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The Principles of the Revolution vindicated

I N A
S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE THE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE,

O N
WEDNESDAY, MAY 29. 1776.

By RICHARD WATSON, D.D. F.R.S.
REGIUS PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY IN THAT UNIVERSITY.

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TO HIS GRACE
AUGUSTUS-HENRY,
DUKE OF GRAFTON,
C H A N C E L L O R
OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE.

My LORD DUKE,

THE principles maintained in the following Discourse have of late become generally unfashionable, and exposed the Author of it to some little misrepresentation
even

Polse
Waterford
Feb 11 1711

even in this place; he conceives them however to be founded in truth, or he would not have either thus publicly avowed them to the world, or inscribed them to your Grace; but have waited for some other opportunity of testifying the gratitude, with which he has the honour to be,

My LORD,

Your GRACE'S

Much obliged Servant,

THE AUTHOR.

R O M. xiii. 3, 4.

RULERS ARE NOT A TERROR TO GOOD WORKS, BUT TO THE EVIL. WILT THOU THEN NOT BE AFRAID OF THE POWER? DO THAT WHICH IS GOOD, AND THOU SHALT HAVE PRAISE OF THE SAME: FOR HE IS THE MINISTER OF GOD TO THEE FOR GOOD. —

MANKIND may be considered as one great aggregate of equal and independent individuals, whom various natural and moral causes have been contributing for above four thousand years to disperse over the surface of the earth. That the earth has never yet, since the universal deluge, been stocked with a third part of the inhabitants it is able to sustain, has been chiefly owing to the ravages of war, excited in opposition to the principle of natural equality here advanced. For what else almost is the history of our Species, but the history of its destruction? it is blotted in every page with the blood of millions, who have either nobly fallen in asserting the great rights of nature against the encroachments and abuses of civil Society, or else of those who have stupidly suffered themselves to be sacrificed in supporting that reproach to human nature, which derogates equally from the honour of those who suffer it, and from the glory of those who use it, Despotism.

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Every individual of our Species is endowed with an aptness and ability of injuring every other with whom he has any intercourse; from hence is derived the expediency of forming civil Societies, that each individual may avail himself of the common strength in resisting private oppression; but this expediency can never become a reason, why a few men of like passions with others, and no better than the rest of their kind, should be permitted in any age or country to tyrannise over their fellows by nature, *to lift up their hearts above their Brethren*, (Deut. xvii. 20.) With respect to the great blessings of our being, God, as an impartial parent, has put us all upon a level; we are all sprung from the same stock, born into the world under the same natural advantages, the earth nourishes us all with the same food, pours forth the same general beverage for us all, defends us all from the intemperature of the seasons with the same coverings, we all breathe the same air, enjoy the same light, are warmed by the same sun, refreshed by the same rains, recruited by the same sleep. This equal distribution of natural good, is accompanied with an equality of natural faculties, by which we are enabled to enjoy it. The utmost period of human life is much the same to all the nations of the earth; intemperance every where shortens this period; but temperance cannot generally lengthen it to a much greater extent in one climate, than in another; the inhabitants of the temperate Zones have in this point no advantage over the rest of their Species; they are not formed with bodies more lasting, or more exempt from external injury or internal decay, than their neighbours on each side; and as to the individuals in particular climates, no one has either more senses, or the same senses in greater perfection, than thousands of his fellows. The same equality is observable in our intellectual
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endowments; civil culture indeed puts a distinction between individuals, which the state of nature is a stranger to; but even this distinction, great as it may seem in some instances, is in all greater in appearance than in reality; the faculties of perceiving, retaining, discerning; of comparing, compounding, and abstracting our Ideas, are as quick and as extensive in the lowest classes of life, as in the highest; the difference consists, in their being exerted upon different objects. Some disparity, it is true, with respect to corporal strength and intellectual ability, may be observed, when we compare together the most perfect of our Species with the most imperfect; yet this difference not only becomes less and less, as we increase the numbers compared together; ceasing entirely, when we take in the whole; but cannot, even where it does subsist in the extreme degree, induce amongst free agents any natural dependence or inequality, any right to dominion on the one hand, or obligation to subjection on the other.

