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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**

XLVIII. Lord Chesterfield's second speech on the Gin act, February 24,
1743.

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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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cellent and wonder-working bill, this bill which is to lessen the consumption of spirits, without lessening the quantity which is distilled; which is to restrain drunkards from drinking, by setting their favourite liquor always before their eyes; to conquer habits by continuing them; and correct vice by indulging it, according to the lowest reckoning, for at least another year; still, my lords, such is my obstinacy, or such my ignorance, that I cannot yet comply with his proposal, nor can prevail with myself either to concur with measures so apparently opposite to the interest of the public, or to hear them vindicated, without declaring how little I approve it.

During the course of this long debate, I have endeavoured to recapitulate and digest the arguments which have been advanced, and have considered them both separately and conjointly, but find myself at the same distance from conviction as when I first entered the house.

In vindication of this bill, my lords, we have been told that the present law is ineffectual; that our manufacture is not to be destroyed; or not this year; that the security offered by the present bill, has induced great numbers to subscribe to the new fund; that it has been approved by the commons; and that, if it be found ineffectual, it may be amended another session.

All these arguments, my lords, I shall endeavour to examine, because I am always desirous of gratifying those great men to whom the administration of affairs is intrusted, and have always very cautiously avoided the odium of disaffection, which they will undoubtedly throw, in imitation of their predecessors, upon all those whose wayward consciences shall oblige them to hinder the execution of their schemes.

With a very strong desire, therefore, though with no great hopes, of finding them in the right, I venture to begin my inquiry, and engage in the examination of their first assertion, that the present law against the abuse of strong liquors is without effect.

I hope, my lords, it portends well to my inquiry, that the first position which I have to examine is true; nor can I forbear to congratulate your lordships upon having heard from the new ministry one assertion not to be contradicted.

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It is evident, my lords, from daily observation, and demonstrable from the papers upon the table, that every year, since the enacting of the last law, that vice has increased which it was intended to repress, and that no time has been so favourable to the retailers of spirits as that which has passed since they were prohibited.

It may therefore be expected, my lords, that, having agreed with the ministers in their fundamental proposition, I shall concur with them in the consequence which they draw from it; and, having allowed that the present law is ineffectual, should admit that another is necessary.

But, my lords, in order to discover whether this consequence be necessary, it must first be inquired why the present law is of no force? For, my lords, it will be found, upon reflection, that there are certain degrees of corruption, that may hinder the effect of the best laws. The magistrates may be vicious, and forbear to enforce that law by which themselves are condemned; they may be indolent, and inclined rather to connive at wickedness, by which they are not injured themselves, than to repress it by a laborious exertion of their authority; or they may be timorous, and, instead of awing the vicious, may be awed by them.

In any of these cases, my lords, the law is not to be condemned for its inefficacy, since it only fails by the defect of those who are to direct its operations. The best and most important laws will contribute very little to the security or happiness of a people, if no judges of integrity and spirit can be found amongst them. Even the most beneficial and useful bill that ministers can possibly imagine, a bill for laying on our estates, a tax of the fifth part of their yearly value, would be wholly without effect, if collectors could not be obtained.

I am therefore, my lords, yet doubtful, whether the inefficacy of the law now subsisting necessarily obliges us to provide another; for those that declared it to be useless, owned at the same time that no man endeavoured to enforce it; so that perhaps its only defect may be, that it will not execute itself.

Nor, though I should allow that the law is at present impeded by difficulties which cannot be broken through, but
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by men of more spirit and dignity than the ministers may be inclined to trust with commissions of the peace, yet it can only be collected, that another law is necessary, not that the law now proposed will be of any advantage.

Great use has been made of the inefficacy of the present law, to decry the proposal made by the noble lord, for laying a high duty upon these pernicious liquors. High duties have already, as we are informed, been tried without advantage; high duties are at this hour imposed upon those spirits which are retailed, yet we see them every day sold in the streets, without the payment of the tax required; and therefore it will be folly to make a second essay of means which have been found, by the essay of many years, unsuccessful.

