

Lord William Wyndham Grenville

State of the Corn Laws
(1815)

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STATE OF THE CORN LAWS

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Lord Grenville, in a luminous and elaborate speech, contended that the only safe line of conduct for the House to adopt was to abstain from all legislative interference on the subject. If, he said, a just light did not even yet pervade the councils of the country upon it, he should deplore it as a calamity. He conjured the House not to take any step without well understanding their ground. The facts before them were sufficient to shew the consequences of proceeding upon any mistaken principle. The committee had felt that the House would not discharge its duty unless it resumed the inquiry before any alteration took place in the laws. He was of the same opinion. The first object of the inquiry ought to be into [145] the capability of the country to supply the full quantity required for its subsistence. The number of acres might be extended to three times, or even thirty times as many as were now sown with corn, if sufficient capital could be employed in their cultivation. But the quantity of capital requisite to effect this object was a material consideration, as well as to ascertain at what price the corn could be grown. Respecting the necessity of fixing the price at 80s., the evidence, so far from agreeing, had been completely contradictory; yet the House was about to legislate on a subject which was to be permanent, and to fix a price, calculated at a time when money was greatly depreciated, while the Chancellor of the Exchequer had declared that there was a prospect of the currency rising to its former level in the very next year. This was a most important reason for going into the inquiry, and it was the only way in which the House could discharge its duty to the country. He was unable to discover what other effect the measure could have than to raise the price of corn. But another question was, what effect it would have on the wages of the labourer? The House should proceed to inquire what would be the effect of an increase of the price of labour? If the price of bread increased, and the price of labour did not increase, what then would be the condition of the labourer? The wisest thing, in his opinion, would be to abstain from legislating at all. He would never assent to any doctrine which separated the manufacturing from the agricultural interests; and if there was any one interest that could be more injured by the measure than another, he would say that this was the body of landholders, on whom it would entail the greatest mischief. It was, therefore, a matter that ought to be looked at and sifted to the very bottom. He would wish to propose an inquiry into the causes which have kept corn at the high prices at which it so long had been; and if it should

appear owing to the difficulty of importing corn at any period from abroad, on what principle could it be argued that this high price would not continue when importation was prohibited? Importation ought, on the other hand, to be entirely free from Ireland; if not, where was the justice of the Union? Nothing could be more just or important than the knitting together the interests of Great Britain and Ireland. [146] Yet, when all the ports of the world were to be shut against the British consumer, except Ireland, it then became the House to consider that they had a duty to perform as British subjects. He objected to the very imperfect and inaccurate statements of the averages on which it must be utterly unsafe to found a permanent measure, and insisted that the market price bore no regular proportion to the standard price. That the Bill was meant to have the effect of raising the price of corn was plain, else why uniformly put this question—to what price must corn rise to give it protection? That it must also have the effect of keeping out of this country the foreign corn which formerly came into it, till it reached 80s. was equally clear. He should ask a question, which he was surprised had not been put in this report, What had been the cause of the exceeding high price of grain for many years past? And if that question was answered—the difficulty of getting corn from abroad—which he was sure it would be, that should certainly deter the House from proceeding farther. With regard to foreign supply, he much doubted whether, under any circumstances, France could now supply this country with any considerable quantity of corn, so long as that law continued in force which prohibited the exportation of corn from that country when it was at 49s. the quarter. Upon the general question of dependence, the present was not the time for entering; but when that time did arrive, he should be prepared to maintain the opinion, that a more pernicious maxim than the vain imagination that a commercial country could keep itself wholly independent of foreign supply,—in other words, that we should cut ourselves off from commercial intercourse with Europe to a certain extent,—never entered into the policy of any state. There was another subject which had been altogether omitted in every discussion of the present measure, both in another place, and in the opening speech of his noble friend: he alluded to the distilleries. Had they no connexion with the proposed measure? and how would its operation affect the revenue, by increasing the price of the raw material? Not a word had been said upon that subject, and yet their lordships would be surprised to hear the amount of revenue which was put to hazard by legislating on it. He implored their lordships from every consideration, in justice to themselves, in justice to their [147] country, not to precipitate a question

affecting the vital interests of the whole nation, whether agricultural, manufacturing, or commercial. As yet they had the evidence only on one side, and they had no evidence to prove what would be the effect of the measure upon the manufacturing classes of the community. For himself he had no possible motive that could bias him in the judgment he had formed. If he had interests, they were interwoven with those of the agriculturists of the country; if he had connexions that might influence him, they were to be found among the landed proprietors; nay, if he looked higher, and had any public prejudices, he did not blush to say that they also pointed the same way, for to the landed interest this country owed its present greatness among the nations of the world. Yet, with all those feelings about him, he most solemnly pronounced it as his opinion, that the intended measure would be an impolitic one; and he therefore again entreated their lordships to pause, to inquire, to reflect, if they hoped to discharge their duty to themselves, and to their country.