. His Noble Friend had shewn the progress of the reduction in the army. In considering the future expense of the army, the nature of its constitution ought to be considered, and the amount of that which he would call a dead expense. This dead expense had originated during the administration of the Hon. Gentleman opposite, at which time he had avowed, that on the return of peace, it would press most inconveniently on the finances of the country. Agreeing to the Property Tax, which had been suggested by the administration of the Hon. Gentleman, (most properly, and to doing which they had his last assistance), he allowed that it might be fair for them to discuss whether or not it was proper to continue it in peace; but he truly hoped he should not hear them call the measure, when the subject should be discussed, abortive, and oppressive, and inequitable—and ascribe the deepest crime to those by whom it was imposed. At least, they could not do this without turning their backs on all consistency and even decency. If they should so argue the question there, they had not so argued it elsewhere; and he trusted that those Honourable Gentlemen would not assume a higher tone on the subject in that House than they had done in another place. [Hear, hear.]

Here his Lordship entered into minute details, through which our limits prevented us from following him. With respect to America, he observed, that he did not entertain any fears of immediate differences with that Government, but that there could be no recollection of what had passed, without proposing a just and well founded necessity for the adoption of measures of security and precaution.—He thus concluded:—The grievances under which the Country, he was ready to admit, laboured at present, would, he trusted, prove only temporary; but he contended that it was merely by meeting these difficulties with courage, that they could be removed; for his part, he had no hesitation to declare, that the Property Tax must be supported—modified, however, so far as to take away that part of it which pressed immediately on the Tenant; for instance, by removing the tax on farming horses; to make the tax less would not, he was sure, eventually relieve the Country. The Property Tax, modified as he mentioned, was, in his opinion, absolutely necessary for the next two years at least, in order to remove the still remaining burdons of the war. He requested Honourable Members on the opposite side not to look upon the question with that spirit of narrow economy which had so lately been shown.—[Hear, hear, from the Opposition.]—That to meet the expenditure with that honest spirit which had prevailed throughout the war, that spirit which at length produced so glorious a termination of it.—[Hear, hear, from the Ministerial Benches.]

Mr. CALcraft rose to put the question of adjournment. After some confusion in consequence of the motion.

The CHANCELLOR of the EXCHEQUER begged leave to inquire, whether it was the intention of the House to pursue the present discussion, and to adjourn all others which might interfere with it?

After some conversation from various Members,

it was finally agreed to adjourn the discussion of the Army Estimates until next Wednesday, in order that Mr. Western's motion relative to the agricultural distresses of the Country might be brought on this day. The House adjourned.

[The debate upon this subject was resumed on Wednesday. Mr. S. Wortley moved, that there should be a deduction from the proposed Establishment of 10,000 men. For the Amendment, 130—Against it, 202. Majority, 72. The original Resolution was then carried without a division.]

THURSDAY, MARCH 7. AGRICULTURAL DISTRESS.

Mr. WESTERN rose, in pursuance of the notice which he had given, to call the attention of the House to the unexampled distress of the Agricultural Interests. He would move that the House should resolve itself into a Committee for that purpose, and as he conceived that they were almost universally admitted, he should anticipate but one objection, which alone he could suppose probable to be made, namely, that an inquiry would be very likely to increase alarm throughout the Country. The measure, however, which he intended to propose could not produce such an effect, and it was the duty of the House to expose to the public view both what it could do, and what it wished to do, in order to relieve those distresses which were so generally felt. Although its power might be limited in comparison of what was expected by the Public, yet it should not shrink from the consideration of resolving many thousands. As to the extent of the difficulties which existed, there was scarcely any way to describe them except by stating facts which Members are already in possession. He would, however, read certain documents, which he had collected with great precision, of such a nature as to prove that the distresses which existed were quite as great as were generally imagined. From Norfolk, which he considered might represent the average distress of the kingdom, he had received information, that there was an increase of Sheriff's writs to the number of 1607, and that executions on goods had risen from 96 to 174. In the county of Worcester, the number of writs & executions in Feb. 1815, was 640. In the same month of the following year they had increased to 850. There were at present, he understood, 186 parishes in that county under process for arrears of taxes. In Suffolk, the number of writs and executions had grown from 450 to 870. In Sussex, out of 32 parishes, of which one hundred consisted, there were 26 under process of Execution. In the late of Ely, during the years 1812 and 1813, one hundred, consisting of thirty parishes, the number of executions was but twenty, and the debt on which they were levied but £765; during the years 1814 and 1815, the number of executions increased to 60, and the debt to £18,000.—[Hear, hear, hear!]

