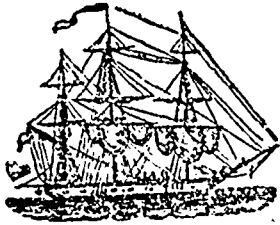


CANADIAN ECONOMIST.



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MONTREAL, SATURDAY, 6TH MARCH, 1847.

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THE CANADIAN ECONOMIST.

MONTREAL, SATURDAY, 6TH MARCH, 1847.

EFFECTS OF THE SUSPENSION OF THE NAVIGATION LAWS.

In our last number we alluded to the approaching downfall of the British Navigation Laws, which we predicted as certain, but at the same time we glanced at various circumstances which might probably retard the final catastrophe. A careful perusal of the proceedings of the British House of Parliament has strengthened the doubts we were at first inclined to entertain, as to the result of the agitation for their repeal during the present session. The ministry, it is evident, are at the present moment very reluctant to enter on any question which may have a tendency to disturb the unexampled harmony which exists in the senate, and which their opponents are pledged not to disturb, until those great and healing measures on which both parties are nearly agreed, and which the condition of Ireland renders imperatively necessary, are disposed of. These measures will occupy nearly exclusively the attention of Parliament, probably for some months. After their adoption—and consequent thereon—the financial condition of the country will require a careful investigation, and occupy a considerable period of time. The other important measures recommended in the Queen's Speech at the opening of the Session, together with the projected alterations in the English Poor Laws, the numerous railway and other private bills, again, will probably create considerable discussion, and fill up the time for the remainder of the Session, which it is understood is intended to be made as short as possible, Parliament being expected to be dissolved in the month of June next.

From a consideration of these circumstances, we are not inclined to expect that the motion for a Select Committee of the House of Commons, on the subject of the British Navigation Laws, will be attended with any positive or decidedly favorable result on the present occasion. The very fact of these laws being suspended for the time will furnish an argument for the protectionists, who will cite—with some semblance of justice—that suspension as affording a fair means of judging of their effects, and then argue the propriety of delaying the final settlement of the question until those effects shall be clearly ascertained.

That the ministry have no intention of proposing as a government measure, during this session, the modification—far less the repeal of the British Navigation Laws—does not admit of a doubt, since Lord John Russell, on the 22d January, made this statement:

"We from the first said that it was not our intention to cause any disturbance or alteration in the Corn Duties or Navigation Laws, after the period to which I proposed the Bills should extend. Any other objects are not in our view in passing either of these Bills, than merely a temporary alteration of the laws; and every one will know at the end of the temporary alteration, that no further disturbance will take place."

It would have given us much pleasure to have been able to express a more sanguine hope of early success in the object which we, and those who think with us, have in view—the removal of those restrictions which press on our commerce—but as, forewarned is, they say, forearmed, we deem it our duty to caution our readers against too great confidence; and this we do with the hope that they may lend their assistance in bringing the subject prominently before the Provincial Parliament at its next sitting.

We are inclined to believe that the discussion during the past year by the press, of the consequences of the recent changes in the commercial policy of Great Britain, has not been altogether unheeded by our representatives, and we are therefore encouraged to hope that when they next assemble, commercial subjects will occupy a share of their attention. As, fortunately for the country, the question of Free Trade in the Province, consequent on the removal of protection by the parent State, has generally speaking been advocated without any reference to party feeling, or bias to either side in politics, we may hope that it will be discussed in the House in a like spirit of impartiality. Indeed, the financial condition of the country is so closely interwoven with its commercial position, as to render it impossible to separate the one from the other. Unless those public works, constructed at such an enormous expense to the Province, can be made subservient to revenue purposes, our situation must be admitted to be most critical. This fact cannot but force itself on our legislators, and therefore we believe that they will be disposed to weigh carefully any measures which may be proposed to make those public works more productive.

Now let us examine the position in which we are placed by the recent suspension by Great Britain of the Corn and Navigation Laws. We all remember that during a part of last year the rates of freight via the St. Lawrence were so high as to give a decided advantage to New York over Quebec and Montreal as shipping ports for Britain, and that had it not been for the protection afforded by the Corn, and the restriction imposed by the Navigation Laws, a very considerable portion of the Canada produce would have been shipped through foreign canals and ports, instead of through our own waters. This year all obstacles are removed, and there is strong reason to apprehend that much Upper Canada produce may be diverted to New York, where there is a probability of cheaper freights to Britain, besides a much more expeditious voyage than from Montreal or Quebec. We own that we cannot look at this probable diversion of Western produce from the St. Lawrence without the most serious concern, but we see no other remedy than that of the complete removal of all those legal restrictions which prevent our employing foreign vessels in the transport of produce to our shipping ports. If those restrictions were removed, we believe that the increased competition would reduce freights downwards to our shipping ports so much below the rates via Canal to New York, as to enable us to compete with our neighbours, notwithstanding the inevitably higher cost of transmission to Europe from our ports than from theirs. To this removal of restrictions then alone can we look for the salvation of our commerce, and on our Legislature must we rely to obtain from the British Government our complete emancipation.

We have on more than one occasion alluded to the injury to our commerce arising from the delay in calling together our Parliament; and the subject now under our examination affords a striking illustration of the truth of our remarks. Had our Ministry done their duty, they would have laid before our representatives, at the earliest date possible, those acts passed during last session of the Imperial Parliament which affect so vitally our agricultural and commercial interests, and which so evidently call for immediate corresponding legislation here. Parliament being thus assembled, the subjects of the British Navigation Laws and the Free Navigation of the St. Lawrence must have passed under their review, and we imagine little doubt can exist that a strong representation would have been voted to the British Government for the repeal of the one, and the concession of the other. Had this been done, the effect would have been to strengthen the hands of that party who are now labouring in the British Senate for commercial freedom, and that motion for a Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Navigation Laws, which in the commencement of this article we alluded to as inscribed on the journals, and which it is to be feared will be negatived, would most probably have been granted. *Sed Dis alteris*: we have now the prospect before us, for this year at least, of suffering all the evils resulting from restrictions on our commerce, at the same time that all the protection, hitherto represented as their equivalent, is withdrawn. If under such disadvantages our commerce should fortunately survive and flourish, it is manifest it will neither be through the paternal care of the British Government, nor yet from the wisdom of our own; but owing to our natural advantages, and the spirit and energy of our population.