The Analogy of nature leads us to the same conclusion: Amongst the various orders of Beings, which rise by imperceptible gradations from unanimated matter to Man, not one has yet been discovered, in which the equality and independence of individuals is not preserved. We may observe many whole ranks of creatures contributing at the expence of their own existence to the support of that of others; but this general subordination of different classes, has no relation to the subjection of one individual to another in the same class. We may observe moreover in some particular classes, many individuals uniting into a kind of community, feeding and sleeping in herds and flocks, assembling themselves together at stated times and in particular places, and making their migrations in large companies; but this disposition for Society, whether you

ascribe it to the timidity, the affection, the mechanism of their respective natures; from whatever principle you derive it, certainly does not seem to proceed from the superiority of any one individual or of any number of individuals over the rest. An inferiority of one Species of Beings to another, and an equality of individuals in the same Species, are general Laws of nature, which pervade the whole System.

Nor has God, in the particular revelations of his will which he hath made, delivered any thing subversive of the conclusion here drawn from the contemplation of the general system of nature which he hath formed. When he blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, *be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth*; his benediction was general and equal to the Patriarch and his three sons, and in them, to their respective posterities, by whom the whole earth has been overspread: and when he further said, *the fear of you, and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, and upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered*; he did not by this great charter, under which man claims dominion over the other animals of the earth, give any one man dominion over another.

The natural equality and independence of individuals here contended for, is not only the great source, from which that part of the System of natural law, which explains the duties of all men towards all in their individual capacity, and of all independent States towards each other in their collective capacity, is derived; but is also the surest foundation of all just reasoning concerning the origin and extent of civil Government in every part of the world. For, this principle being admitted, that, antecedent to all voluntary compact, every individual is equal to every other; it follows as an easy consequence, that
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the just superiority of any one man, or of any order and succession of men in any community, over the other members which compose it, must spring from their express appointment and free consent; — that no one individual can have a right to give his consent for any other; nor any one generation of men, a right to establish any form of Government, which their Children will not have an equal right to alter or abolish as they think fit; — that as no individual can be compelled to give his consent to become a member of any civil community, it may be doubted whether he can be compelled to continue a member, unless in cases of his delinquency against the laws of nature, or against such laws of Society as he himself has either explicitly assented to or tacitly acquiesced in, or unless a perpetual continuance in the community made part of the compact by which he entered into it; — that the Authority of the supreme Magistrate to restrain natural liberty, and to dispose of personal property, may be circumscribed in its extent, defined in its quality, and limited in its duration, according to the mere good pleasure of those who entrust him with it; — that when a civil Governor violates the Constitution of his country, or in other words, the compact made between himself and those who have condescended to be governed by him, he forfeits all title to the distinction, which his equals had for certain ends and purposes thought proper to confer upon him; — that Kings are not to look upon their Kingdoms as private estates, which they have an unconditional right to possess; nor to consider themselves as superior to the laws, or their subjects as slaves, who are to fall down, like the Idolaters of old, and worship the work of their own hands.

These and many other equally important truths concerning the nature of civil Authority, were either not generally understood,

stood, or not generally received amongst us, till after the Revolution. The People and Parliament indeed, in the time of Charles the First, seem to have comprehended the great outlines of civil liberty; but imagining, that it could not become complete, unless all men were reduced to the level of the state of nature, they overturned the Constitution; and by finally submitting to the daring usurpations of Cromwell, they brought the nation under a more debasing and deplorable Servitude, than ever it had experienced under the most arbitrary of its princes. Thanks be to God, that as on this day we were freed from Republican Tyranny, and restored to that form of Government, which justly excites the envy of every modern nation, and which no ancient nation, in the opinion of the greatest Politician of Imperial Rome, ever enjoyed. The miseries which preceded the Restoration, the causes which under God's especial providence produced it, and the misfortunes which followed it, from its being accomplished without subjecting the King to proper conditions, or from some inherent malady in the then Constitution, are all too notorious to be enlarged upon before this assembly. The misfortunes of that Family, terminated in the safety of these Kingdoms; but God forbid, we should insult the Ashes of the dead, or the distressed of the living, by a minute investigation of their errors in Government; especially, as it is not probable, that the subversion of the Constitution will ever again be attempted by the same means which they used. There are in truth other means less obvious, but more dangerous, by which as arbitrary a System of Government may in some future period be established amongst us, as already prevails in most of the states of Europe: we hope and trust, this period is at a great distance; but the following reflections

reflections will not suffer us to entertain a doubt of the possibility at least of its future existence.

