

THE  
STATE OF THE POOR:  
OR,  
AN HISTORY  
OF THE  
LABOURING CLASSES IN ENGLAND,  
BY SIR FREDERIC MORTON EDEN, BART.  
IN THREE VOLUMES.  
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1797.

*Mr. PITT's Speech; and Heads of his Bill for the Relief of the Poor:*

HOUSE OF COMMONS, 12 February 1796.

A MOTION was made by Mr. Whitbread, and seconded by Mr. Honeywood, for the second reading of the Bill for regulating the Wages of Labourers.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, not observing that gentlemen were prepared to deliver their sentiments on the present bill, could not give a silent vote upon a question of so much importance, and at the same time of so much delicacy. In the interval which had taken place since the first reading of the bill, he had paid considerable attention to the subject, and endeavoured to collect information from the best sources to which he had access. The evil was certainly of such a nature as to render it of importance to find out a proper remedy; but the nature of the remedy involved discussions of such a delicate and intricate nature, that none should be adopted without being maturely weighed. The present situation of the Labouring Poor in this country, was certainly not such as could be wished, upon any principle, either of humanity or policy. That class had of late been exposed to hardships which they all concurred in lamenting, and were equally actuated by a desire to remove. He would not argue how far the comparison of the state of the labourer, relieved as it has been by a display of beneficence never surpassed at any period, with the state of this class of the community in former times, was just, though he was convinced that the representations were exaggerated. At any rate the comparisons were not accurate, because they did not embrace a comprehensive view of the relative situations. He gave Mr. Whitbread ample

credit for his good intentions in bringing the present bill into Parliament, though he was afraid that its provisions were such as it would be impolitic, upon the whole, to adopt; and though they were adopted, he believed that they would be found to be inadequate to the purposes which they proposed.—The authority of a very eminent calculator, Dr. Price, had been adduced to shew the great advance that had taken place on every article of subsistence, compared with the slow increase of the wages of labour. But the statement of Dr. Price was erroneous, as he compared the earnings of the labourer, at the period when the comparison is instituted, with the price of provisions, and the earnings of the labourer at the present day, with the price of the same articles, without adverting to the change of circumstances, and to the difference of provisions. Corn, which was then almost the only food of the labourer, was now supplied by cheaper substitutions; and it was unfair to conclude, that the wages of labour were so far from keeping pace with the price of provisions, because they could no longer purchase the same quantity of an article, for which the labourer had no longer the same demand. The simple question now to be considered was, whether the remedy for the evil, which was admitted in a certain extent to exist, was to be obtained by giving to the Justices the power to regulate the price of labour, and by endeavouring to establish by authority, what would be much better accomplished by the unassisted operation of principles? It was unnecessary to argue the general expediency of any legislative interference, as the principles had been perfectly recognized by the honourable gentleman himself. The most celebrated writers upon political economy, and the experience of those states where arts had flourished the most, bore ample testimony of their truth. They had only to inquire, therefore, whether the present case was strong enough for the exception, and whether the means proposed were suited to the object intended? The honourable gentleman imagined that he had on his side of the question the support of experience in this country, and appealed to certain laws upon the statute-book in confirmation of his proposition. He did not find himself called upon to defend the principle of these statutes, but they were certainly introduced for purposes widely different from the object of the present bill. They were enacted to guard the industry of the country from being checked by a general combination among labourers; and the bill now under consideration was introduced solely for the purpose of remedying the inconveniences which labourers sustain from the disproportion existing between the price of labour and the price of living. He had the satisfaction to hear the honourable gentleman acknowledge, that if the price of labour could be made to find its own level, it would be much more desirable than to assess it by arbitrary statute, which, in the execution, was liable to abuse on the one hand, and inefficacy on the other. If the remedy succeeded according to the most sanguine expectations, it only established what would have been better effected by principle; and if it failed on the one hand it might produce the severe oppression, and on the other encourage the most profligate idleness and extravagance. Was it not better for the House then to consider the operation of general principles, and rely upon the effects of their unconfined exercise? Was it not wiser to reflect what remedy might be adopted, at once more general in its principles, and more comprehensive in its object, less exceptionable in its example, and less dangerous in its application? They should look to the instances where interference had shackled industry, and where the best intentions have often produced the most pernicious effects. It was indeed the most absurd bigotry, in asserting the general principle, to exclude the exception; but