It has been granted on all sides in this debate, nor was it ever denied on any other occasion, that the consumption of any commodity is most easily hindered by raising its price; and its price is to be raised by the imposition of a duty. This, my lords, which is, I suppose, the opinion of every man, of whatever degree of experience or understanding, appears likewise to have been thought of by the authors of the present law; and therefore they imagined that they had effectually provided against the increase of drunkenness, by laying, upon that liquor which should be retailed in small quantities, a duty which none of the inferior classes of drunkards would be able to pay.

Thus, my lords, they conceived that they had reformed the common people, without infringing the pleasures of others, and applauded the happy contrivance, by which spirits were to be made dear only to the poor, while every man who could afford to purchase two gallons was at liberty to riot at his ease, and, over a full flowing bumper, look down with contempt upon his former companions, now ruthlessly condemned to disconsolate sobriety.

But, my lords, this intention was frustrated, and the project, ingenious as it was, fell to the ground: for though they had laid a tax, they unhappily forgot this tax would make no addition to the price unless it was paid, and that it would not be paid unless some were empowered to collect it.

Here, my lords, was the difficulty; those who made the law were inclined to lay a tax from which themselves should be exempt, and therefore would not charge the
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liquor as it issued from the still; and when once it was dispersed in the hands of petty dealers, it was no longer to be found without the assistance of informers, and informers could not carry on the business of prosecution, without the consent of the people.

It is not necessary to dwell any longer upon the law, the repeal of which is proposed, since it appears already that it failed, only from a partiality not easily defended, and from the omission of what is now proposed, the collecting the duty from the still-head.

If this method be followed, there will be no longer any need of informations, or of any rigorous or new measures; the same officers that collect a smaller duty may levy a greater; nor can they be easily deceived with regard to the quantities that are made; the deceits, at least, that can be used, are in use already; they are frequently detected and suppressed, nor will a larger duty enable the distillers to elude the vigilance of the officers with more success.

Against this proposal, therefore, the inefficacy of the present law can be no objection. But it is urged, that such duties would destroy the trade of distilling, and a noble lord has been pleased to express great tenderness for a manufacture so beneficial and extensive.

That a large duty, levied at the still, would destroy, or very much impair, the trade of distilling, is certainly supposed by those who defend it, for they proposed it only for that end; and what better method can they propose, when they are called to deliberate upon a bill for the prevention of the excessive use of distilled liquors?

The noble lord has been pleased kindly to inform us, that the trade of distilling is very extensive, that it employs great numbers, and that they have arrived at exquisite skill, and therefore—note well the consequence—the trade of distilling is not to be discouraged.

Once more, my lords, allow me to wonder at the different conceptions of different understandings. It appears to me, that since the spirits, which the distillers produce, are allowed to enfeeble the limbs, and vitiate the blood, to pervert the heart, and obscure the intellects, that the number of distillers should be no argument in their favour! for I never heard that a law against theft was repealed or delayed, because thieves were numerous. It appears to me,

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me, my lords, that if so formidable a body are confederated against the virtue or the lives of their fellow-citizens, it is time to put an end to the havock, and to interpose, while it is yet in our power to stop the destruction.

So little, my lords, am I affected with the merit of the wonderful skill which the distillers are said to have attained, that it is, in my opinion, no faculty of great use to mankind, to prepare palatable poison; nor shall I ever contribute my interest for the reprieve of a murderer, because he has, by long practice, obtained great dexterity in his trade.

If their liquors are so delicious, that the people are tempted to their own destruction, let us at length, my lords, secure them from these fatal draughts, by bursting the vials that contain them; let us crush at once these artists in slaughter, who have reconciled their countrymen to sickness and to ruin, and spread over the pitfalls of debauchery such baits as cannot be resisted.

The noble lord has, indeed, admitted that this bill may not be found sufficiently coercive, but gives us hopes that it may be improved and enforced another year, and persuades us to endeavour a reformation of drunkenness by degrees, and above all, to beware at present of hurting the *manufacture*.