It is possible then, that the very small part of the subjects of this mighty empire, with which the right of electing a Representation for the whole is at present lodged, may become so corrupted and abandoned in their choice, as to elevate to that high distinction men of arbitrary principles, or of flagitious lives and strangers to all principle, or of ruined fortunes and fitted for every species of political prostitution; — it is possible, that a majority of such a Representation may betray their trust, may sacrifice their honour to their interest, may become poor through Luxury, and profligate through poverty; — it is possible, that a System of reciprocal corruption may take place between a bad Minister and such a venal Representation, that he may bribe them with the public money, and that they may profusely grant him the public money in order to share in the plunder of the people; — it is possible, that from an increase of commerce and an extension of empire, the influence of the Crown may be so far enlarged, as to enable any Minister to lay an undue Bias upon the judgments of individuals in both Houses of Parliament, by distributing amongst them either private pensions, or the lucrative employments of public trust; fear may compel some, gratitude may induce others, if not to support, at least to acquiesce in measures, which they do not approve; and an interested expectation may operate generally to the same end; — it is possible, that under such circumstances, the foundations of the Constitution may be gradually undermined, and the great fabric of civil liberty finally subverted, by the very formality of law, and by the immediate agency of the very powers destined to support it; — it is possible, lastly, that the bulk of the people, mistaking the forms and shadows

of the Constitution for its substance and reality, may not be sensible of their danger, till they are borne down to the earth under the pressure of Taxes; may not be roused from their Lethargy, till they are fretted and galled by the chains of Slavery; Then however at last, we are persuaded, they will not degenerate from the blood of their Ancestors, but with united hands and hearts drag forth to condign punishment the most pestilent of all Traytors, the traytors against the Constitution and the common safety.

Whenever this melancholy scene shall take place amongst us, that the legislative and executive Authority shall (though not in name and appearance, yet) in effect and reality become united in the same person, (at the distant prospect of which every friend of liberty must shudder with horror,) Government will not want men to support its pretensions with the shadow of reasoning.

We grant you, they will say, the Crown of England is limited in its operation by the laws of our Constitution, as forcibly as the meanest of its subjects; for we abhor the doctrines of passive obedience and divine right, as of foreign growth, and first introduced amongst us by some slavish Divines in the reigns of James the First and his Successor; we heartily reprobate such principles, as repugnant alike to reason and revelation; we are not of those, who cannot distinguish between resistance and rebellion; for we venerate the principles of the Revolution, and thinking that the bond of union between a King of England and his people is then broken, when Government is administered more by the fluctuating will of an Individual, than by the settled laws of the community, we are of opinion that the people may conscientiously resist the usurpation of the Crown, even to the altering of the Succession
itself;

itself; But what of this has happened now? Has the King by his regal Authority alone abrogated, changed, or suspended any of your ancient laws? Has he exercised his prerogative in a manner unprecedented, or stretched its influence beyond the boundary claimed by his Ancestors and allowed by yours? Has he screened his favourite Ministers from public Justice by hasty dissolutions of Parliament? Has he attempted to borrow money of his Subjects, and imprisoned, or otherwise maltreated those who refused to lend it? Has he levied any taxes, which did not originate with, and were not imposed by your own representatives? Has he raised, or kept up a standing Army, without the consent of Parliament? Has he refused to hear the petitions of his people, or construed the petitioners Libellers? Has he displaced any conscientious Judges for not declaring that to be Law, which was merely arbitrary, or filled the Bench with the refuse of the Bar? Has he erected by his own fiat any new Judicatures, or changed the forms of proceeding in the old? In short, has he done any one public Act, which is not sanctified by the Laws of his Country, which is not stamped with the signature of the whole Legislature? Your Ancestors, who effected the Revolution, as well as their Ancestors, who resisted Charles, owned it Rebellion to resist a King who governed by Law; and what has your King done, but execute the Laws enacted by your Ancestors, or by your selves? What have you to complain of? The King, you say, is but the chief Magistrate of the nation — true — suffer him however as that Magistrate to execute the Laws according to the nature of his Office. His Authority, you contend, is limited by your wisdoms — allowed — but within whatever narrow limits you may wish to confine his executive Authority, the legislative Authority of the State you must grant to be

universal in extent, supreme in degree, irresistible in operation; you must grant to the Government an unconditional supremacy over every individual composing the community subject to its Jurisdiction, or you will introduce into the bosom of Society that very liberty of a state of nature, which it was at first instituted to regulate and restrain. — No, it might be answered; the power of every Legislature upon earth, even of the most uncorrupt and uninfluenced, is in its very nature fiduciary, and of consequence not omnipotent. It may crush indeed with the weight of Government every insurgent against its supremacy, it may be deaf to the petitions of millions, and treat the judgment of a majority of its subjects with contemptuous neglect; but it cannot make virtue become vice, nor alter the relations of things. It stands itself in a certain relation of infinite inferiority to the God of nature, whose Laws, whether natural or revealed, it cannot transgress without impiety; — it stands in another relation of perfect equality to every other independent state, whose rights it cannot violate without injustice; — it stands in another relation of conditional superiority to its own subjects, whose general interests it cannot oppose without Tyranny. For there may be a Tyranny of the whole Legislature, as well as of one of its members; the Tyranny of a King consists in making his will the Law, the Tyranny of a Legislature consists in making private interest a main principle of public conduct, and the Law of course an instrument of oppression to the people in general. A Legislature may frequently err, and enact Laws injurious to the common weal; yet is not Tyranny to be wantonly imputed to it for such errors; nothing less than a general defect in principle, proceeding from external influence, and producing a general corruption of its members, can entitle it to that Appellation.