trade, industry, and barter, would always find their own level, and be impeded by regulations which violated their natural operation, and deranged their proper effect. This being granted, then he appealed to the judgment of the House, whether it was better to refer the matter entirely to the discretion of a magistrate, or to endeavour to find out the causes of the evil, and, by removing the causes, to apply a remedy more justifiable in its principle, more easy in the execution, more effectual in its operations, in fine, more consonant to every maxim of sound and rational policy. The evil, in his opinion, originated, in a great measure, in the abuses which had crept into the Poor Laws of this country, and the complicated mode of executing them. The Poor Laws of this country, however wise in their original institution, had contributed to fetter the circulation of labour, and to substitute a system of abuses, in room of the evils which they humanely meant to redress, and, by engrafting upon a defective plan defective remedies, produced nothing but confusion and disorder. The Laws of Settlements prevented the workman from going to that market where he could dispose of his industry to the greatest advantage; and the capitalist, from employing the person who was qualified to procure him the best returns for his advances. These laws had at once increased the burdens of the Poor, and taken from the collective resources of the State, to supply wants which their operation had occasioned, and to alleviate a poverty which they tended to perpetuate. Such were the institutions which misguided benevolence had introduced, and with such warnings to deter, it would be wise to distrust a similar mode of conduct, and to endeavour to discover remedies of a different nature. The country had not yet experienced the full benefit of the laws that had already been passed, to correct the errors which he had explained. From the attention he had bestowed upon the subject, and from the inquiries he had been able to make of others, he was disposed to think we had not gone yet far enough, and to entertain an opinion that many advantages might be derived, and much of the evil now complained of removed, by an extension of those reformatations in the Poor Laws which had been begun. The encouragement of Friendly Societies would contribute to alleviate that immense charge with which the Public was loaded in the support of the Poor, and provide by savings of industry for the comfort of distress. Now the parish-officer could not remove the workman, merely because he apprehended he might be burdensome; but it was necessary that he should be actually chargeable. But, from the pressure of a temporary distress, might the industrious mechanic be transported from the place where his exertions could be useful to himself and his family, to a quarter where he would become a burden without the capacity of being even able to provide for himself. To remedy such a great striking grievance, the Laws of Settlement ought to undergo a radical amendment.— He conceived, that, to promote the free circulation of labour, to remove the obstacles by which industry is prohibited from availing itself of its resources, would go far to remedy the evils, and diminish the necessity of applying for relief to the Poor's Rates. In the course of a few years, this freedom, from the vexatious restraint which the laws imposed, would supersede the object of their institutions. The advantages would be widely diffused, the wealth of the nation would be increased, the poor man rendered not only more comfortable but more virtuous, and the weight of Poor's Rates, with which the landed interest is loaded, greatly diminished. He should wish, therefore, that an opportunity were given of restoring the original purity of the Poor Laws, and of removing those corruptions by which they had

been obscured. He was convinced that the evils which they had occasioned did not arise out of their original constitution, but coincided with the opinion of Blackstone, that, in proportion as the wise regulations that were established in the long and glorious reign of Queen Elizabeth, have been superseded by subsequent enactments, the utility of the institution has been impaired, and the benevolence of the plan rendered fruitless.

