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Miscellaneous works Of The Late Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl Of Chesterfield

Consisting Of Letters to his Friends, never before printed, And Various
Other Articles

**Chesterfield, Philip Dormer Stanhope of
Dublin, 1777**

XLVII. Lord Chesterfield's first speech on the Gin act, February 21, 1743,
after the second reading of the Bill.

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XLVII.

LORD CHESTERFIELD'S first speech on the Gin act*, February 21, 1743, after the second reading of the Bill.

MY LORDS,

THE bill now under our consideration appears to me to deserve a much closer regard than seems to have been paid to it in the other house, through which it was hurried with the utmost precipitation, and where it passed almost without the formality of a debate; nor can I think that earnestness, with which some lords seem inclined to press it forward here, consistent with the importance of the consequences, which may with great reason be expected from it.

It has been urged that where so great a number have formed expectations of a national benefit from any bill, so much deference, at least, is due to their judgment, as that the bill should be considered in a committee. This, my lords, I admit to be in other cases a just and reasonable demand, and will readily allow that the proposal, not only of a considerable number, but even of any single lord, ought to be fully examined and regularly debated, according to the usual forms of this house. But in the present case, my lords, and in all cases like the present, this demand is improper, because it is useless; and it is useless, because we can do now all that we can do hereafter in a committee. For the bill before us is a money bill, which, according to the present opinion of the commons, we have no right to amend, and which therefore we have no need of considering in a committee, since the event of all our deliberations must be, that we are either to reject or pass it in its present state. For I suppose no lord will think this a proper time to enter into a controversy with the commons, for the revival of those privileges to which I believe

* The act of parliament, that had been passed the 9th year of George II. by which no person was permitted to sell spirituous liquor in less quantity than two gallons, without a licence, for which 50 pounds was to be paid, having proved, from the difficulties in the execution, ineffectual to obstruct the progress of drunkenness among the common people; a new bill was moved and passed in the house of commons, by which a small duty was laid on the spirits *per* gallon at the still-head, and the price of licences reduced to twenty shillings.

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we have a right; and such a controversy, the least attempt to amend a money bill will certainly produce.

To desire therefore, my lords, that this bill may be considered in a committee, is only to desire that it may gain one step without opposition; that it may proceed through the forms of the house by stealth, and that the consideration of it may be delayed, till the exigencies of the government shall be so great, as not to allow time for raising the supplies by any other method.

By this artifice, gross as it is, the patrons of this wonderful bill hope to obstruct a plain and open detection of its tendency. They hope, my lords, that the bill shall operate in the same manner with the liquor which it is intended to bring into more general use; and that, as those who drink spirits are drunk before they are well aware that they are drinking, the effects of this law shall be perceived before we know that we have made it. Their intent is, to give us a dram of policy, which is to be swallowed before it is tasted, and which, when once it is swallowed, will turn our heads.

But, my lords, I hope we shall be so cautious as to examine the draught which these state empirics have thought proper to offer us; and I am confident that a very little examination will convince us of the pernicious qualities of their new preparation, and shew that it can have no other effect than that of poisoning the public.

The law before us, my lords, seems to be the effect of that practice of which it is intended likewise to be the cause, and to be dictated by the liquor of which it so effectually promotes the use: for surely it never before was conceived, by any man intrusted with the administration of public affairs, to raise taxes by the destruction of the people.

Nothing, my lords, but the destruction of all the most laborious and useful parts of the nation, can be expected from the licence which is now proposed to be given, not only to drunkenness, but to drunkenness of the most detestable and dangerous kind, to the abuse not only of intoxicating, but of poisonous liquors.

Nothing, my lords, is more absurd than to assert, that the use of spirits will be hindered by the bill now before us, or indeed that it will not be in a very great degree promoted by it. For what produces all kind of wickedness, but the prospect of impunity on one part, or the sollicitati-

on of opportunity on the other? Either of these have too frequently been sufficient to overpower the sense of morality, and even of religion; and what is not to be feared from them, when they shall unite their force, and operate together, when temptations shall be increased, and terror taken away?

