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A

LETTER

TO

THE LORD CHANCELLOR

ON THE

ABOLITION OF SLAVERY.

BY A WEST INDIAN,

LONDON:

B. FELLOWES, LUDGATE STREET.

1833.

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ADVERTISEMENT.

The following Letter was sent to Lord Brougham in December, 1830. As the writer has seen no reason to change his views, and, as the present ministerial plan appears to him a very dangerous one, it is now printed.

TO THE RIGHT HON.

LORD BROUGHAM AND VAUX,

Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain.

MY LORD,

Whatever view your Lordship may take of the plan I am about to offer for the settlement of the Negro Slavery question, I am confident that we are agreed about the objects which are proposed to be accomplished by that plan :—that Negro Slavery must cease ; that its abolition should be effected with the least possible mischief and offence ; and that the means adopted for this purpose should be formed without any, the remotest, reference to party-spirit and party-interests, to the competition between East and

West Indian industry, or to any principle but that of humanity and justice.

I believe many well-meaning people are so weak as to think that the British Parliament need only pass a bill for setting free all slaves, and at once they will be in the condition of labourers in a country always free, and their masters in that of farmers in such a country. This would be silly enough any where, but in England it is a refusal to learn from our own experience; for how immense are the difficulties of rectifying our poor laws system, which has gone a little way towards introducing a kind of Slavery.

It was the opinion of the wisest ancient writer on politics,* that a slave is entitled to liberty only as soon as he is capable of using it. The justness of this view is unquestionable; but unluckily it so happens that no one can be so well qualified as the master, both to judge when the slave is fit for freedom, and to *make* him fit; and yet it

* Aristotle.

is usually the master's interest to keep him a slave. That system, therefore, and that only can effectually put an end to slavery, so as to benefit the slave himself, which shall make his emancipation flow from the *will* and self-interest of the master. Keeping this principle in view, I propose,

First, That there be *a transfer either of the whole or of a portion of the tax now laid on sugar in the shape of duties, to one on slaves.*

Secondly, That the tax be an *ad valorem* tax, and the valuation fixed by the slave-owner, and appended to the registry of the slave.

Thirdly, That the owner be compelled to sell his slave at the price so fixed, whenever the slave demands it, or any other person offers to purchase him for the purpose of setting him free.

Fourthly, That *some* representation of the colonies in Parliament be allowed, and the

duties and powers of the colonial legislatures limited accordingly. This last measure (independently of its being otherwise expedient and just) is necessary for carrying into effect the former, the colonies having been guaranteed by the Act of 1778, from internal interference.*

The manner in which the measures proposed by me may be expected to operate, is briefly this :

The owner of the slave will be made the *voluntary* instrument of emancipation, by rendering it his interest to convert the taxed slave into the untaxed free labourer. And he will not be able to evade the pressure of the tax by setting a lower valuation than the true one on his slave, inasmuch as he will be compelled to sell the slave at that price whenever his redemption is claimed.

* The consent of the colonial legislatures to a taxation of slaves, instead of the duties on sugar, would, of course, render this part of the scheme unnecessary ; and it is possible that their consent may now be obtained, especially if the choice should be between this and the obnoxious measure at present contemplated by government.

It may be objected, indeed, "How are the slaves to be redeemed, even if the price were thus lowered?" The better sort, I answer, by the savings of their little perquisites,—perquisites which the master will never curtail, because he well knows that they are *necessary to render the slave valuable*,—to make him trustworthy, and to give him influence with the inferior sort. Something more might be done by voluntary contribution; but the main point is, that it would be palpably the master's interest to convert his taxed labourer into an untaxed one, and that he would not long ask for a boon to induce him to do this. In many instances, he would perhaps free the slave under an agreement of his afterwards *working out* his price.

Old prejudices may for a time keep many back, and this would, on the whole, be beneficial; it would be just the "lock in the wheel" of a system which ought not to move with unchecked velocity. The result would be, that the better sort of slaves only would, in the first instance, be set free, or encouraged to purchase their

freedom on low terms, because their value being the highest, the tax on them would be the heaviest. Now these are the slaves best prepared for freedom; and it is most desirable that they should first enjoy it, and not all simultaneously. But once having tried the experiment on these, and having found that free labour yields a greater return than slave labour did, the slave owner would inevitably go on to free all his slaves. Prejudices that will yield to nothing else, will give way when self-interest is palpably opposed to them. Variations and impediments in the working of the system there must be; but this is the natural operation of it. It addresses not the humanity of men, which may grow cool, but self-interest which never does; it makes the interest of the planters and the cause of emancipation coincide.

