

Lord William Wyndham Grenville

Malt Tax Bill
(1790)

MALT TAX BILL

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Lord Grenville said, he had always been desirous of discussing every question on its own proper grounds. Their lordships would not therefore expect that he should say any thing on the shop tax that had been repealed, or on the regulations for preventing frauds in the collection of the duties on tobacco, which had been introduced collaterally into the debate, and, which he conceived to have no connexion with the merits or demerits of the present tax. As little did he feel himself bound to notice what the noble lord had thought proper to introduce respecting the state of the public revenue and expenditure. That subject had been before introduced in a discussion to which it had as little relation as to the present, the debate on the convention, under the idea, he supposed, that from the concern he had had in another place in the report of a committee on the state of the public receipt and expenditure, the subject must always be proper, provided he was present. On that subject, however, he would not enter into any debate till the proper documents were before their lordships. That period was fast approaching, and when it did arrive, he trusted that the noble lord who had mentioned the subject before, or the noble viscount who had alluded to it now would bring it regularly before the House. It would then appear, that their calculations were as ill founded, as their mode of introducing them was unseasonable; and that the state of the public receipt and expenditure was such as all their lordships, and everyman, who felt as an Englishman, would rejoice to peruse. The present tax made no part of the permanent expenditure of the country. It was part of a system of finance to which, as a whole, [1201] he had not heard a single objection of a body of taxes brought forward to defray an extraordinary expense within a short period. Of the objects to obtain which that expense had been incurred, their lordships had expressed their approbation. That they ought to be defrayed there could be no doubt, and that they ought to be defrayed with the least possible loss of time, had been generally admitted. Taxes, to be productive, must be felt; so large a sum as 800,000l., could not be raised within the year without falling heavy somewhere. The only question then was, whether this tax, as a part of the whole, was so objectionable as to deserve to be rejected. He would not say that the money must be had, and therefore that the tax must pass. To such a miserable argument he would not have recourse, because he knew the situation and resources of the country to be such, that if the tax was

improper, a substitute could be easily found.-The noble viscount had said, that additional duties on malt were improper, because they tended to diminish the consumption, and to lessen the produce of the revenue upon the whole. Were he disposed to resort to the *argumentum ad hominem*, he might say that the mode of the tax was planned by an administration with which the noble viscount was particularly connected, and of which the present administration were in that respect only the humble imitators. An additional duty of sixpence per bushel had been imposed in 1780; the noble viscount must therefore disapprove of a measure which he had formerly supported, or approve of the present additional duty. This argument, however, he would not press. The tax was to be examined on its own merits. The principal objections he had heard to it were, that it was partial, and tended to produce ill effects on the health and morals of the industrious poor. Every tax must be more or less partial, till that great desideratum in finance could be found out, a tax that would affect every individual in the community in the exact proportion that he ought to bear. Could such a tax as this be discovered, there would be an end of all other taxes; but till it was discovered, every new tax must fall heavier in a certain degree on some particular description of men than others. All that could be done was so to calculate the general aggregate of taxes as to bear on all ranks and descriptions of men as nearly as possible [1202] in proportion to their ability. Now, what was the case at present? A number of taxes were proposed to raise a large extraordinary sum, within a short period, Was there any one of these taxes that could be said to affect the poor in the least degree, except the additional duty on malt? Not one; and of this they would pay only a share. It was evident, that of the extraordinary aid required, the poor paid perhaps less than their fair proportion. The objection of partiality was consequently done away. With regard to the evil consequences predicted from it, they appeared to have no foundation in experience. If the former additional duty had not put an end to the private breweries, was it to be expected that so small an addition as the present would do it? The additional charge per gallon on the beverage of the poor would be less than one third of a farthing: a charge so small as could not surely prevent any man from brewing for himself who had been accustomed to do so before. It would, indeed, fall much heavier on the rich than on the poor, as the beer brewed by the former would pay three times as much as that usually brewed by the latter. -Notwithstanding what the noble lord had said of the continuance of smuggling, it was certain that lowering the duties on spirits, and the various wholesome regulations adopted by the last parliament, had greatly restrained smuggling, and in-

creased the regular entries of the articles that were the objects of it. It was equally true, that the wealth and commerce of the country had increased in a manner unexampled in any former period, and that the situation of the poor had been so much improved as to enable them to consume much greater quantities of excisable commodities than they had ever done before. To these causes was the increased consumption of British and foreign spirits to be attributed, and not to any diminution of the private breweries by the increased duties on malt. The advantage to the private brewer over the common brewer was still so great, being nearly in the proportion of two to one in point of duty, as to afford sufficient encouragement to all who chose it, to brew at home. Conceiving, on these grounds, that the tax was neither partial, nor likely to produce any evil consequences, he was of opinion that it ought to pass