

Protectionist Fallacies Exposed

A speech delivered by Dr. Michael Clark, M.P., at a luncheon of The Free Trade League of Canada in Manitoba Hall, Winnipeg, on April 4, 1916

(Continued from Last Week)

I have tried to show you that this proposal is economically unsound and morally indefensible. Now I pass on to show you how, in regard to the subject viewed from another angle, the peculiar angle of the British Empire, it is practically impossible of application. That third point would follow logically from the previous two, because if a man practices what is economically unsound and morally indefensible, he will find he is practicing something which costs him dear, even if it can be put into practice, which, in the case of nations, is impossible.

I don't know whether you recall that in the beginning of Mr. Chamberlain's agitation thirteen years ago he laid down this doctrine as axiomatic: That without a preference on food stuffs it would be impossible for Britain to give any preference to Canada at all. Well, to those of us who live on this side of the water I think that is obvious. There is no one here who expects Canada to do a large trade in textile goods to Lancashire, at least not in the immediate future. That would be a form of competition that we would be debarred from by the necessities of the case.

But if Canada cannot be helped in the export of foodstuffs she cannot be helped at all. Mr. Chamberlain laid that down as axiomatic, and tho his successors profess to oppose it, there is not an economist of note in Britain who doesn't know that that is so. Without a tax on foodstuffs Britain cannot give Canada a preference at all.

Now, I want to put to you this simple question: Do you think the condition of things in Britain a few years from now, when we are trying to reconstruct the world after the war, will be such that any responsible statesman—I don't care how he describes himself—would propose to tax the foodstuffs of Great Britain? The only way in which we can forecast the future at all is to look into the history of the past, and I think history has important guidance for us in trying to answer the question I have just put to you.

Wars and Food Prices

There were three great wars in the nineteenth century. There was the great French war ending in the victory of Waterloo. All of you who know the elements of English history remember that from 1818 to 1821 the condition of distress in Great Britain was past description of words. The distress culminated in the Luddite Riots of 1818, three years after the victory of Waterloo. But the people's suffering was terrible for six years after that victory, and indeed it gave rise to an agitation for cheaper food which never again subsided until the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846.

Now that is an historic fact, which has a bearing on the question I am trying to answer, and I get it from the beginning of the nineteenth century. From 1854 to 1856 the Crimean War took place, and history relates that you had the riots in the cities of the Old Country which are specifically known as Bread Riots. It is well to remember in this connection that the wars may be thrust upon us—the we believe this war was a necessity past which we could not get—yet war is a terrible evil and brings with it terrible results.

In 1857 you had the Bread Riots and in 1818 you had the people under John Lubbock going about the streets of the Old Country calling for bread. But I don't remember recorded in any history I ever read any statesman who proposed to relieve that condition of affairs by putting a tax upon foreign grain. The corn laws had been repealed eleven years previously to the Bread Riots of 1857 and they certainly were not reimposed at that date.

Free Trade Always Benefits

Now I come to the end of the nineteenth century, the Boer War. After the Boer War you had a very bad depression of trade in Britain. I will tell you a wonderful thing, which is worth mentioning at this point. At

the end of the Boer War you had free trade in Britain for half a century and altho her people were nearly double what they were in the middle of the century, the trade depression was nothing like so great as it was after the Crimean or after the great French wars. And I heard Sir Edward Grey with my own ears say that while Britain had had depression of trade, those depressions had never been so great since she had had Free Trade. I give you that, for what it is worth, in passing.

I still want to get an answer to the question, which you haven't forgotten, I hope, and I want to recall to you that while there was that very bad depression of trade in Great Britain after the Boer War, and while one of the greatest electioneers of all history, Mr. Chamberlain, tried to revive the tariff in Great Britain, you know as well as I can tell you that in 1906, he, the great politician of the statesman order as he was, was finally defeated and was only able to count 156 in that general election of 1906 out of 670 members in the British House of Commons.

No Food Tax Possible

There was no question then of returning to taxing the food of the people. Now I come to the question which I put to you: Do you think there is any likelihood after this war that conditions will be such in Great Britain that any statesman will seriously propose to tax the food of the people? I leave that question, with such light as I have been able to shed over it for your guidance from the brief historical references my time has permitted me to make.

This question is such a big one that one doesn't know where to leave it. One of the curious things about this proposal is that people should propose to give a preference to Canada by taxing foodstuffs when the very people who would benefit by that, according to the presumptions of these half-taught economists, that is to say the farmers of the plains, don't want it, being manly enough to want to stand upon their own feet. They are manly enough to say: We would perish of hunger rather than have carried the burden of humanity and civilization, as we are carrying it, starve for our benefit. (Loud cheers.)

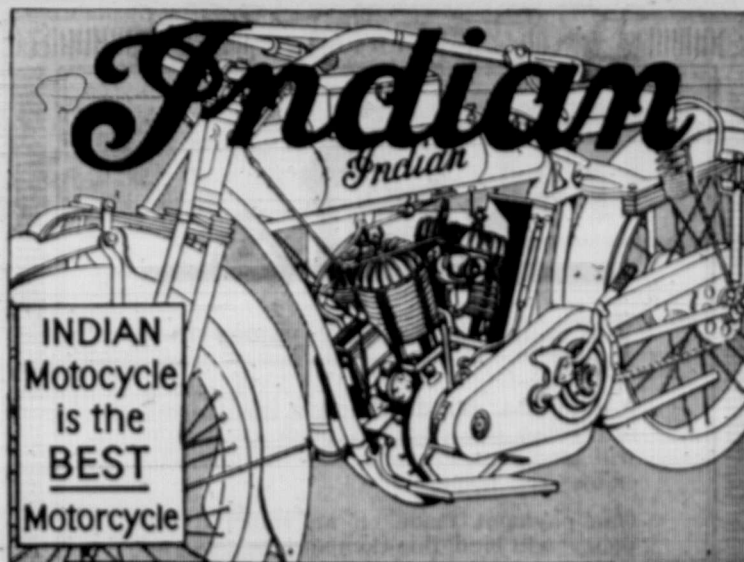
Manufacturers Opposed

If the farmers of the West don't want it, who does? Windermere? (Loud laughter.) The manufacturers of Ontario want it, and what do they want it for but to bolster up the protection upon their own goods? That is what they want it for; they want to be able to say to the world: See what has come to Free Trade Britain, she has given up her effete policy of Free Trade, a policy, by the way, which enabled her to finance all the other nations at war. That was a marvellous performance for a country ruined by Free Trade.

That is the British end of it, but what is the Canadian end of it? I have just referred to the Ontario manufacturer as calling for a preference on Canadian wheat in the British market. Well, when they do that they laugh on one side of their face, but when they are asked to give a corresponding advantage to Canada, they laugh on the other side of it.

I have asked whether there is a British statesman who would put a duty on British food after the war. Now, I would like to ask another question: do you think there is a Canadian manufacturer who would be willing to lower his tariff protection for the benefit of Britain or of anybody else unless he was obliged to. I never saw one made that way yet. Well, if the statesman of Britain refuse to tax the food of the people and the manufacturers here refuse to lower the tariff what is going to become of the proposition for a mutual preference? It is beginning to look a little thin as a practical proposition.

As a matter of fact it is a practical



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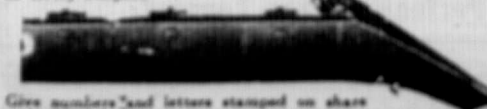
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