I am very far, my lords, from thinking that there are, this year, any peculiar reasons for tolerating murder; nor can I conceive why the manufacture should be held sacred now, if it be to be destroyed hereafter. We are, indeed desired to try how far this law will operate, that we may be more able to proceed with due regard to this valuable manufacture.

With regard to the operation of the law, it appears to me, that it will only enrich the government, without reforming the people, and I believe there are not many of a different opinion. If any diminution of the sale of spirits be expected from it, it is to be considered that this diminution will, or will not, be such as is desired for the reformation of the people. If it be sufficient, the manufacture is at an end, and all the reasons against a higher duty are of equal force against this: but if it is not sufficient, we have, at least,

least, omitted part of our duty, and have neglected the health and virtue of the people.

I cannot, my lords, yet discover why a reprieve is desired for this manufacture, why the present year is not equally propitious to the reformation of mankind, as any will be that may succeed it. It is true we are at war with two nations, and perhaps with more; but war may be better prosecuted without money than without men, and we but little consult the military glory of our country, if we raise supplies for paying our armies, by the destruction of those armies that we are contriving to pay.

We have heard the necessity of reforming the nation by degrees, urged as an argument for imposing first a lighter duty, and afterwards a heavier. This complaisance for wickedness, my lords, is not so defensible as that it should be battered by arguments in form, and therefore I shall only relate a reply made by Webb, the noted walker, upon a parallel occasion.

This man, who must be remembered by many of your lordships, was remarkable for vigor, both of mind and body, and lived wholly upon water for his drink, and chiefly upon vegetables for his other sustenance. He was one day recommending his regimen to one of his friends who loved wine, and who perhaps might somewhat contribute to the prosperity of this spirituous manufacture, and urged him, with great earnestness, to quit a course of luxury, by which his health and his intellects would equally be destroyed. The gentleman appeared convinced, and told him, "that he would conform to his counsel, and thought he could not change his course of life at once, but would leave off strong liquors by degrees." "By degrees," says the other with indignation, "if you should unhappily fall into the fire, would you caution your servants not to pull you out by degrees?"

This answer, my lords, is applicable to the present case. The nation is sunk into the lowest state of corruption; the people are not only vicious, but insolent beyond example; they not only break the laws, but defy them, and yet, some of your lordships are for reforming them by degrees.

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I am not so easily persuaded, my lords, that our ministers really intend to supply the defects that may hereafter be discovered in this bill. It will doubtless produce money, perhaps much more than they appear to expect from it. I doubt not but the licensed retailers will be more than fifty thousand, and the quantity retailed must increase with the number of retailers. As the bill will, therefore, answer all the ends intended by it, I do not expect to see it altered; for I have never observed ministers desirous of amending their own errors, unless they are such as have caused a deficiency in the revenue.

Besides, my lords, it is not certain that, when this fund is mortgaged to the public creditors, they can prevail upon the commons to change the security. They may continue the bill in force, for the reasons, whatever they are, for which they have passed it, and the good intentions of our ministers, however sincere, may be defeated, and drunkenness, legal drunkenness, established in this nation.

This, my lords, is very reasonable; and therefore we ought to exert ourselves for the safety of the nation, while the power is yet in our own hands; and without regard to the opinion or proceedings of the other house shew, that we are yet the chief guardians of the people.

The ready compliance of the commons, with the measures proposed in this bill, has been mentioned here, with a view, I suppose, of influencing us; but surely by those who had forgotten our independence, or resigned their own. It is not only the right, but the duty of this house, to deliberate, without regard to the determinations of the other: for how should the nation receive any benefit from the distinct powers that compose the legislature, unless the determinations are without influence upon each other? If either the example or authority of the commons can divert us from following our own convictions, we are no longer part of the legislature: we have given up our honors, and our privileges; and what then is our concurrence but slavery, or our suffrage but an echo?

The only argument, therefore, that now remains, is the expediency of gratifying those, by whose ready subscrip-

scription, the exigencies our new statesmen have brought upon us have been supported, and of continuing the security by which they have been encouraged to such liberal contributions.