While he thus had expressed those sentiments which the discussion naturally prompted, it might not perhaps be improper, on such an occasion, to lay before the House the ideas floating in his mind, though not digested with sufficient accuracy, nor arranged with a proper degree of clearness. Neither what the honourable gentleman proposed, nor what he himself had suggested, were remedies adequate to the evil it was intended to remove. Supposing, however, the two modes of remedying the evil were on a par in effect, the preference in principle was clearly due to that which was least arbitrary in its nature; but it was not difficult to perceive that the remedy proposed by the honourable gentleman would either be completely ineffectual, or such as far to over-reach its mark. As there was a difference in the numbers which compose the families of the labouring Poor, it must necessarily require more to support a small family. Now, by the regulations proposed, either the man with a small family would have too much wages, or the man with a large family, who had done most service to his country, would have too little. So that were the minimum fixed upon the standard of a large family, it might operate as an encouragement to idleness on one part of the community; and if it were fixed on the standard of a small family, those would not enjoy the benefit of it, for whose relief it was intended. What measure then could be found to supply the defect? Let us, said he, make relief, in cases where there are a number of children, a matter of right, and an honour instead of a ground for opprobrium and contempt. This will make a large family a blessing, and not a curse; and this will draw a proper line of distinction between those who are able to provide for themselves by their labour, and those who, after having enriched their country with a number of children, have a claim upon its assistance for their support. All this, however, he would confess, was not enough, if they did not engraft upon it resolutions to discourage relief where it was not wanted. If such means could be practised as that of supplying the necessities of those who required assistance, by giving it in labour, or affording employment, which is the principle of the act of Queen Elizabeth, the most important advantages would be gained. They would thus benefit those to whom they afforded relief, not only by the assistance bestowed, but by giving habits of industry and frugality, and, in furnishing a temporary bounty, enable them to make permanent provision for themselves. By giving effect to the operation of Friendly Societies, individuals would be rescued from becoming a burden upon the Public; and, if necessary, be enabled to subsist upon a fund which their own industry contributed to raise. These great points of granting relief according to the number of children, preventing removals at the caprice of the parish-officer, and making them subscribe to Friendly Societies, would tend in a very great degree to remove every complaint to which the present partial remedy could be applied.—Experience had already shewn how much could be done by the industry of children, and the advantages of early employing them in such branches of manufactures as they are capable to execute. The extension of Schools of Industry was also an object of material importance. If any one would take the trouble to compute the amount of all the earnings of the children who are already educated in this

manner, he would be surpris'd, when he came to consider the weight which their support by their own labours took off the country, and the addition which, by the fruits of their toil, and the habits to which they were formed, was made to it's internal opulence. The suggestion of these schools was originally drawn from Lord Hale and Mr. Locke; and upon such authority he had no difficulty in recommending the plan to the encouragement of the Legislature. Much might be effected by a plan of this nature, susceptible of constant improvement. Such a plan would convert the relief granted to the Poor into an encouragement to industry, instead of being, as it is by the present Poor Laws, a premium to idleness, and a school for sloth. There were also a number of subordinate circumstances, to which it was necessary to attend. The law which prohibits giving relief where any visible property remains should be abolished. That degrading condition should be withdrawn. No temporary occasion should force a British subject to part with the last shilling of his little capital, and compel him to descend to a state of wretchedness from which he could never recover, merely that he might be entitled to a casual supply. Such little sums might be advanced as might put the persons who received them in the way of acquiring what might place them in a situation to make permanent provision for themselves. These were the general ideas which had occurred to him upon the subject; if they should be approved of by any gentleman in the House, they might perhaps appear at a future time in a more accurate shape than he could pretend to give them. He could not, however, let this opportunity slip without throwing them out. He was aware that they would require to be very maturely considered. He was aware also of a fundamental difficulty, that of insuring the diligent execution of any law that should be enacted. This could only be done by presenting, to those who should be intrusted with the execution, motives to emulation, and by a frequent inspection of their conduct as to diligence and fidelity. Were he to suggest an outline, it would be this. To provide some new mode of inspection by parishes, or by hundreds—to report to the Magistrates at the Petty Sessions, with a liberty of appeal from them to the General Quarter Sessions, where the Justice should be empowered to take cognizance of the conduct of the different commissioners, and to remedy whatever defects should be found to exist. That an annual report should be made to Parliament; and that Parliament should impose upon itself the duty of tracing the effect of it's system from year to year, till it should be fully matured. That there should be a standing order of the House for this purpose, and, in a word, that there should be an Annual Budget opened, containing the details of the whole system of Poor Laws, by which the Legislature would shew, that they had a constant and a watchful eye upon the interests of the poorest and most neglected part of the community. Mr. Pitt concluded an excellent speech with acknowledging, that he was not vain enough to think that he had brought forward any new idea; adding, however, that those which he had suggested, were collected from the best sources of information, from a careful examination of the subject, and an extensive survey of the opinions of others. He would only say, that it was a subject of the utmost importance, and that he would do every thing in his power to bring forward or promote such measures as would conduce to the interest of the country.

Mr. Whitbread's motion was negatived without a division <sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Debrett's Parl. Reg. xlv. 22.