At the same time, no one can be better aware than your Lordship of the suspicion with which any measure, professing as its object the emancipation of the slaves, is likely to be regarded by the proprietors. Certain and evident as is the

advantage of such a system to them, I question whether they do not look with so much mistrust on any interference of this kind, as to make it likely that they would reject the proposal, unless it carried with it an important concession to their wishes ; wishes which I know have long been ardently entertained. Let the Colonies be represented in the British Parliament,* not, indeed, each colony by a separate member, but in such proportion to their importance as may seem fit on a careful survey of the interest to be represented. Representation they must have, if they are themselves to be treated in this matter like freemen, and not like slaves. This must be the preliminary measure to any amicable and equitable adjustment of the question. The details of such an arrangement, as may secure an adequate representation without adding too many members to Parliament, (perhaps four might be sufficient,) I shall not enter upon ; it is, I am sure, practicable, although it may, probably, be necessary to admit of some anomaly

* See Note, p. 8.

in the period for which a member should be elected. The distance between the colonies and the mother country may make it necessary that in case of a dissolution of Parliament the former member should be considered as member in the new house, *pro tempore*. Some difficulties again may be suggested in the mode of election, owing to the difference between the interests to be represented in some colonies,—as Trinidad and St. Lucia, — contrasted with others, — such as Barbadoes and Jamaica; but it is plain that they all by some means do contrive at present to appoint representatives. The agents for the colonies are, in fact, a clumsy attempt at representation; and if the clashing and ill-defined interests of some of the colonies have never prevented the appointment of such persons, they cannot now be supposed to do so.

I shall not anticipate further the many arguments which I am aware may be urged, for argument sake, against my proposal; but there is one point of difficulty which I feel, and of which I am not competent to say, whether it is sufficient to deter

Government from advocating this measure. There must be some sacrifice of revenue on the part of Great Britain,—a gradual, but still a considerable sacrifice. Whilst the system is working, whilst the transition from taxed slaves to untaxed free labourers is going on, the revenue derived from the colonies must decrease. I state the objection in the strongest form, because my design is, not so much to advocate my present scheme, as to ascertain the practicability of the object which is to be accomplished by this or by some other means; and I should be glad to see it placed in its strongest light before the public, if only to clear the national character from the charge of canting hypocrisy on this subject. The country cannot surely refuse to make some sacrifice for the attainment of this great object, unless the voice of humanity and generosity, which has been so long echoing from one end of Great Britain to the other, be indeed only the whine of sickly sentimentality or party cunning. Can we, in the same breath, continue to demand slave emancipation, and refuse to contribute something, for a few years, whether it be from our abundance, or our need, to accom-

plish it? Taxation is, to be sure, burthensome enough already, but this would be no tax,—it would be a national charity. No sensible man can expect the same sort of legislation for the removal of an old, obstinate, and enormous evil, as for the continuance and improvement of a good or tolerable system. Obstacles of some sort must stand in the way of settling this question; but are we to leave our neighbour to struggle, and sink, and drown, because we are afraid of catching cold in helping him out of the water?

Still it is a difficulty, and if it be met in the first instance by a readiness on the part of this country, to make such a temporary sacrifice, as shall go hand in hand with our professions of philanthropy, it will also require the prospective wisdom of the Legislature to replace gradually, at the proper season, and in some different shape, on the colonies, their present share of the burthen of taxation. Meanwhile, the breathing time which will be given them, is *necessary for their future prosperity*, I should almost say for their commercial existence.

Nor should I then anticipate any serious opposition to such a measure, from the colonies themselves. Matters of this kind will be far more readily and satisfactorily arranged, when parliamentary representatives in England, instead of legislators abroad, are the parties to be consulted, and to decide. These will always be, as the Agents now are, permanent residents of Great Britain, removed from scenes which may be supposed to foster prejudice; more accessible, and more under that sort of control which alone should be exercised by a free country over any of its members. Had the United States of America been formerly represented (according to Adam Smith's plan), it is a question whether any discontent on their part would yet have divided us. It is better, no doubt, for both countries that a separation did take place; but if it be our policy to retain our present colonies much longer, the same views of policy as well as of justice require, that the colonists should be admitted to all the rights of their fellow-subjects at home.

The suggestions which I have offered will, unless I am much mistaken in your Lordship's character, be estimated simply by their intrinsic claim to consideration. But it may still be necessary for me to add, that they are not mere abstract speculations, which have exercised my ingenuity in seclusion, and at a distance from the actual scene of slavery. I have lived long in the colonies, have spent indeed some of my best years in hard service there; I know the people, black and white, master and slave; and whatever reception this proposal of mine may meet with, sure am I that no emancipation measure will be either safe or effectual, that shall not so far coincide with it, as to recognize the principle of the master becoming the voluntary instrument of freedom to the slave.

I have the honour to be

My Lord,

Your Lordship's obedient Servant,

A WEST INDIAN.

December, 1830.