Public credit, my lords, is indeed of very great importance; but public credit can never be long supported without public virtue; nor indeed, if the government could mortgage the morals and health of the people, would it be just and rational to confirm the bargain. If the ministry can raise money only by the destruction of their fellow-subjects, they ought to abandon those schemes for which the money is necessary; for what calamity can be equal to unbounded wickedness?

But, my lords, there is no necessity for a choice which may cost us or our ministers so much regret; for the same subscriptions may be procured by an offer of the same advantages to a fund of any other kind; and the sinking fund will easily supply any deficiency that might be suspected in another scheme.

To confess the truth, I should feel very little pain from an account that the nation was for some time determined to be less liberal of their contributions, and that money was withheld, till it was known in what expeditions it was to be employed, to what princes subsidies were to be paid, and what advantages were to be purchased by it for our country. I should rejoice, my lords, to hear that the lottery, by which the deficiencies of this duty are to be supplied, was not filled, and that the people were grown, at last, wise enough to discern the fraud, and to prefer honest commerce, by which all may be gainers, to a game by which the greatest number must certainly be losers.

The lotteries, my lords, which former ministers have proposed, have always been censured by those that saw their nature and their tendency; they have been considered as legal cheats, by which the ignorant and the rash are defrauded; and the subtle and avaricious often enriched; they have been allowed to divert the people from trade, and to alienate them from useful industry. A man who is uneasy in his circumstances, and idle in his disposition, collects the remains of his fortune, and buys tickets in a lottery; retires from business, indulges himself in laziness, and waits, in some obscure place,

place, the event of his adventure. Another, instead of employing his stock in trade, rents a garret, and makes it his business, by false intelligence and chimerical alarms, to raise and sink the price of tickets alternately, and takes advantage of the lies, which he has himself invented.

Such, my lords, is the traffick that is produced by this scheme of getting money; nor were these inconveniencies unknown to the present ministers in the time of their predecessors, whom they never ceased to pursue with the loudest clamours, whenever the exigencies of the government reduced them to a lottery.

If I, my lords, might presume to recommend to our ministers the most probable method of raising a large sum for the payment of the troops of the electorate, I should, instead of the tax and lottery now proposed, advise them to establish a certain number of licensed wheel-barrows, on which the laudable trade of thimble and button might be carried on for the support of the war, and shoe-boys might contribute to the defence of the house of *Austria* by raffling for apples.

Having now, my lords, examined, with the utmost candor, all the reasons which have been offered in defence of the bill, I cannot conceal the result of my inquiry. The arguments have had so little effect upon my understanding, that, as every man judges of other by himself, I cannot believe that they have any influence, even upon those that offer them, and therefore I am convinced that this bill must be the result of considerations which have been hitherto concealed, and is intended to promote designs which are never to be discovered by the authors before their execution.

With regard to these motives and designs, however artfully concealed, every lord in this house is at liberty to offer his conjectures.

When I consider, my lords, the tendency of this bill, I find it calculated only for the propagation of diseases, the suppression of industry, and the destruction of mankind. I find it the most fatal engine that ever was pointed at a people; an engine by which those who are not killed will be disabled, and those who preserve their limbs, will be deprived of their senses.

This bill therefore appears to be designed only to thin the ranks of mankind, and to disburden the world of the multitudes that inhabit it, and is perhaps the strongest proof of political sagacity that our new ministers have yet exhibited. They well know, my lords, that they are universally detested, and that whenever a Briton is destroyed, they are freed from an enemy; they have therefore opened the flood-gates of gin upon the nation, that, when it is less numerous, it may be more easily governed.

Other ministers, my lords, who had not attained to so great a knowledge in the art of making war upon their country, when they found their enemies clamorous and bold, used to awe them with prosecutions and penalties, or destroy them like burglars with prisons and with gibbets. But every age, my lords, produces some improvement; and every nation, however degenerate, gives birth, at some happy period of time, to men of great and enterprizing genius. It is our fortune to be witnesses of a new discovery in politics; we may congratulate ourselves upon being cotemporaries with those men, who have shewed that hangmen and halters are unnecessary in a state, and that ministers may escape the reproach of destroying their enemies, by inciting them to destroy themselves.

