

P O L I T I C S.

DEBATES IN THE BRITISH PARLIAMENT

HOUSE OF COMMONS.

June 24.

THE Minister moved the order of the day for the second reading of the Bill for subjecting tobacco to the laws of Excise.

Mr. Alderman Sawbridge opposed the principle of this bill as dangerous to the rights of the subject. At a time when we were commemorating the century of the Revolution, that illustrious epocha of British liberty, the House, he trusted, would not countenance an attempt to infringe that liberty by an extension of the Excise laws. He hoped they would not give up, in another instance, that bulwark of our privileges; trial by jury. The clauses of this Bill were of a nature highly oppressive, full of such restrictions as would injure and impede the Tobacco-dealers in a very great degree. For these reasons, he would dissent from the further progress of this Bill.

Sir Watkin Lewes informed the House, that his constituents had instructed him to oppose the Bill to the utmost of his power, as an encroachment on the natural right of the people; and that his private opinion corresponded with those sentiments. Such an encroachment could not be compensated by that addition of revenue which was expected from the present measure. For his part, he was of opinion, that a reduction of duty would be the best mode of preventing smuggling in this article. While the duties on tobacco were so enormous, in comparison of the prime cost of the commodity, there existed a strong temptation to the smuggler; and he was confident that no Bill, however oppressive, would operate a sufficient check on smuggling, while the duties continued at their present high rate.

Mr. Alderman Newnham appealed to the House if it was a fair, or a decent thing, to hurry a Bill of such magnitude through the House so quickly. It was impossible for the trade themselves to understand all the clauses of this bill, and therefore he thought a more distant day than the morrow (he did not mean a very distant day) ought to be fixed upon by the Right Hon. Gentleman, if he wished the Bill to be understood; but if the Bill was to be smuggled through the House, then he would doubtless go on as he proposed. He begged the Minister to consider his own character, if no other

consideration could have any effect upon him. He also thought it was very extraordinary that a question of this magnitude was debated in so thin a House.

Sir Benjamin Hammett wished to have the revenue carefully and fairly collected, but he by no means wished to have the collection of it enforced by a system so arbitrary as that of the Excise laws; laws which decided causes without a trial by jury. He had always been averse to the laws of Excise, solely because they proceeded on a principle so repugnant to the general spirit of English jurisprudence.

Mr. Samuel Smith was not an enemy to the Excise laws, in themselves, when exerted with moderation; but, in the present Bill, they were coupled with additional severities, and unusual restrictions. One great disadvantage that would arise from employing Excise officers in collecting the duties on tobacco, was, that they would have an opportunity of learning the secrets of a valuable branch of trade; and some of them might be tempted, in hopes of acquiring a fortune, to go over to the Continent, and communicate those secrets to foreign nations.

Mr. Alderman Watton combated the bill. The principal ground on which he rested, was, that a valuable part of our laws, namely, the privilege of being tried by our Peers, would be superseded in part by the Bill now under discussion. With regard to the clauses of the Bill, many of them were extremely severe. He was surprised that a person of such judgment as the Right Hon. Gentleman possessed, should endeavour to increase the revenue by such means as those which were included in the Bill.

Mr. Sheridan condemned the precipitation with which the Minister seemed inclined to carry this Bill through the House. The Excise laws, he said, had already been extended so far, that the people had little to boast of in respect of those invaluable blessings derived from the constitution; and the question now was, whether those blessings should be still further abridged by a very considerable extension of those laws which were incompatible with the freedom of the subject, inasmuch as they deprive him of those blessings which result from a free constitution.