

Lord William Wyndham Grenville

Frame Work Bill
(1812)

Source: Hansard, First series, vol. XXI, cc. 180-2
<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1812/mar/02/frame-work-bill>

FRAME WORK BILL.

HL Deb 2 March 1812 vol 21 cc1080-2

Lord Grenville thought the evil of a deeper nature than noble lords were inclined to admit. The great cause was the bad policy which had plunged our manufacturers into distress. The distress and the cause were spreading together. It was now that the effect of the paper issue was making itself felt through the community; and it was impossible in any case to conceive, why the same evils which had extended on an excessive issue of paper, should not be attended with the same evils here as in all other countries. This was a more prominent cause than even the Orders in Council. His noble friend (the earl of Lauderdale) had imputed the distress to the sudden rise and fall of wages by the sudden demands for manufactures; but even where the wages did not fall, the excessive issue of paper lowered their real value. The same money could not purchase the same quantity of provisions; and unless there was a maximum on the price of the necessaries of life, the working people must be more and more impoverished, even in the nominal receipt of undiminished wages. The great manufacturers worked for foreign markets; the rise of the prices abroad did not keep pace with the rise of the nominal value of the currency at home; and in consequence, they were obliged to tell their workmen that they could not make the prime cost on their materials. The workmen said, and with not less truth, that they could not live by their work; and thus distress; came rapidly upon the most useful and industrious classes of the community. The present system had the direct tendency of [1081](#)exhausting the resources of the industrious part of the public; this was no new thing to their lordships; it had been pointed out from the beginning: every step of its progress had been regularly detailed, and it was now making its way with accelerated evil. Was this a thing within penal laws to correct? Were men to be cured of this by the gibbet and the gallows? The Bill might irritate and punish, and inflict miseries dreadful to feeling and humanity; but it would not stop an evil which resulted from the wretchedness into which a dangerous and headlong system had driven the working people. His noble friend, (the earl of Harrowby) in quoting a

passage from judge Blackstone, seemed to doubt whether that great judge looked on the punishment of death as a means of prevention, or as the penalty for enormous crime. But, putting the first point out of question, was the guilt of this crime of that enormous nature which required death? The noble earl obviously combined the individual act with the crime of conspiracy: but the Bill omitted all the intention of conspiracy, and alluded only to the act of the individual. It would be answered, that the intention of the Bill was chiefly against the conspiracy: but where was the object of a Bill to be found but in its leading clauses, or preamble? He was sorry to hear an attempt to justify the introduction of penal statutes by great names. If there was any case in which we should not look to precedents, or give up any thing to great names, it was a case like the present. To justify the infliction of death, there must be no authority but strong necessity. The statute book was stained with sanguinary laws; it was a stigma on the character of the country; foreigners looked upon it as such, and appealed to its existence as the standard of our national character. His noble friend spoke of the mildness with which those laws were administered. A philosopher once said, that among the Athenians, to praise the Athenians was extremely easy: but where were we to find the great evidence of a mild and legislative spirit,—the prevention? If the question was of the purity of the administration of justice, he most agree that here we were unrivalled,—that there was no country in the world,—that there never was a country, where the innocent man was so secure of acquittal as here. But as to punishment, he knew of no country in Europe,—perhaps he ought to speak of it as before the late [1082](#)dreadful revolution—where so many suffered by sanguinary punishments. Were we about to write in blood the new code for the new situation to which we were gradually advancing? In this instance, we could not punish without frequently committing the most shocking offences against humanity. Crimes of the most different nature were mingled under one punishment; and death was to be equally inflicted for conspiracy and for acts for which a school-boy's whipping would be too severe. Men were to be hanged for 'damaging' frames. What a word! and how capable of perversion. What was 'damaging' a frame? The slightest injury to the slightest part of a complicated machinery was to bring a man in peril of his life. This was enough to throw the body of the

manufacturing people into despair. Tell them, that if from folly or malice a man break any part of a machine, he forfeits his life, as much as if he had conspired to destroy the whole machinery of the establishment,—as much as if he had murdered the man at the machine, and the consequence must be horrid. The wisdom of legislators was employed in pointing out the gradations of crime, and making the return always more easy than the progress; but here, "Returning were as tedious as go o'er," and the moment the workman had touched upon his crime, he had incurred the punishment of its consummation.