This new method may, indeed, have upon different constitutions a different operation; it may destroy the lives of some, and the senses of others; but either of these effects will answer the purposes of the ministry, to whom it is indifferent, provided the nation becomes insensible, whether pestilence or lunacy prevails among them. Either mad or dead the greatest part of the people must quickly be, or there is no hope of the continuance of the present ministry.

For this purpose, my lords, what could have been invented more efficacious than an establishment of a certain number of shops, at which poison may be vend- ed; poison so prepared as to please the palate, while it wastes the strength, and only kills by intoxication? From the first instant that many of the enemies of the ministry shall grow clamorous and turbulent, a crafty hireling may lead him to the ministerial slaughter-house, and ply him with their wonder-working liquor, till he
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is no longer able to speak or think; and, my lords, no man can be more agreeable to our ministers, than he that can neither speak nor think, except those who speak without thinking.

But, my lords, the ministers ought to reflect, that though all the people of the present age are their enemies, yet they have made no trial of the temper and inclinations of posterity. Our successors may be of opinions very different from ours; they may perhaps approve of wars on the continent, while our plantations are insulted and our trade obstructed; they may think the support of the house of Austria of more importance to us than our own defence, and may perhaps so far differ from their fathers, as to imagine the treasures of Britain very properly employed in supporting the troops, and increasing the splendor, of a foreign electorate.

Whatever, my lords, be the true reason for which this bill is so warmly promoted, I think they ought, at least, to be deliberately examined; and therefore cannot think it consistent with our regard for the nation to suffer it to be precipitated into a law. The year, my lords, is not so far advanced but that supplies may be raised by some other method, if this should be rejected; nor do I think that we ought to consent to this, even though our refusal should hinder the supplies, since we have no right, for the sake of any advantage, however certain or great, to violate all the laws of heaven and earth, and to fill the exchequer with the price of the lives of our fellow-subjects.

Let us therefore, my lords, not suffer ourselves to be driven forward with such haste, as may hinder us from observing whither we are going. Let us not be persuaded to precipitate our counsels, by those who know that all delays are detrimental to their designs, because delays may produce new information; and they are conscious that the bill will be the less approved, the more it is undestood.

But every reason which they can offer against the motion is, in my opinion, reason for it; and therefore I shall readily agree to postpone the clause, and no less readily to reject the bill.

If, at last, reason and evidence are vain, if neither justice nor compassion can prevail, but the nation must be destroyed for the support of the government; let us at least, my lords, confine our assertions, in the preamble, to truth. Let us not affirm that drunkenness is established by the advice or consent of the lords spiritual, since I am confident not one of them will so far contradict his own doctrine, as to vote for a bill which gives a sanction to one vice, and ministers opportunities and temptations to all others, and which, if it be not speedily repealed, will overflow the whole nation with a deluge of wickedness.

 XLIX.

Lettre de son excellence my lord CHESTERFIELD aux états généraux des provinces-unies, pour prendre congé, le 26 Février, N. S. 1732.

HAUTS ET PUISSANS SEIGNEURS,

LE roi, mon maître, qui me rappelle pour remplir les fonctions de ma charge auprès de sa personne, m'a ordonné de vous réitérer en cette occasion les plus fortes assurances de son inviolable amitié pour cette illustre république.

C'est par-là que je commençai ma commission auprès de vos hautes puissances; il m'est doux de la terminer de même, et je me félicite de ce que, pendant un assez long-tems qu'elle a duré, tout a visiblement concouru à vérifier les sentimens d'un monarque incapable d'en témoigner qui ne soient réels.

Le roi sent vivement les avantages que les deux nations retirent de l'alliance qui les unit si étroitement. Toujours attentif au bonheur de ses sujets, et à celui de ses alliés, il est résolu d'entretenir, et s'il est possible, de ferrer de plus en plus les nœuds d'une union que

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