tion. Of this kind of Tyranny we have hitherto had no example in our History; for our Parliaments have hitherto protected us against the ambition of our Princes; and we trust, they ever will protect us: If however in the vicissitude of human things, the contrary should happen; — if the Nobility, forgetting the duty they owe the people in return for the rank and distinction they enjoy above the other members of the community, should ever abet the arbitrary designs of the Crown; — if the Commons should become so wholly selfish and corrupt, as to be ready to support any Men and any Measures; — if lastly, the King should be so ignorant of his true interest, or so ill advised, as to use such degenerate Parliaments as the tools of a Tyrannic Government; — then we have no doubt in asserting, that the people will have a full right to resume the reins of Government into their own hands, to lop off the rotten gangrened members, and to purge the corruptions of the body politic in any manner they shall think most meet. — But who shall be the Judge, whether the Legislature hath violated the ends of its establishment, or not? Who? but those, by whose Authority it was at first ordained, and for whose benefit it is still maintained, the People; the People are not made to swell the dignity of a Legislature, but the Legislature is every where established to promote the interests of the people. No one, it is to be hoped, will so purposely mistake my meaning, as to accuse me of erecting a few factious incendiaries, the indebted discontented dregs of a nation, nor even such interested leaders of opposition, as make a trade of their abilities, into a tribunal, before whose inquisition the Majesty of the Legislature ought to stoop with reverence; Men of this stamp ought to give no disturbance to any Government; to a good one they are contemptible, and to a bad one they are not formidable;

for they can never acquire the general confidence of the people; and without that, every effort against an established Government is, and ought to be, ruinous to those who make it: without that, Charles the Second had never been restored to these Kingdoms, nor James the Second driven from them. To the People then, I repeat it, is the Legislature ultimately accountable for the execution of its trust. God forbid, that our Governors should at any time so far neglect their duties, as to make it necessary for the people to sit in judgment upon their conduct; for their verdict is usually written with the sword, and registered in blood.

Every one knows the desolation, which overspread this Land in the time of Charles the First; but no one can tell, whether God will be so merciful to us, as to terminate such another war by so favourable an Issue, as that which we this day commemorate: and this should induce us all to deliberate and hesitate, to count the cost and weigh the expected benefit, before we, by word or deed, blow up into a flame to consume the land, that fire of Civil discord, which God, as a punishment for our infidelity and immorality, has suffered to be already kindled.

Those who entertain high notions of the omnipotency of Parliament, will see no resemblance between the causes, which brought on the dissensions then, and now; and will not therefore trouble themselves with apprehensions of a similar Catastrophe; others will think, there is no difference except in this; that it was a part of the nation, which then resisted the King, because he would have taken from them their property, without their consent given by themselves or their representatives; and now, it is a part of the empire, which resists the Legislature for the very same reason. The beginnings of strife

were then trifling, the end devastation and carnage, oppression of the People, ruin of the King, of the Nobility, and of the Constitution. The beginning of our present discords were trifling also, the progress is terrible, the end uncertain. This storm, which hath arisen in the Western Continent, may be compared to the Cloud, which Elijah's Servant saw rising out of the sea; at first it was little, no bigger than a man's hand, it was scarce visible across the Atlantic; and those who did see it, too scornfully said in their hearts, can a drop disturb the repose of the ocean? can a speck obscure the splendour of the sun? But how hath it since thickened, and expanded itself, and darkened the face of Heaven! how doth it now hang over our heads, ready to fall down in Torrents; which will gather as they go, and when swollen with the blood of our Brethren, may become too mighty to be arrested, or diverted from their ruinous progress by any arm of flesh! May the Lord God Almighty then, whose *judgments are assuredly abroad in the Earth, by whom Kings reign, and Princes decree justice, who maketh men to be of one mind, and stilleth the mad tumults of the people,* vouchsafe to extend his mercy to us, to interpose, as in former times, his particular Providence in our behalf, and to influence thereby the hearts of both King and People to their mutual Interest,

PEACE.