It is allowed, by those who have hitherto disputed on either side of this question, that the people appear obstinately enamoured of this new liquor; it is allowed on both parts, that this liquor corrupts the mind, and enervates the body, and destroys vigor and virtue, at the same time that it makes those who drink it too idle and too feeble for work; and while it impoverishes them by the present expence, disables them from retrieving its ill consequences by subsequent industry.

It might be imagined, my lords, that those who had thus far agreed, would not easily find any occasions of dispute; nor would any man, unacquainted with the motives by which parliamentary debates are too often influenced, suspect that after the pernicious qualities of this liquor, and the general inclination among the people to the immoderate use of it, had been generally admitted, it could be afterwards inquired, whether it ought to be made more common, whether this universal thirst for poison ought to be encouraged by the legislature, and whether a new statute ought to be made, to secure drunkards in the gratification of their appetites.

To pretend, my lords, that the design of this bill is to prevent or diminish the use of spirits, is to trample upon common sense, and to violate the rules of decency as well as of reason. For when did any man hear, that a commodity was prohibited by licensing its sale, or that to offer and refuse is the same action?

It is indeed pleaded, that it will be made dearer by the tax which is proposed, and that the increase of the price will diminish the number of the purchasers; but it is at the same time expected that this tax shall supply the expence of a war on the continent. It is asserted therefore, that the consumption of spirits will be hindered, and yet that it will be such as may be expected to furnish, from a very small tax, a revenue sufficient for the support of armies, for the re-establishment of the Austrian family, and the repressing of the attempts of France.

Surely,

Surely, my lords, these expectations are not very consistent, nor can it be imagined that they are both formed in the same head, though they may be expressed by the same mouth. It is however some recommendation of a statesman, when, of his assertions, one can be found reasonable or true; and in this, praise cannot be denied to our present ministers: for though it is undoubtedly false, that this tax will lessen the consumption of spirits, it is certainly true that it will produce a very large revenue, a revenue that will not fail, but with the people from whose debaucheries it arises.

Our ministers will therefore have the same honor with their predecessors, of having given rise to a new fund, not indeed for the payment of our debts, but for much more valuable purposes, for the cheering of our hearts under oppression, and for the ready support of those debts which we have lost hopes of paying. They are resolved, my lords, that the nation, which no endeavours can make wise, shall, while they are at its head, at least be merry; and since public happiness is the end of government, they seem to imagine that they shall deserve applause by an expedient, which will enable every man to lay his cares asleep, to drown sorrow, and lose in the delights of drunkenness both the public miseries and his own.

Luxury, my lords, is to be taxed, but vice prohibited, let the difficulties in executing the law be what they will. Would you lay a tax upon a breach of the ten commandments? Would not such a tax be wicked and scandalous; because it would imply an indulgence to all those who could pay the tax? Is not this a reproach most justly thrown by protestants upon the church of Rome? Was it not the chief cause of the reformation? And will you follow a precedent which brought reproach and ruin upon those that introduced it? This is the very case now before us. You are going to lay a tax, and consequently to indulge a sort of drunkenness, which almost necessarily produces a breach of every one of the ten commandments. Can you expect the reverend bench will approve of this? I am convinced they will not, and therefore I wish I had seen it full upon this occasion. I am sure I have seen it much fuller upon some other occasions, in which religion had no such deep concern.

We have already, my lords, several sorts of funds in this nation, so many that a man must have a good deal of learning to be master of them. Thanks to his majesty, we have now amongst us the most learned man of the nation in this way. I wish he would rise up and tell us, what name we are to give to this new fund. We have already the civil list fund, the sinking fund, the aggregate fund, the South-sea fund, and God knows how many others. What name we are to give to this new fund I know not, unless we are to call it the drinking fund. It may perhaps enable the people of a certain foreign territory to drink claret, but it will disable the people of this kingdom from drinking any thing else but gin; for, when a man has, by gin-drinking, rendered himself unfit for labor or business, he can purchase nothing else, and then the best thing he can do is to drink on till he dies.

