

that although they were termed freemen they were really compelled to do the work of serfs. We find that during that period they were allowed simply such wages as would afford them the barest possible covering for their bodies and the scantiest possible means of subsistence. And yet, Sir, through all that long period of darkness and distress to the labouring man, he was compelled to serve the State, either in the public armies or in doing public works, to an extent far in excess of any labour which the labouring men of this day perform when it is of a voluntary character and performed at a fixed price bargained for by themselves. At the present day the conditions of labour are practically the same in Canada as in England. In both countries the arrangements with regard to it are now subject to conditions on which master and employe must of necessity agree. The labourer in Canada is, however, in a position a good deal superior, I think, in other respects to that of the labourer in England, because in Canada—in all the country places, at all events, and to a great extent in the cities also—every labouring man may, if he likes, have a home on soil owned as well as occupied by himself.

Effect of Restrictive Legislation.

I was about to allude to laws of a restrictive character which have been enacted apparently for the protection of the workingman, but really in order to bring about a most evil result to every one of them. All laws which have a tendency to prevent the free exchange of labour, which make labour tributary to capital, which make the employe a mere serf to the employer, must of necessity affect injuriously the interests of the workingman.

[A disorderly interruption here occurred, lasting for about five minutes; it was caused by an obstinate individual in the middle of the hall who persisted in standing on his seat and acting in an eccentric fashion; he was ultimately, however, induced to sit down.]

I was proceeding, Sir, to remark on the evil tendency of all restrictive laws—that is, laws which unnecessarily interfere with contracts between man and man. Precisely the same principle which affects contracts for labour affects contracts for any other commodity; and whatever deprives a man of the liberty to transfer his labour to the market that he thinks best adapted to meet his wants, and to furnish him with the equivalent which his labour is intended to purchase, must of necessity have an injurious effect upon the public policy of a people subjected to such a system of laws. Those who lived during the time of the agitation for the repeal of the Corn Laws in England—that great agitation against the last vestige of protection which cursed for so long the Mother Country—cannot but remember the deplorable state to which the population of England was reduced by this attempt to protect the farmer and the landlord at the expense of all the rest of the community. (Cheers.) Sir, it is well known to every Englishman present who lived in England forty or fifty years ago, that at that time there was, instead of prosperity as is commonly supposed, a condition of the utmost depression in the Mother Country. (A voice—"That's so.") As long as protective laws remained in force it was supposed that a certain class would be benefited, and that no other class would suffer any injury from them. It is, however, impossible to protect any particular interest unless it be at the expense of other interests. (Hear, hear.) Now, Sir, I remember very well when John Bright, George Thompson, Richard Cobden, and other great men of that time had the far-seeing eye of statesmen to observe the disastrous