Distresses in Rent and Taxes were, he understood, between 100,000 and £12,000. The question next to be considered was, whence they had arisen? Was it from amount of Taxation? Certainly in some measure from the Poor Rates. They were no doubt immense beyond belief.—[Hear, hear!]

Ytches, too, operated severely upon farmers to prohibit to the capital employed by them. Was it from the greatness of our national debt, and from the increased and increasing circulation of paper? He would say, that it was not from any one of these causes separately, but from a combination of them—from causes that produced effects, which in their turn became causes. The principal cause, however, was a surplus produce arising chiefly from our own growth; and here it was to be remarked, that the price of corn does not vary exactly with the surplus or deficit, for where either is small, there is always observed a much more than proportionate variation in price. Besides, as the price of grain had become a higher tone on the subject in that House than they had done in another place. [Hear, hear.]

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An opinion prevailed, that farmers had made extravagant profits during the last 15 or 20 years; but he thought that opinion was not well founded; nor did he think that the prices, on taking average of years, would be found so high as under the existing circumstances they should have been. He was only surprised that prices had not been higher. But to place this in a clearer light, he would take the prices on averages of years at two different periods, and compare the increase of prices in the one period over the other, with the corresponding increase of taxation; for whether in the shape of direct taxes, on the produce of agriculture, or otherwise, no man could doubt, that as taxation influenced the prices of all commodities, that taxation must be felt also either directly or indirectly by agriculture. Now, if they were to take the prices for the ten years prior to the year 1790, they would find about 47s. the quarter. The average of taxation, including the charge for the National Debt for the same period, was only 15 millions. On an average of ten years, ending 1812, excluding the two dear years of 1801 and 1802, and excluding also the last cheap years, the price of wheat was from 87s. to 88s. the quarter; and during this same period, the average of taxation was not less than 65 millions. Wheat had only therefore risen from 47 to 88s. per quarter. He was surprised that it had not risen to a much higher price, from the greatly increased rate of taxation, and also from the rapid increase of the amount of the circulating medium. Taxes had been quadrupled, having risen from 15 millions to upwards of 60. Under such an increase of taxation, and with the burdons exclusively laid on agriculture, it was impossible for the farmer to have made any great accumulations. It was true agriculture had been in a flourishing state, but he was sure that it had not yielded a greater return to the capital engaged in it than was done by any other manufacture. Upon the decrease of the price of produce, the circulation of country banks, which had been gradually increased, till it came to form a very large proportion of the circulating medium of England, was all at once greatly contracted, and almost entirely withdrawn. Looking at the Country under such novel circumstances, it was difficult to estimate what would be the result of this decrease of prices, attended as it had been by the withdrawing of nearly the whole of the paper circulation. Whence were we to stop? He could form no opinion on this subject—he could hardly conceive a limit to the progress of the distress. Prices might fall to what they were 50 years ago. At one time, the superabundance of the circulating medium was such, and the prices of all commodities became so high in consequence, that a very just alarm began to be entertained; but we were now in the other extreme, and the consequences to which that would give rise were beyond any views which he was enabled to form.—With regard to the value of the produce of our land, it had been estimated in various ways; but he thought on any calculation the amount of the value of all the produce of land must be considerably above 200 millions. He would take the rent of the kingdom at 57 millions. The gross produce was always estimated at 4 tens; in his own opinion, it was never 5 rents than 4, but he would merely take 4. Multiplying 57 by 4 would give 228 millions; but he would not call it more than 200 millions. Now, if this 200 millions was depreciated by an augmentation of produce beyond the demand for it, in summer such as no man had ever before known, it was unreasonable to suppose, that the loss on the gross amount had withdrawn the circulating medium. The paper was in consequence of the loss withdrawn; for it was founded on the value of that produce to a very considerable extent, and must therefore on the decrease in value of things, that extensive effects had been produced by this first cause, the depressed value of the produce of land, a depression arising from a surplus, though bearing no proportion to the surplus. As far as any remedy was practicable, it must consist in taking off that surplus—in finding a market for it—from that point all the consequences which they might wish to follow must be derived. Supposing things to go on in their present course without any interference on the part of the Legislature, what would be the effect? Why the evil would at last remedy itself—the price would rise by a diminution of produce; the produce would progressively be destroyed, and the prices would in consequence not only rise, but the surplus would be increased. For the high price would not arise naturally, as it were, from the gradual increase of wealth or taxation, but from general scarcity.—[Hear, hear, hear!]

