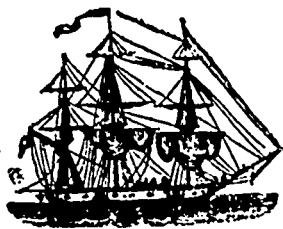


CANADIAN ECONOMIST.



FREE TRADE JOURNAL, AND WEEKLY COMMERCIAL NEWS.

Vol. I.]

MONTREAL, SATURDAY, 27TH FEBRUARY, 1847.

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CONTENTS.

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|--|---|
| 1.—British Parliament and Navigation Laws. | 7.—Trade Circular of Thomas C. Orr, of Glasgow. |
| 2.—The Usury Laws. | 7.—Deficiency of Grain. |
| 3.—The 'Organ' in explanation. | 9.—Miscellaneous Articles. |
| 4.—Speech of Lord John Russell. | 10.—Intelligence—General and Local. |
| 5.—The Government Measures for Ireland. | 11.—The Markets. |
| 6.—Emigration. | 12.—Advertisements. |

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BRITISH PARLIAMENT AND NAVIGATION LAWS.

A perusal of the debate which took place in the House of Commons on the 21st ultimo, must, we imagine, satisfy the most sceptical that the doom of the British Navigation Laws is sealed. It is possible, nay not improbable, that this great work may not be achieved during the present year. The pressure of other matters,—the wish to avoid as much as possible, in this the last session of the present Parliament, the agitation of questions on which there may exist a difference of opinion in the House,—the desire which the Ministry must naturally feel that the effect of the temporary and partial suspension of these laws on the shipping interest may be fairly tested—all these circumstances combined, may preserve them on the statute book for another year: but unless there be—which is very unlikely—in another session such a change in the position of parties as to place the Protectionists in the ascendancy in the councils of the nation, these laws can hardly be expected longer to continue in existence.

The debate already alluded to shows clearly that the great party who have so successfully struggled to relieve the country from the trammels which have weighed down her commerce, are equally united and determined to shake off the monopoly of the shipowner, and that all their energies will be put forth for that purpose. Nor, so far as we are enabled to judge, is the Minister indisposed to yield to their influence. Not one word falls from his lips, or from any of his colleagues, in favor of those laws, which but recently were almost universally considered as lasting memorials of the wisdom of our ancestors,—nay, he almost apologises, on the ground of the difficulties which he would have encountered, for not having abrogated instead of merely suspending them.

We feel it our duty to bring this subject again prominently before our readers, because when we commenced the agitation for the repeal or modification of the Navigation Laws, we were again and again, through the medium of the *Government organ*, informed that our demands and those of the Montreal Board of Trade were "preposterous," "unreasonable and absurd," and that the "Repeal of the Union and of the Navigation Laws" were to be placed "much in the same category." Many persons, we are aware, were carried away by these high-sounding declarations—coming from a pen which at one time stood deservedly high amongst the commercial public—and did really conceive that any remonstrances which the colony might make on the subject would prove unavailing. But we think they are now undeceived, and will no longer rely on such a broken reed as their oracle has proved himself to be.

The following extracts from speeches in the House of Commons will put our readers in possession of the opinions of members of the Free-Trade party:—

Mr. EWART said he would apply the doctrines of free trade not only to the importation of corn, but to the navigation laws, which were a heavy burden on commerce, a burden imposed in a barbarous time, and

unfit for a civilized period. They were as old as the days of Henry VII., and they were adopted by the Protector; but they were unfitted for the present time. He would vote for the temporary suspension of restrictions, and he only regretted that they were to be merely temporary.

Mr. HUME said that, with regard to the navigation laws, he certainly did expect a more liberal exposition of ministerial policy. It was utterly impossible for any man, who read the proceedings at Montreal, and the proceedings which had taken place in other colonies, in reference to this subject, to believe that the Government could long maintain the authority of the mother country over some of these colonies, if it deprived them, as they were now deprived, by the restrictive provisions of the navigation laws, of adequate means for the free and speedy transit of their produce to the English market. * * * They had taken from the colonies what they considered to be protection, and it was now the least that we could do for them, to enable them to export their produce to our markets in cheap shipping. He submitted to the noble lord, that this was a question which must yet occupy the attention of the Government and of the House.

Mr. ROBERTS said that the noble lord should bear in mind that it is high freights which prevent the freer importation of corn. What stands in the way of our bringing it in at a cheaper rate? The navigation laws? The bold, clear, and common-sense way of effecting this object is by abolishing the navigation laws.

Sir C. NAPEEN said he felt perfectly satisfied that if the navigation laws were totally abolished there would be much more exertion and enterprise on the part of our merchants than there was at the present moment. He would say further that the seamen of this country would get more protection, be better paid, and better treated, as well as that we should build better ships than were now built and building, when it was known throughout the world that our navigation laws did not exist. * * * He hoped to see the noble lord at last come forward with a bill to abolish the navigation laws, and that they would never be re-established again.

These sentiments were enforced by observations from Mr. Bright, and Mr. Brown, the eminent Liverpool merchant, the new Member for South Lancashire, and but feebly answered by any of the Protectionists with the exception of Lord George Bentinck, who boldly launched out in defence of the principles of the British Navigation Laws, and censured Her Majesty's Ministers for "listening to the doctrines of the Political Economists." Were he a Minister, he announced, he would pursue a totally different course: he would hang up all the Political-Economists, together with forestallers and regraters who are holding up their stores for higher prices! With such advocates, we think, we may safely predict the speedy abolition of the British Navigation Laws.

In a matter of such vital importance to the colony as the repeal of the Navigation Laws and the opening of the St Lawrence to foreign vessels obviously is, it will not do to be too confident, and we therefore trust that ere long there will be some decided manifestation of public opinion throughout the province,—that that opinion will be conveyed to our Legislature,—and that our Legislature will urge these measures on the British Parliament. If such a course be pursued, we hold our victory to be secure: so that the means of success are in our own hands.

In appealing to the British Parliament for the boon we ask, we have certainly claims which must be admitted to possess great weight. We are not on the present occasion about to re-state them, and re-argue the general question—with that all who have studied our columns must be familiar—but, in addition, the peculiar grounds to which we refer, and on which we would specially rely, are the sudden withdrawal of the protection on which we had every reason to calculate for the time specified in the Act passed last session of the Imperial Parliament. Let us not be understood as censuring the conduct of the British Government in suspending that Act. Far from it: we must, in common with every other British subject, not only acquiesce in, but applaud, it. But we cannot shut our eyes to the fact, that unless our demands be granted there is great danger to our commerce,—that a large portion of our produce, and the principal part of that of the United States, which, under a perfectly free system would pass through our waters, will be sent via the United States canals to New York. Every one is aware that last year, had it not been for the obstacles which the then existing enactments interposed, Canadian produce would to a large extent at one time have been forwarded through the latter