Surely, my lords, men of such unbounded benevolence, as our present ministers, deserve such honors as were never paid before: they deserve to bestride a butt upon every sign-post in the city, or to have their figures exhibited as tokens where this liquor is to be sold by the licence which they have procured. They must be at least remembered to future ages, as the happy politicians, who, after all expedients for raising taxes had been employed, discovered a new method of draining the last reliques of the public wealth, and added a new revenue to the government: nor will those, who shall hereafter enumerate the several funds now established among us, forget among the benefactors to their country the illustrious authors of the drinking fund.

May I be allowed, my lords, to congratulate my countrymen and fellow-subjects upon the happy times which are now approaching, in which no man will be disqualified from the privilege of being drunk; when all discontent and disloyalty shall be forgotten, and the people, though now considered by the ministry as enemies, shall acknowledge the lenity of that government, under which all restraints are taken away?

But, to a bill for such desirable purposes, it would be proper, my lords, to prefix a preamble, in which the kindness of our intentions should be more fully explained, that the nation may not mistake our indulgence for cruelty,
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nor consider their benefactors as their persecutors. If therefore this bill be considered and amended (for why else should it be considered?) in a committee, I shall humbly propose, that it shall be introduced in this manner.

“Whereas the designs of the present ministry, whatever they are, cannot be executed without a great number of mercenaries, which mercenaries cannot be hired without money; and whereas the present disposition of this nation to drunkenness inclines us to believe, that they will pay more chearfully for the undisturbed enjoyment of distilled liquors, than for any other concession that can be made by the government; be it enacted, by the king’s most excellent majesty, that no man shall hereafter be denied the right of being drunk on the following conditions.”

This, my lords, to trifle no longer, is the proper preamble to this bill, which contains only the conditions on which the people of this kingdom are to be allowed henceforward to riot in debauchery, in debauchery licensed by law, and countenanced by the magistrates. For there is no doubt but those on whom the inventors of this tax shall confer authority will be directed to assist their masters in their design to encourage the consumption of that liquor, from which such large revenues are expected, and to multiply without end those licences which are to pay a yearly tribute to the crown.

By this unbounded licence, my lords, that price will be lessened, from the increase of which the expectations of the efficacy of this law are pretended; for the number of retailers will lessen the value, as in all other cases, and lessen it more than this tax will increase it. Besides, it is to be considered, that at present the retailer expects to be paid for the danger which he incurs by an unlawful trade, and will not trust his reputation or his purse to the mercy of his customer, without a profit proportioned to the hazard; but, when once the restraint shall be taken away, he will sell for common gain, and it can hardly be imagined that, at present, he subjects himself to informations and penalties for less than six pence a gallon.

The specious pretence, on which this bill is founded, and indeed the only pretence that deserves to be termed specious, is the propriety of taxing vice; but this maxim of government

government has, on this occasion, been either mistaken or perverted. Vice, my lords, is not properly to be taxed, but suppressed, and heavy taxes are sometimes the only means, by which that suppression can be attained. Luxury, my lords, or the excess of that which is pernicious only by its excess, may very properly be taxed, that such excess, though not strictly unlawful, may be made more difficult. But the use of these things which are simply hurtful, hurtful in their own nature, and in every degree, is to be prohibited. None, my lords, ever heard in any nation of a tax upon theft or adultery, because a tax implies a licence granted for the use of that which is taxed, to all who shall be willing to pay it.

Drunkenness, my lords, is universally and in all circumstances an evil; and therefore ought not to be taxed, but punished, and the means of it not to be made easy by a slight impost, which none can feel, but to be removed out of the reach of the people, and secured by the heaviest taxes, levied with the utmost rigor. I hope those, to whose care the religion of the nation is particularly consigned, will unanimously join with me in maintaining the necessity, not of taxing vice, but suppressing it, and unite for the rejecting of a bill, by which the future, as well as present, happiness of thousands must be destroyed.

 XLVIII.

LORD CHESTERFIELD'S second speech on the Gin act,
February 24, 1743.

MY LORDS,

THOUGH the noble lord * who has been pleased to excite us to an unanimous concurrence with himself and his associates in the ministry, in passing the ex-

* The duke of Newcastle.

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