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At one time, the superabundance of the circulating medium was such, and the prices of all commodities became so high in consequence, that a very just alarm began to be entertained; but we were now in the other extreme, and the consequences to which that would give rise were beyond any views which he was enabled to form.—With regard to the value of the produce of our land, it had been estimated in various ways; but he thought on any calculation the amount of the value of all the produce of land must be considerably above 200 millions. He would take the rent of the kingdom at 57 millions. The gross produce was always estimated at 4 tens; in his own opinion, it was never 5 rents than 4, but he would merely take 4. Multiplying 57 by 4 would give 228 millions; but he would not call it more than 200 millions. Now, if this 200 millions was depreciated by an augmentation of produce beyond the demand for it, in summer such as no man had ever before known, it was unreasonable to suppose, that the loss on the gross amount had withdrawn the circulating medium. The paper was in consequence of the loss withdrawn; for it was founded on the value of that produce to a very considerable extent, and must therefore on the decrease in value of things, that extensive effects had been produced by this first cause, the depressed value of the produce of land, a depression arising from a surplus, though bearing no proportion to the surplus. As far as any remedy was practicable, it must consist in taking off that surplus—in finding a market for it—from that point all the consequences which they might wish to follow must be derived. Supposing things to go on in their present course without any interference on the part of the Legislature, what would be the effect? Why the evil would at last remedy itself—the price would rise by a diminution of produce; the produce would progressively be destroyed, and the prices would in consequence not only rise, but the surplus would be increased. For the high price would not arise naturally, as it were, from the gradual increase of wealth or taxation, but from general scarcity.—[Hear, hear, hear!]

and therefore there was no estimating the danger from such a destruction of produce. One of the greatest mischiefs at present was, that the earnings of industry were so much diminished as to occasion a considerable diminution of consumption. Though the price of corn had decreased so very much, the People could get so little employment, that they were starting as it were, increased also, in a ratio sufficient for the sustenance

of that population, but even to glut the market. The surplus might not be very large, but still it was a surplus. On the fall of prices, in 1813, from 120s. to 70s. the quarter, the first effect of that fall undoubtedly was to create an alarm in the minds of the farmers. That alarm was considerably increased by the rejection of the Corn Bill in 1813, and still further by the rejection of it in 1814. The farmer was not only alarmed, but exceedingly distressed, and obliged to bring his article to market immediately, for the sake of raising money. It appeared then that the farmer was not possessed of those accumulations which the Public imagined—that he did not possess a sufficient reserve for his own protection—he was then forced to go with every disadvantage to market, and to take whatever the purchasers would give him. An opinion prevailed, that farmers had made extravagant profits during the last 15 or 20 years; but he thought that opinion was not well founded; nor did he think that the prices, on taking average of years, would be found so high as under the existing circumstances they should have been. He was only surprised that prices had not been higher. But to place this in a clearer light, he would take the prices on averages of years at two different periods, and compare the increase of prices in the one period over the other, with the corresponding increase of taxation; for whether in the shape of direct taxes, on the produce of agriculture, or otherwise, no man could doubt, that as taxation influenced the prices of all commodities, that taxation must be felt also either directly or indirectly by agriculture. Now, if they were to take the prices for the ten years prior to the year 1790, they would find about 47s. the quarter. The average of taxation, including the charge for the National Debt for the same period, was only 15 millions. On an average of ten years, ending 1812, excluding the two dear years of 1801 and 1802, and excluding also the last cheap years, the price of wheat was from 87s. to 88s. the quarter; and during this same period, the average of taxation was not less than 65 millions. Wheat had only therefore risen from 47 to 88s. per quarter. He was surprised that it had not risen to a much higher price, from the greatly increased rate of taxation, and also from the rapid increase of the amount of the circulating medium. Taxes had been quadrupled, having risen from 15 millions to upwards of 60. Under such an increase of taxation, and with the burdons exclusively laid on agriculture, it was impossible for the farmer to have made any great accumulations. 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